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Adapting to Crisis: The Governance of Public Services for Migrants and Refugees during COVID-19 in Four European Cities

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Abstract: The lack of access to basic services played a big part among the key effects of COVID-19 on migrants and refugees. This paper examines the governance dynamics behind public services for migrants and refugees to understand how COVID-19 has impacted them and what accounts for different levels of adaptive capacity. It employs a mixed methods approach, using egocentric network analysis and qualitative interviews to compare the service ecosystems in four European cities from 2020 to 2022 (Birmingham, Larissa, Malaga, and Palermo). The paper explores the impact of two conditions on the service ecosystems' ability to adapt to the pandemic: the structure of governance and the presence of dynamic capabilities. We argue that the ability of local governments to manage pandemic challenges is highly dependent on the formal distribution of comprehensive competences across various levels (the structure of governance), and the quality of network cooperation between different administrations and civil society (dynamic capabilities). Our analysis reveals that while both conditions are critical for the level of adaptive capacity in public services' provision, the structure of governance is more likely to act as a constraint or trigger for coping strategies.

Keywords: COVID-19; crisis response; migration; integration and asylum; local governance



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1. Introduction

A survey published in 2021 by the EU Share advocacy network reported that the lack of access to basic services “due both to legal status (particularly undocumented persons) and to services moving to online/telephone provision without accompanying translation or interpretation” played a significant role among the key effects of COVID-19 on migrants and refugees (SHARE Network 2021)¹. This was also confirmed by broader research on the “racialised consequences” (Arias Cubas et al. 2022) of closures and lockdowns (Slootjes 2022). A more recent OECD report indicated that after the first phase of “disproportionate impact” of the pandemic on migrants, longer-term effects have been more mixed, suggesting that governance systems have, to various degrees, adjusted to the exceptional circumstances, and that service providers may have developed coping strategies to steer the process (OECD 2022a).

This paper delves further into the governance dynamics behind public services for migrants and refugees to understand how COVID-19 has impacted them and what accounts for different levels of adaptive capacity. This perspective is crucial to complement the growing body of research on public administrations' and local governments' behaviors in times of crisis, such as that by Landau et al. (2021), Altiparmakis et al. (2021), Capano (2020), Oliver et al. (2020), and Petridou (2020). Drawing on empirical material collected through the Horizon2020 easyRights project, which aimed at improving migrants' access to public services in four European cities (Birmingham, Malaga, Larissa and Palermo), we further compare the strategies, practices, and instruments put forward by all the actors

involved in the services ecosystem, namely, public administrations, service owners and migrant support organizations, to cope with COVID-induced disruptions.

Even under optimal circumstances, governance—intended as the structures and practices of coordination and control, or the rules of the game in a specific issue area (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999)—can be a challenging task. Providing public services and navigating potentially adversarial situations can place considerable pressure on those seeking to govern. However, these demands intensify even more when governance faces a crisis (Peters 2021). The pandemic is one of those events “characterised by high consequentiality, limited time, high political salience, uncertainty, and ambiguity” (Moynihan 2008, p. 351). While actors involved in the governance of migrant integration are not new to crises and emergencies, COVID-19 has put additional pressure on systems that heavily rely on close (and physical) collaboration, and whose institutional structures are, in many cases throughout Europe, still in the making.

We focused specifically on the impact of COVID-19 on the governance of public services for migrants and refugees, investigating any potential changes that may have occurred. Unlike the main analyses conducted so far as the pandemic unfolded, we do not look at the access to health services, but focus on a wider range of services that are part and parcel of the governance of integration, such as applications for citizenship and residence permits, requests for work-related certificates, access to education or applications for asylum. We therefore also fill an empirical gap by exploring the actors involved in the provision of public services for migrants, their roles, their types of interaction and their practices, and assess the extent of their adaptation to the pandemic’s shock. Drawing on the multilevel governance and public governance literature, we seek to explain the similarities and differences in the adaptive capacity among the easyRights pilot cities observed, namely, Birmingham (United Kingdom), Larissa (Greece), Malaga (Spain) and Palermo (Italy). Rather than focusing on administrative performance, our endeavor is to shed light on the “actors’ ability to respond to change, manage and influence resilience” (Engle 2011). We assume that two main variables factor into the capacity of integration governance systems to adapt to unexpected and complex events, such as a global pandemics. The first is the institutional structure of the governance system, which can be network-based or have a hierarchical structure, and the second is the presence of what Mazzucato and Kattel (2020) call “dynamic capabilities”, which encompass a participatory culture and the capacity of actors to collaboratively take decisions.

The following section provides an overview of the easyRights project and the public services’ ecosystems observed during the two years of the pandemic. We then discuss the theoretical arguments guiding our hypothesis and engage with the methodology used to trace the change in the governance of public services. The empirical part of the paper and the conclusion provide the results of the comparative analysis, and put forward some reflections on the theoretical implications of our findings.

2. The easyRights Project

The easyRights project is an EU-funded project under the Migration-06 Call: Addressing the challenge of migrant integration through ICT-enabled solutions. The project started in January 2020 and was completed by the end of 2022. The project’s overall goal was to use intelligent technologies to facilitate migrants’ understanding of and access to public (welfare) services. To this end, the project aimed at, among others things, personalizing and contextualizing existing public (digital) services for migrants and refugees, through a co-creation approach bringing together all the relevant actors of the services ecosystem. Four pilot cities, namely, Birmingham, Larissa, Palermo and Malaga, each selected two integration-related services, described below and visualized in Figure 1, as test cases for the project’s implementation. The chosen services together relate to three stages of the settlement process: adjustment, adaptation and longer-term integration (Richmond and Shields 2005; Shields et al. 2016).

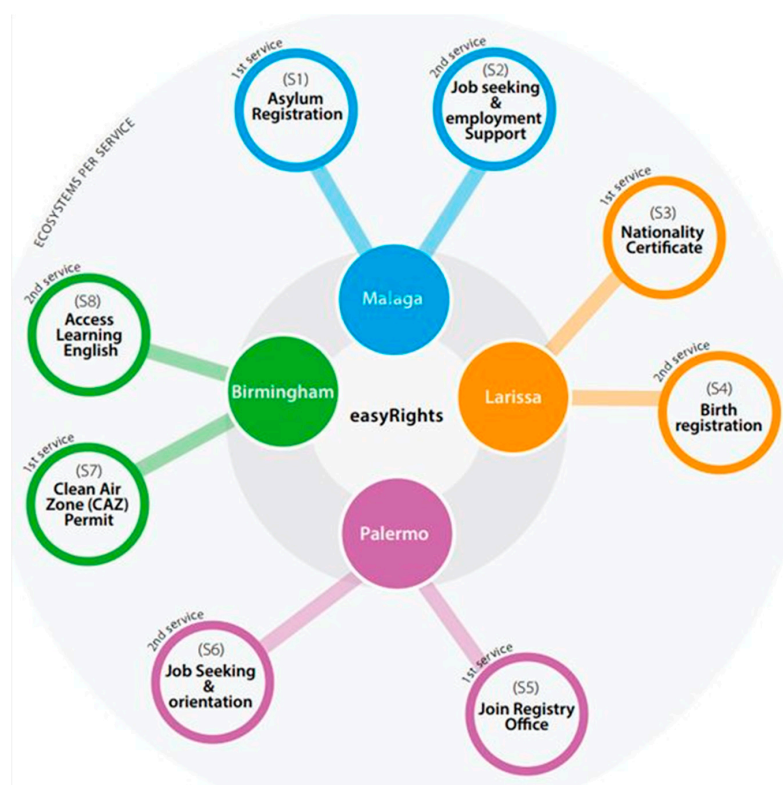


Figure 1. The eight service ecosystems in easyRights (project report D5.1).

The city of Birmingham, a city that boasts a migrant population of about 250,000 people, focused on a digital platform issuing drivers a certificate of compliance with the Clean Air Zone (CAZ). The service is relevant to immigrants because, on the one hand, it affects a job (taxi driver) that is highly targeted by Birmingham’s migrant population, and on the other, because the Clean Air Zone is an area that hosts many religious buildings, businesses run by migrants and a children’s hospital. The second service selected for the easyRights project by the Birmingham City Council was the provision of language courses for non-English speakers.

The services covered and observed in the Municipality of Larissa were the certifications of nationality and birth. These services hold particular importance for the integration of migrants and refugees as they facilitate access to a wide range of additional benefits and forms of support.

Pivotal to the integration system of the Municipality of Malaga were the asylum-seeking services and the guide to employment. Both these services involve a broad network of governmental and non-governmental actors, such as the Red Cross, the National and local police, NGOs and different municipal departments.

In Palermo, the services for migrants selected within the easyRights project and observed throughout two years of the COVID-19 pandemic were access to the civil registry—which is a pre-requisite for obtaining all other documents and welfare services—and a job-seeking service.

The co-creation rationale of the project, which was centered around the so-called Quadruple Helix approach² and included the organization of Hackathons and focus groups with migrants and refugees, allowed us to observe the interaction of the actors involved in the provision of the services, including the final migrant users, and analyze the changes that occurred during the pandemic in terms of types of relationships, formal and informal norms, and practices regulating different steps of service provision.

3. Adapting to Complex Crisis: An Analytical Framework

There is hardly any doubt that COVID-19 has been a huge test for governments, and this is especially true in those sectors that directly affect vulnerable populations, such as health, social policies, inclusion and integration policies (OECD 2022a; Ansell et al. 2021; Crawley 2021; Kuhlmann et al. 2021). As soon as lockdown and social distancing measures began to be implemented, many in-person services that form the core of these policies were halted and gradually relocated online. This presented new opportunities but required new arrangements, regulations, distributions of responsibilities, funds, and forms of collaboration and learning across administrative levels. The governance of migrants' integration has been no exception to the pandemic storm (OECD 2022b; SHARE Network 2021; Slootjes 2022). Integration systems in Europe—which have recently been impacted by economic and migration crises—have been put under additional pressure to maintain public service provision and navigate through more than two years of uncertainty.

Early scholarly works on COVID-19 have provided useful insights into the conditions that shaped countries' responses to the crisis. These span from institutional features (such as federal versus unitary states, the level of government effectiveness, the organization of health and other ministries) to cultural traditions (for instance, trust-based versus more authoritarian relations or the legacy of generous social policies), from the degree of freedom to political polarization (Altıparmak et al. 2021; Capano 2020; Kuhlmann et al. 2021; Maor and Howlett 2020). As much as responses have been different, mimesis, policy diffusion and (national) political power-seeking dynamics have also led to patterns of convergence or divergence throughout Europe (Kuhlmann et al. 2021).

In our research, we are not interested in the policy responses to the pandemic *per se*, but rather in understanding how the system of governance of public services (i.e., the service ecosystems) adapted to the shock caused by COVID-19, and what explains different organizational coping strategies. In this respect, the notion of adaptive capacity is particularly relevant. Adaptive capacity describes the ability to adapt. The historical underpinnings of adaptive capacity can be found in earlier works in sociology and organizational and business management, where this concept is described as an essential component of leadership and organizational success. Unlike resilience, which is the capacity of systems to “bounce back” and return to a state of equilibrium after a shock, or robustness, which is the ability of decision-makers to uphold or realize a public agenda or function despite turbulent events (Capano and Woo 2017), adaptive capacity describes the existence of repertoires of possible solutions to unforeseen problems and unpredictable variations (Engle 2011). It is a component of resilience characterized by the actors' interaction and organizational behaviors. Therefore, in exploring the impact of COVID-19 on governance dynamics within public services' ecosystems, we assess their adaptive capacity, and explain what factors constrained or enabled it. Drawing on Engle's conceptualization (Engle 2011), this was measured in terms of the level of change in the services ecosystems and the development of possible solutions to cope with COVID-19.

The first variable affecting the capacity of governance systems to react to unexpected events is their institutional structure. Services' ecosystems might be flatter, modularized, and easily integrated, or rather large, compartmentalized, and insulated hierarchies (Ansell et al. 2021). Marsden (1981) uses the concept of embeddedness in network theory to claim that the history of exchange has an impact on the routinization and stabilization of linkages between members. The structures (of relations) that have grown and stabilized over time affect and constrain the options for action on the part of the actors. Networks must therefore be understood in their current form as the result of past interactions, but moreover as fluid and in a constant process of change. While the focus of relational embedding is on dyadic relations and their impact on network construction, structural embedding focuses on the network system, and thus the systemic effect and consequences of these actions on the macro level. Therefore, the complex interplay of webbed interactions impacts the organization of the network. Furthermore, the influence of the embedded structure on the adaptability of organizational networks is also related to the incorporation of the local

context (Pavlovich and Kearins 2004). Along similar lines, but in the realm of migration and integration, the literature on multilevel governance looks at the polity structure, and actors' relationships more specifically, to understand the implications for policy-making processes and outcomes. Within the multilevel governance academic debate, the so-called localist thesis argues that local policies are shaped by local conditions (Caponio et al. 2018), such as local problems (immigration numbers, economy, demographics, etc.), local political variables including the power relations among local political parties (Garbaye 2005), and government relations with civil society organizations. The proponents of the relational thesis, conversely, argue that local migrant integration policies are not so much, or not only, shaped by local conditions, but rather by the relations between states and local authorities (Scholten 2016). Scholten (2016), for instance, argues that vertical policy coordination fosters frame convergence, while an absence of coordination may lead to contradictory policies. Following these arguments, we conjecture that network-based ecosystems will exhibit higher levels of adaptive capacity to cope with the challenges of the crisis than more hierarchical ones. Based on our cases and previous analyses of integration governance systems across Europe (Caponio et al. 2018; Scholten 2016; Scholten and Penninx 2016), the cities of Birmingham and Palermo fall within the first category, while the municipalities of Larissa and Malaga display more centralized service ecosystems (European Commission et al. 2018).

Beyond the formal structure of governance, we assume that the nature of the relations between local governments and the variety of local actors involved in the provision of public services affect the system's capacity to react. Public administration and organizational behavior scholars argue that dynamic capabilities (Mazzucato and Kattel 2020), defined as the ways in which governments engage with other actors and stakeholders, learn and take decisions, provide clues for understanding organizational transformations and institutional reactions to new challenges, such as complex crises. Studies on collaboration in public services (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002) show how the presence of a collaborative culture, local partnerships and citizens' participation open up "new political opportunity spaces in the locality" (Maloney et al. 2000, as cited in Sullivan and Skelcher 2002, p. 219), and may lead to effective solutions based on "a better idea of 'what the problem is' and 'what works' in a particular area from the perspectives of the beneficiaries" (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002, p. 183). Crisis management responses, as a consequence, may be conditioned by the nature of multi-actor collaborations in the policy-making processes (Ansell et al. 2021; Kuhlmann et al. 2021). We therefore expect that cities displaying more dynamic capabilities (Speer 2012; Mazzucato and Kattel 2020) will also exhibit higher levels of adaptive capacity in the governance of public services during the COVID-19 crisis.

Based on this explanatory framework, we will look at how the combination of different institutional structures (along the hierarchical and network-based continuum) and the presence of dynamic capabilities impacted the adaptive capacities of the four cities.

4. Methodology

Their involvement in the easyRights project allowed us to observe the governance of the selected public services from January 2020 to December 2022, and to gather data about the contextual settings, institutional developments and dynamic capabilities before the pandemic outbreak (early 2020) and after two years of the pandemic (end of 2022). To enhance clarity, it is important to differentiate between the two types of data collection performed during this study. The first type, conducted as part of the easyRights project, aimed to analyze institutional networks and their sustainability³. These data have not been included in this article. However, the extensive project-related collaboration with representatives from the pilot cities and other relevant stakeholders supported our understanding of the local context and dynamics. This facilitated subsequent cooperation for the current research.

The second type of data collection and analysis presented in this study focused on identifying pandemic-related institutional adjustments made to the governance systems of

each country. We relied on a combination of a semi-quantitative egocentric institutional network analysis (to identify service providers, their roles and types of interaction) with semi-structured interviews, to understand the impact of the pandemic on the composition and the governance dynamics of the services ecosystems.

As regards the research design, as well as the data collection and analysis approach, we referred to the mixed method approach by [Morse and Niehaus \(2009\)](#) exemplified in Figure 2. Accordingly, we defined a core component and a dependent supplementary component in the research process (p. 23). The preparatory phase is of particular importance in this sequential mixed-methods research design to prevent the use of incorrect data in the subsequent steps. We first integrated the steps in a sequential way to collect the information on one pilot city, and then merged the data of the different steps to compare the four pilots systematically ([Creswell et al. 2009](#))⁴.

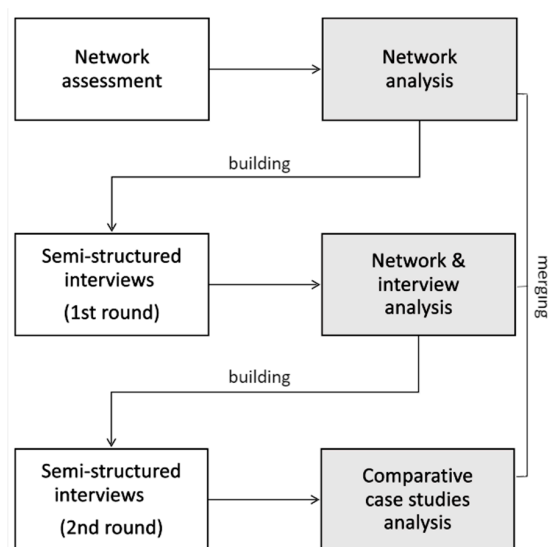


Figure 2. Qualitative sequential mixed-methods research design (based on [Morse and Niehaus 2009](#)).

The institutional network analysis is the core component and is based on the concentric circles' hierarchical network technique established by [Kahn and Antonucci \(1980\)](#). The latter was adapted for the purpose of the present research: egos are focal points such as organizations, groups or individuals, and the network is tracked according to the actors' direct relationships with ego⁵. The network survey was implemented as a first step with the help of a table and an accompanying description of how to fill it out. This table included questions about the actors of the ecosystem pre-, during and post-COVID-19 crisis, as well as values assigned to the relationship among actors. Nevertheless, the central categories of [Kahn and Antonucci \(1980\)](#) were maintained. Representatives of the institutions, predominantly of the municipalities, completed the table and were the contact persons for the in-depth semi-structured interviews. Three categories of actors were mapped:

- Institutional internal actors (e.g., other departments of a municipality), which contribute to service provision;
- other (external) institutions, such as public, private, non-profit or business partners offering different kinds of support to maintain services pre-, during, and post-crisis;
- institutions who make a specific, relevant contribution to the services, such as communicating with target groups, contributing to discussions as experts, etc.

The allocation of values is made based on the specific (strength of) support provided by inner-institutional actors and (external) institutions to ensure the (further) service delivery in practice. This comprehends the type, extent, and impact of the resources (financial, time, personnel, knowledge, infrastructure, etc.). We assigned values for every sequence

(pre-, during, and post-pandemic) separately (see Tables S2–S5 in annex). A value of 3 was assigned to the most important support providers, without whose support the service provision would not be conceivable and feasible. A value of 2 refers to actors that are quite significant for the service provision, but whose importance and assignment in the support network is also linked to their role and the temporary demand. Value 1 comprises actors who play a role in the support network and provide mostly one-dimensional support. A value of 0 was assigned to actors who were mentioned in one or two of the pandemic sequences, but are not part of the specific sequence. A change of value indicates a change in the strength of the relationship, so they could be still playing the same role but their strength increased or decreased.

The dimensions of support are determined by the role(s) of the respective actors and their relevance to service provision, the resources available to them, and the relationship with the ego.

The network maps created in this standardized process were analyzed in their composition, and the roles and support activities perceived by the service providers. The first analysis and visualizations of the networks enabled the following:

- an initial comparison of the network maps and identification of similarities and differences that could be addressed and explored in the subsequent rounds of interviews;
- the development of the guidelines for the semi-structured interviews;
- the targeted collection of contextual and background data for the assignments made (descriptions and understanding of the respective roles of named actors, relations, and support resources) and the supplementation/clarification of existing material.

The tables with network data were used in the interviews as cognitive support and narrative generators ([Hollstein and Pfeffer 2010](#)).

The network data map the changes in the network and the adjustments required to cope with the crisis. They illustrate the changes in the governance structure of the selected public services, the roles of the actors involved and the strengths of their relationships. The results of the egocentric network analysis served as a starting point for the formulation of the theory-based hypotheses and the development of the semi-structured interviews with the service providers. The twelve semi-structured interviews⁶ allowed us to answer the research questions more comprehensively ([Morse 2010](#)). The first round of semi-structured interviews aimed at deepening our understanding of the networks described. We designed the interview guidelines according to the results of the network analysis and conducted them online. The interviewees were specifically asked about:

- the amount and composition of the actors/institutions;
- the characteristics of the actors/institutions;
- the nature and characteristics of the relationships;
- the position in the network map and the ongoing prospective adjustments in the different stages of the COVID-19-related measures.

In the second round of semi-structured interviews, the existing network data and information from the first interview round were completed with specific information on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the governance of the services. Focus in this round of interviews was more on identifying change processes and contextual circumstances (local and institutional settings, pandemic-related needs), and deepening understandings of why changes occurred during the different phases of the pandemic. In this context, interviewees further specified the relevance of actors to service provision and collaboration practices (characteristics of relations).

This process facilitated the identification of institutional responsibilities for service provision, as well as the hierarchical decision-making processes associated with these responsibilities. The cases were allocated according to two analytical categories, namely, network-based or hierarchical systems ([Ansell et al. 2021](#)), and the level of dynamic capabilities they displayed ([Mazzucato and Kattel 2020](#)). We could therefore draw conclusions on how the size of the networks (number of ego-contacts: degree), their compositions (types of

support and resources, level of homogeneity) and their levels of dynamic capabilities (presence or absence of collaborative practices and participatory approaches to decision-making) affected the capacity of the system to adapt to the crisis.

5. Results

The following section discusses how COVID-19 impacted governance systems of the selected public services (services ecosystems) for migrants and refugees in Birmingham, Larissa, Palermo and Malaga, thus affecting their adaptive capacity between 2020 and 2022.

5.1. Birmingham

Within a centralized fiscal system and a mixed share of responsibilities across the levels of governance, migrant integration policies in the UK have evolved more on the local level (Scholten 2016) following what has been defined by Favell as “pragmatic localism” (Favell 1998). In response to some triggering events—such as the riots in north-western cities in the early 2000s and the 2005 bombings in London—that put social cohesion high on the political agenda, the national level of governments sought to regain control and coordination over integration policy. As a result, and in line with reforms in other policy areas initiated in the mid-2000s, several (soft) governance mechanisms were put in place. Social cohesion at the local level is now pursued through a complex network of entities with non-coterminous boundaries, so that health or housing policies frequently span distinct regions and are vertically accountable to multiple central bodies, rather than their locality (Broadhurst and Gray 2022; Bentley et al. 2016). This loose and locally led coordination framework of integration and community cohesion policies runs in parallel with a centrally regulated system of service delivery (Mosley 2011), which is often devolved to third parties (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002), and a mix of centralized and decentralized policy implementation, depending on the policy field (European Commission et al. 2018).

The Birmingham services ecosystem is characterized by a high number (and highly diverse network of) actors. As shown in Figure 3, before 2020, it was composed of twenty-two actors: twelve governmental institutions, eight NGOs and two private companies. In our assessment of actors and their roles pre-pandemic, eighteen institutions, including six inner institutional actors, eight NGOs and four governmental institutions, were assigned to the innermost circle, thus being directly in charge of service provision. Four actors—two private institutions and two governmental educational institutions—were assigned to the outermost circle, thus providing tangential support to service delivery. In all three sequences (pre-, during and post-pandemic), no institutions were assigned to the middle circle, which includes relevant actors whose importance is, however, temporary and ad-hoc.

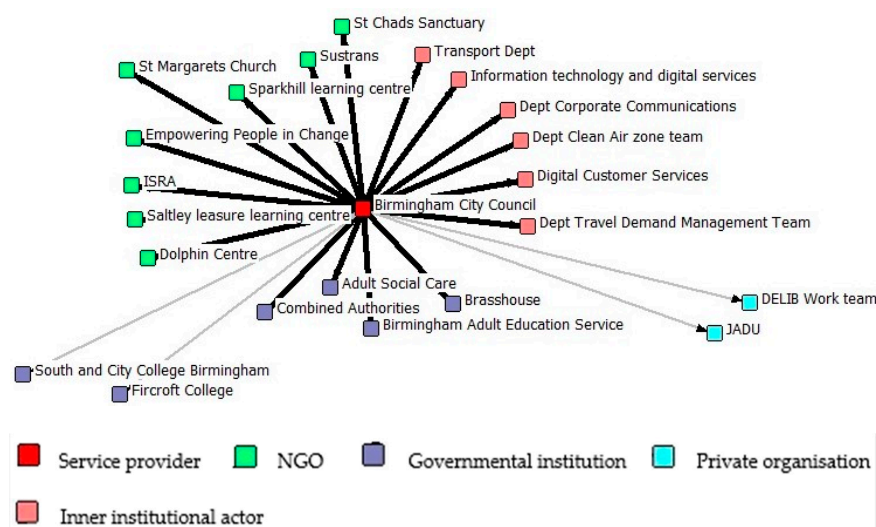


Figure 3. Birmingham's pre-crisis network of actors.

The high stability of the Birmingham network is characterized by the fact that the actors mentioned from the pre-pandemic period have remained part of the network throughout the COVID-19 crisis (see Figure 4), and, with one exception (the NGO Sustrans belonged to the narrowest network circle before and during the pandemic and lost relevance after the pandemic), their importance in the network has also remained unchanged. In addition, the network of actors expanded during the pandemic by 5 actors (27 actors in total; 4 NGOs and 1 governmental institution joined the network), who remained part of the network after the pandemic with unchanged importance.

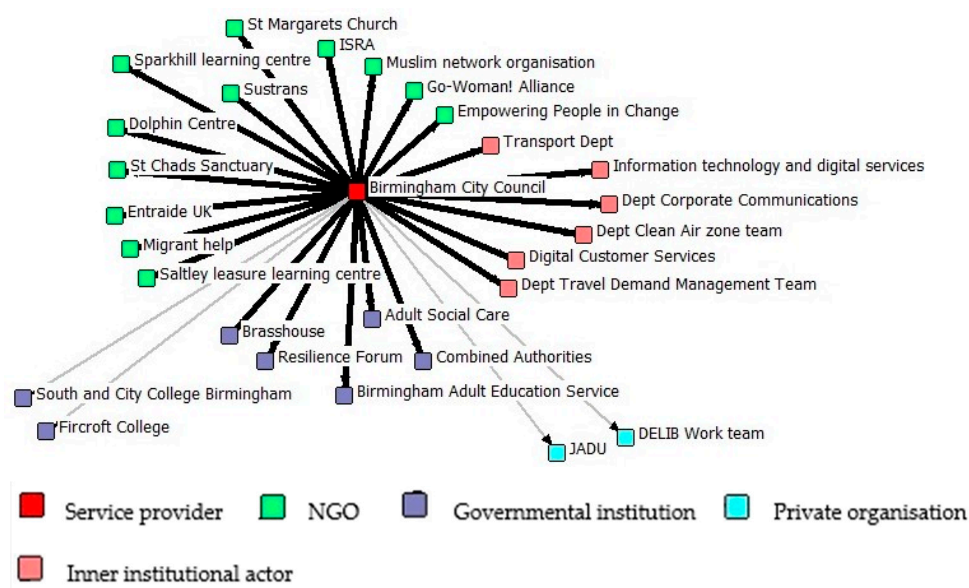


Figure 4. Birmingham's mid-crisis network of actors.

The stability of the ecosystem did not imply, however, a lack of adaptive capacity. On the contrary, we observed that actors could substantively change their tasks and types of services provided during the pandemic, activating learning processes across municipal departments and units (Interview B1). Interestingly, changes taking place during the pandemic triggered a more systemic re-organization of the services ecosystems (Interview B2) and of the services themselves. While some actors resumed their original activities, the majority changed—to different degrees—their tasks or positions. The positions of the new actors who joined the network during the pandemic remained the same also after the peak of the emergency (see Figure 5). These include the NGOs Muslim network organisation, Entraide UK and the Go-Woman! Alliance, which provided food parcels and flexible support; the Go-Woman! Alliance also provided laptops to learners and taught digital skills. The NGO Migrant help supported local residents in general and in different matters during and post-pandemic, and Resilience Forum, a governmental institution, supports local emergency measures.

As in many countries in Europe, “non-essential” services in Birmingham were at first interrupted to organize emergency measures such as mask distribution and intensify crisis-communication activities to enforce lockdowns and social distancing. A significant percentage of the non-administrative staff of the Birmingham City Council was reassigned to provide food parcels to vulnerable individuals at various centers, while the rest of the employees were required to work from home, with few exceptions related to mental and physical conditions. Key mobility services, such as transport for West Midlands (bus services) and Sustrans walking, had to cease their operations due to the lockdowns. The services under scrutiny, CAZ and ESOL, however, did not incur severe disruptions, nor did the demand from citizens decrease, as shown by data from the Brum Breathe Platform⁷, which registers users' applications for certificates to access the CAZ area. Against the

background of a limited interruption in the demand for and provision of services related to the migrant population, many actors of the network either suspended their activities or had to reorganize their work. While the decisions on lockdowns and restrictions were solely made by the central government, decisions related to staffing, purchasing, or releasing of business grants were strongly led by local authorities. Institutional arrangements between the national, regional and local levels left the BCC with significant room for maneuvering to adjust crisis responses to local needs. Local authority's directors or chief executives, for instance, could autonomously decide on the criteria for business grant allocations, despite the funding source being exclusively national. This allowed the targeting of black and ethnic minority groups who were also the main users of the two services, or local organizations supporting immigrants.

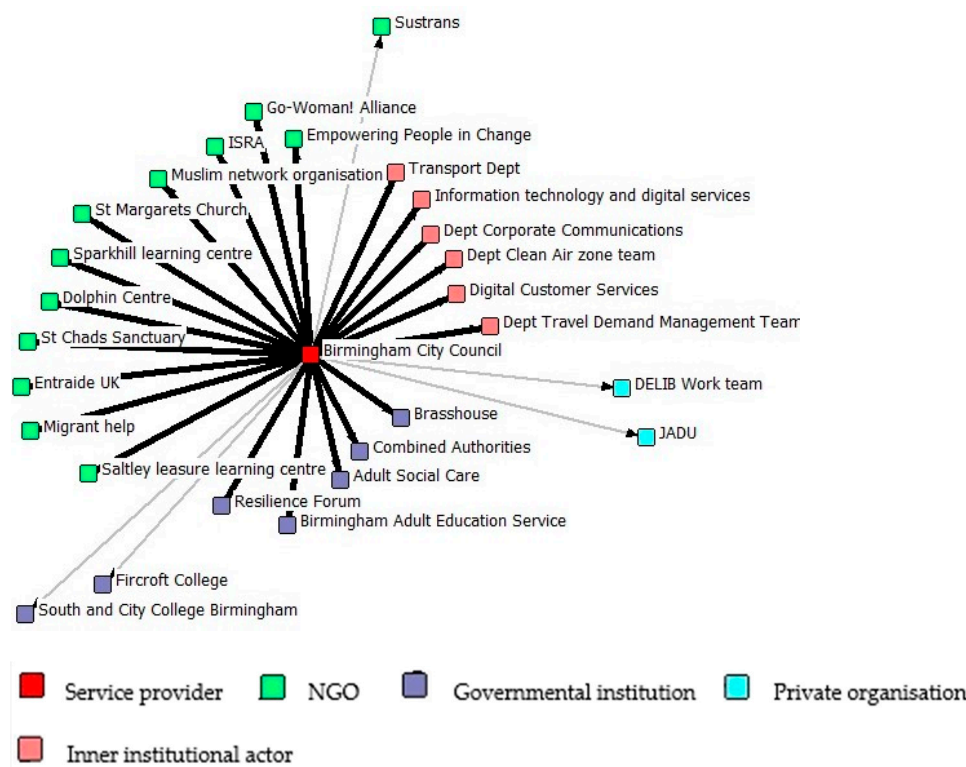


Figure 5. Birmingham's post-crisis network of actors.

The flexibility of the governance system also played an important role in re-activating the collaborations between private and public actors, NGOs and institutions. According to a civil servant interviewed during the easyRights project (interview B2), learning from previous crises was not an option within the Birmingham City Council: "the whole environment had to be adapted to this change as there were no practices that could be re-utilized. [. . .] Adaptation was fast, though, and the productivity even increased".

The Birmingham Adult Education Service became BCC's most essential partner as a gateway to a wide range of services, including ESOL, particularly on their website, where they not only taught English but also offered access to all the other BCC services for migrants. Similarly, BCC could rely on increasing support from the Adult Social Care and the Go-Woman! Alliance to reach their users during lockdowns and closure.

Thanks to a long-lasting tradition of community engagement with ethnic and non-ethnic voluntary associations and partnerships with the private sector for the delivery of services (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002), the level of collaboration between the BCC and the digital community could expand without significant constraints during the pandemic, and NGOs partly compensated for the drop in events organized by BCC for migrants and refugees to help them understand and access CAZ and ESOL. The BCC, therefore, shared

information with community groups and increased stakeholder engagement in digital and community customer service. Moreover, thanks to these partnerships, it developed a digital inclusion strategy to strengthen the digital skills of street-level bureaucrats providing online public services.

While these dynamics did not necessarily prevent the emergence of racialized consequences of the pandemic (Arias Cubas et al. 2022; Hu 2020), they show the extent to which the network-based and flexible structure of governance of integration factored in the capacity of the services ecosystems to adapt to a major and complex crisis. The leeway of civil servants to react to everyday emergencies extended beyond departmental boundaries and levels of government. Moreover, the rooting of the practice of involving civil servants responsible for policy implementation in policy design enabled civil servants to create new programs to cope with a crisis with little precedent to guide them.

5.2. Larissa

Public administration in Greece is among the most centralized in the European Union (Hlepas 2020; European Commission et al. 2018). While policy implementation is in theory decentralized, in practice the central government exercises a strong oversight over this phase of the policy cycle, and provides decentralized agencies with explicit instructions on how to interpret and administer the law. These tensions have been driving the proposals for administrative reforms in the last few years (European Commission et al. 2018). Greek public administration includes 13 regional authorities, 325 municipalities, and seven decentralized administrations. In other words, Greece is a unitary, decentralized state with two levels of governance: central state governance, which is exercised centrally through government ministries and at a decentralized level, and the local self-government, which is exercised at the regional and municipal levels (European Commission 2021). Constitutional amendments have strengthened the principles of decentralization and local autonomy. Consequently, at lower levels, several municipalities have merged so that the new municipality could appropriately exercise decentralized authority (Sakita 2021).

The governance networks of the two services observed, namely, the issuance of nationality certificates and of birth certificates, show some significant differences with the structure analyzed; for instance, in Birmingham. While in the case of Birmingham, the inner circle is characterized by a high variety of actors and provided resources (infrastructural, access to the target groups, dissemination of information, etc.), the inner circle of the Larissa support network is characterized by a more homogenous composition of actors comprising three municipal departments partners:

1. the municipal Department of Social Services provides, among other things, social services for the elderly, structures and services for children, services for primary care and health promotion, and social structures for poor and vulnerable groups;
2. the Registry Office provides both certificates of residence and birth certificates, but also offers a variety of services to all citizens;
3. the ICT Department.

Moreover, direct service providers in the inner circle are the following extra-governmental institutions:

1. The Civil Protection Department;
2. The Immigrant and Refugee Integration Council. This body acts as the Municipality's consulting instrument and advisory board in order to strengthen the integration of immigrants and refugees in the local community. It comprises six elected official members—four executives of the local Municipal Authority and two members of the opposition—and five migrants;
3. The decentralized Administration of Thessaly, providing Greek nationality to immigrants;
4. The Municipality's Public Benefit Enterprise.

A similar homogenous composition can be seen in the second circle of support, which includes a total of four actors. The first is DIKEL, a municipal company that implements

programs for the development and support of social intervention initiatives. Its mission encompasses a wider group of people who need help to integrate or reintegrate into the social and economic spheres. The other three state institutions are the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, which is responsible for policy provision, and two institutions responsible for the camp administration on-site (the administration of the Koutsochero Camp and the administration of the refugee camp). NGOs are only present in the outermost circle. These are the Danish Refugee Council, which supports camp management and is thus in close exchange with various target groups of the services, and Terre des Hommes, a Swiss children's relief agency taking care of child protection case management services. IOM's work also focuses on the Koutsochero Refugee Camps and supervises the financial administration of the camp's activities.

Larissa's support network is thus characterized by a homogeneous, state-centered landscape of actors. As highlighted by the interviewees (interview L1 and L2), the structure of the network and the strength of the relations did not change at any time during or after the pandemic (see Figure 6). The COVID-19 crisis did not affect its stability and, according to one informant (interview L3), "it even contributed to strengthening it". Unlike in Birmingham, institutional stability was not compensated for by flexibility in the governance dynamics, with significant challenges for the accessibility of the service.

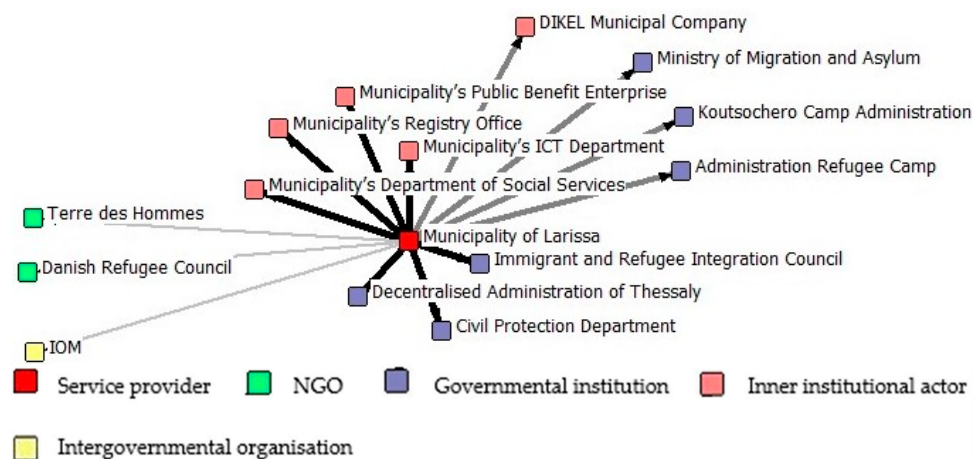


Figure 6. Larissa's service ecosystem remained unchanged in all periods of the crisis.

Even more than in other European countries, the Municipality of Larissa interrupted its services at the onset of the pandemic in order to deal with the implementation of prevention and protection measures. Remote service—to submit applications, and receive and deliver certificates—lasted overall for almost two years, with almost no exceptions, and required a strong degree of internal coordination. In the words of a civil servant within the administration, "communication between various departments to resolve various procedural issues was extremely difficult. Everything was slow with many problems and obstacles to complete basic tasks" (interview 2). While leading to a very successful strategy of disease control (Exadaktylos and Chatzopoulou 2023; Petridou and Zahariadis 2021), the centralization of the structure of governance, in this respect, did not facilitate the shift of responsibilities across offices or the adoption of new arrangements for service provision, especially in a context of staff shortage. Moreover, as shown in the network visualization, the organizational structure did not change between February 2020 and August 2022, with the only exception being the increasing responsibilities of the Civil Protection Department to provide basic services during the pandemic. As mentioned during one interview, "new practices in the Municipalities should follow national provisions, and this takes time" (interview 2). This finding reflects what some scholars have argued concerning the transformation of Greek public administration as still giving substantial primacy to the national state, despite inter-municipal and multi-level cooperation having increased in the last 20 years as part of the accession process into the EU (Hlepas 2020). The still incomplete

transformation of the hierarchical Greek public administration and its impact on decision-making during the pandemic is well summarized in the words of a civil servant approached during the project: “challenges in the provision of those public services for migrants are mainly due to the great bureaucracy, but especially to the lack of clear authorities within the organizational chart” (interview 3). Besides the centralized structure of governance, which is the first condition analyzed in our cases, the limited participatory culture (Costopoulou et al. 2021; Chorianopoulos 2009) and collaborative mechanisms also contributed to a lower adaptive capacity in the provision of public services for migrants during the pandemic, although to a more limited extent. Third-sector organizations and the Koutsochero Camp Administration indeed compensated for the services’ interruption by providing additional support to the users, namely, refugees and migrants from the camp living in assigned homes in the city. Evidence collected during the project, however, also shows how, compared to other cases such as Birmingham, those actors tend to have limited margins to maneuver in their activities. Interestingly, and although more specific research is required, we observed that the Greek government successfully invested its relatively limited financial resources to invest in the digitalization of healthcare and public services, thereby transforming the economic crisis into a catalyst for digital innovation. This centrally led digital turn involved also the services analyzed in the easyRights project, and partly helped circumvent the challenges in service provision described above.

5.3. Malaga

The governance of integration in Spain reflects the imperfect decentralization of its administrative system. It comprises three tiers of governance: state, autonomous communities, and local entities, which are connected by principles of competence, as prescribed by the Spanish Constitution. The General Secretary of Immigration and Emigration at the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migrations is the national authority responsible for overseeing immigrant integration. To ensure collaboration between the different levels of governance, three entities have been established:

1. The Inter-Ministerial Commission on Aliens coordinates various departments and the General State Administration;
2. The Sectoral Conference on Immigration facilitates the coordination of actions and competencies between the general administration and regional governments;
3. The Forum for the Social Integration of Immigrants serves as the primary platform for NGOs and associations to participate in integration policies.

Additionally, each autonomous community has its own integration plan that governs integration policies and the provision of public services. Spain’s rapid rise as a country of immigration has made NGOs key actors in reception and integration policies, many of which are not experts in migration issues (Józwiak et al. 2018). The “complexification” of integration, combined with the continuous training needs of an ever-expanding network, created challenges for and instability in an ecosystem still based on annual grant contests that favor state-wide organizations over local ones. The administration is also embedded in an imperfect bipartisan system, structured since 2015 in two internally unstable blocks that lack subtlety and an ability to compromise. Therefore, while Spain is characterized by a network structure, and dynamic capabilities are indeed present at the local level within territorial units, jurisdictional conflict and territorial tensions hamper both vertical and horizontal coordination between levels of government, with few exceptions related to political convergence.

The administrative structure and its conflictual dynamics were exacerbated during the pandemic (Royo 2020; Navarro and Velasco 2022) and, as noted by some scholars, put “intergovernmental relations systems in a sort of stress test” (Navarro and Velasco 2022, p. 192). In our case study for the city of Malaga, we could clearly see how the dynamic capabilities at the local level could not compensate sufficiently for the coordination fatigue across territories and administrative levels, which is part and parcel of the Spanish system, and which was even further exacerbated in the pandemic. The services ecosystems in

Malaga mirror the complex structure described above (see Figure 7). The network analysis shows intensive cooperation and support offered by NGOs, namely, Christar international, Diez42, Centro Luz, CEAR, the Red Cross and Malaga Acoge. These actors directly and substantially support both the city of Malaga (especially the Department of Employment), regarding job-seeking services for migrants (service 1), and the National Office of Asylum for asylum applications (service 2) by conducting interviews and acting as the first contact point for migrants. Although few changes occurred in the network, with two actors becoming part of the ecosystem during the pandemic and the “rapid response volunteer group” (see Figures 8 and 9) remaining even after the peak of the crisis, their involvement increased and became more formal.

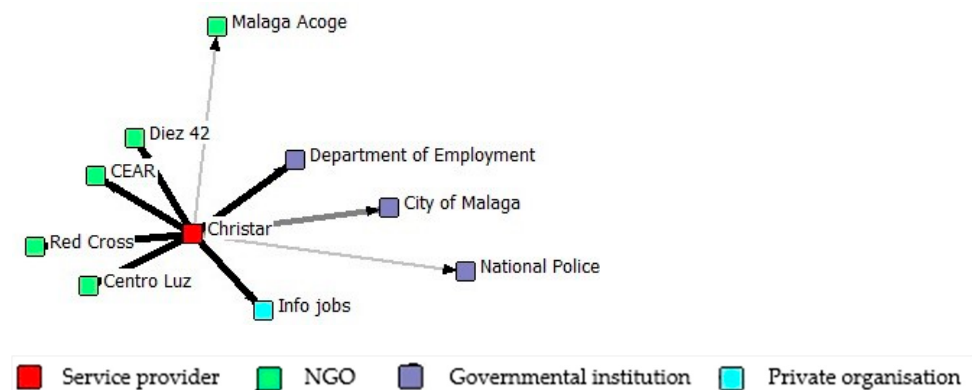


Figure 7. Malaga's pre-crisis network of actors.

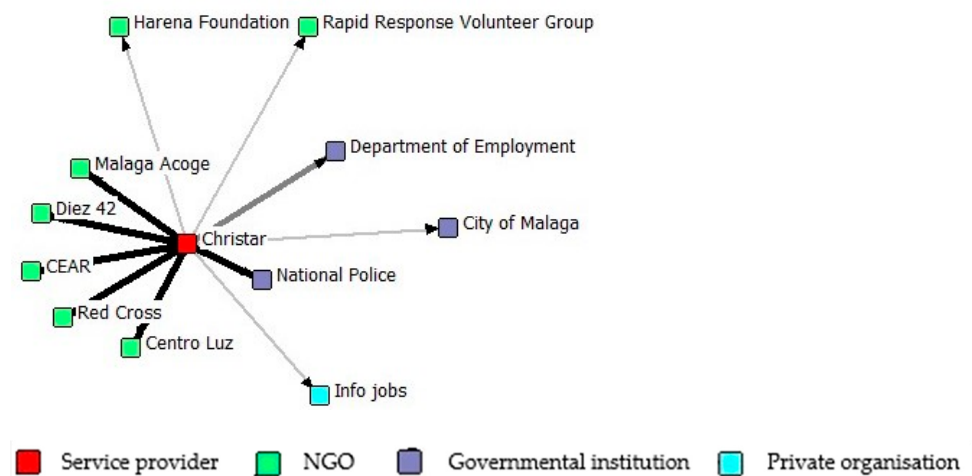


Figure 8. Malaga's mid-crisis network of actors.

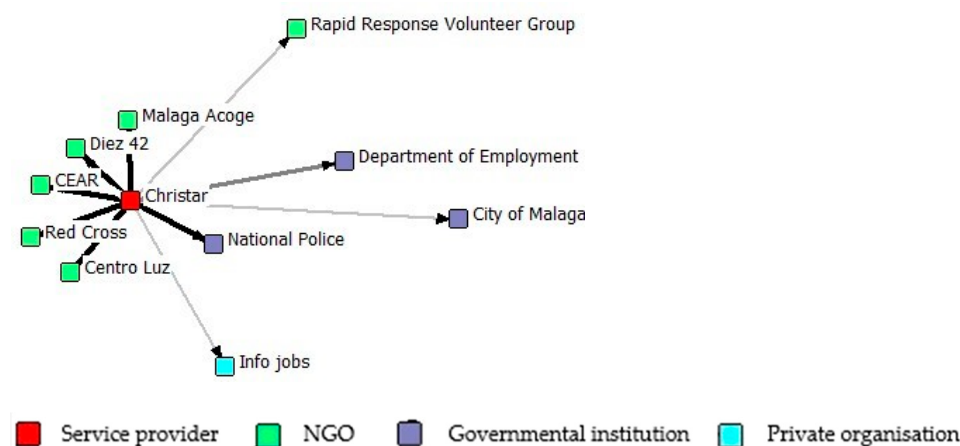


Figure 9. Malaga's post-crisis network of actors.

As highlighted by one public official within the Municipality, “to some extent, the pandemic led to the formalisation of collaborations between the city council and local associations and NGOs, recognising their valuable role in both operational activities and strategic thinking. They have always been there, but they are not visible enough” (interview M4). The city of Malaga, for instance, activated online participatory activities among the actors and established working groups for the management of the crisis through the city's Social Council (Consejo Social de la Ciudad de Málaga), a forum for dialogue among economic, social, and professional bodies. At the same time, as highlighted by a representative of an NGO, “since decisions depended largely on national and regional decisions, we were left in the dark for some time, and we could not provide real answers to migrants asking for support. After the first lockdown, it was better, and for asylum requests, asylum seekers were granted a grace period for the submission of documents” (interview M1).

The challenges of vertical coordination observed in Malaga increased even more following the extraordinary “state of alarm” activated by the central government in the first weeks of the pandemic, which “implied an alteration in the power distribution among tiers of government” (Navarro and Velasco 2022, p. 200), but also more formal relationships, both between municipal, regional or national institutions, and among actors in the services ecosystems (interview M4). The re-centralization of decision-making processes during the first weeks of the pandemic often caused delays in service provisions and, as pointed out by a public official at the Municipality of Malaga, “it impacted more small local NGOs than the municipality itself” (Interview M1). As argued in the analysis of refugee reception policies in Spain (Garcés-Mascareñas and Moreno-Amador 2020), actors that could rely on stronger networks and collaborations across territories had more room to maneuver in their responses to the emergency. This was the case, for instance, of “Malaga Acoge”, the responsibility of which is, among other things, to provide legal assistance to migrants and refugees, and which could adapt its working methods based on the experiences of other Spanish localities and continue its operations, either online or in person as lockdown measures were removed.

5.4. Palermo

The governance of migrants' integration in Italy is embedded in a broader administrative system that is formally unitary but with federalizing trends in place. Since regional governments have legislative and regulatory powers in areas like social policies, education, the labor market, vocational training, health, and housing, they are key actors in the development of integration policies (Campomori and Caponio 2017). Local governments are primarily responsible for defining concrete integration measures and implementing policies set by regional governments. The “National integration plan for persons eligible for

international protection” recognizes the central role of local authorities and public services at the local level, including educational institutions and healthcare services (European Commission et al. 2018). While the active involvement of migrant support organizations and NGOs in the decision-making phase highly depends on the government’s willingness to open up the process, the governance system relies substantively on the third sector to implement many public services for migrants and refugees (see Figure 10).

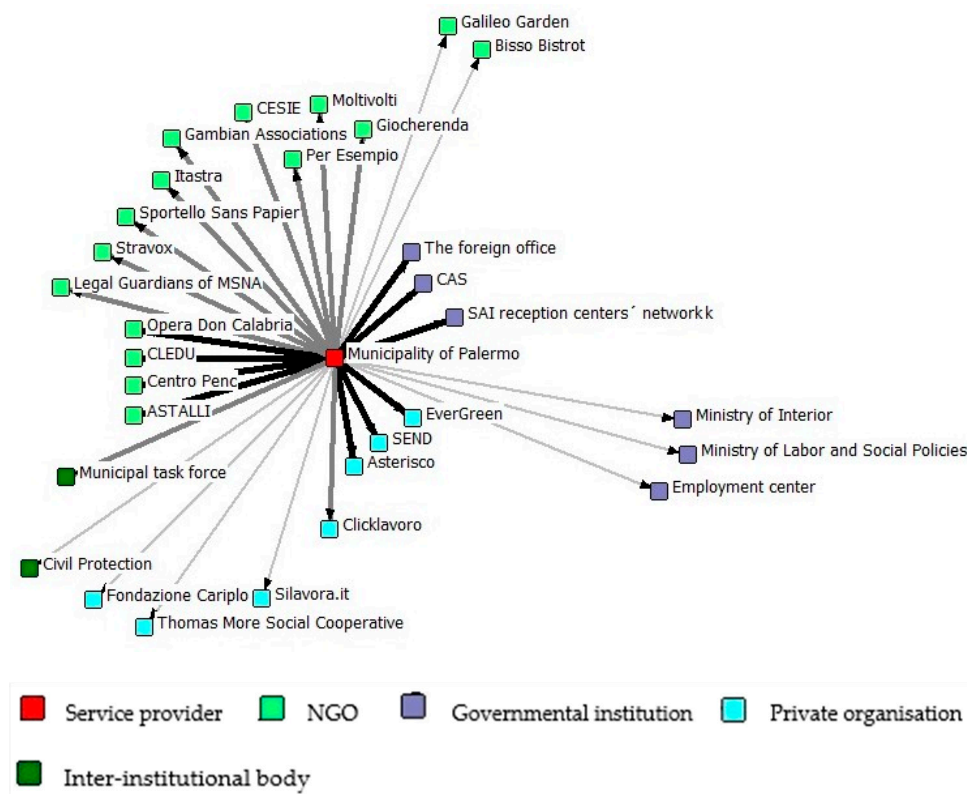


Figure 10. Palermo's pre-crisis network of actors.

Like in the rest of the country, the Municipality of Palermo interrupted the provision of public services for migrants and refugees (such as the requests of application for asylum and job-seeking support) for some days before moving online. The first step of the adaptation phase required the intensive involvement of and coordination with the Civil Protection Department, which is the government-led cornerstone of the Italian crisis management system, and is significantly supported by volunteer efforts (Capano 2020). The strengthened collaboration between the service providers and the Civil Protection Department is visible in the network visualization (see Figure 11). The latter, together with NGOs and the COVID-19 Municipal Task Force, started intensively supporting migrants in filling out requests for benefits offered to vulnerable people (such as food vouchers) and translating administrative documents to speed up the administrative processes of asylum- or job-seeking.

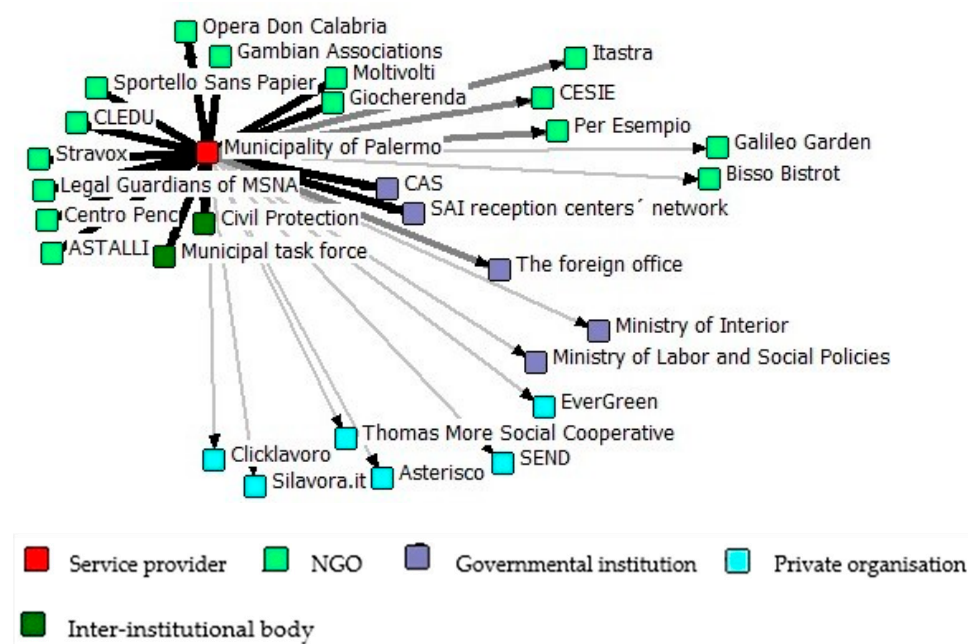


Figure 11. Palermo's mid-crisis network of actors.

The non-hierarchical structure of the governance system was key to maintaining a relatively high adaptive capacity. Since NGOs and non-profit associations are traditionally key actors of employment services, for instance, and compensate for the ineffective public support provided by Public Employment Agencies, the adjustments required during COVID-19 were routinely absorbed (interview P1). As reported by one civil servant among our interviewees, “the pandemic consolidated pre-existing collaborations. The structure did not change, having entities already there who knew what to do was important” (interview P3). The network analysis undertaken across the crisis periods (pre-, mid-, and post-COVID-19 crisis) shows that, rather than transforming the structure of the network in quantitative terms, the pandemic significantly changed the intensity of the relations (see Figure 11). Over time, the inner circle of key supporting actors grew significantly, expanding from just ten institutions to encompassing sixteen after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This expansion came at a cost to the middle circle, whose actors were previously involved in a limited way in service provision, but became important during the crisis to coping with the increasingly complex and urgent demands placed on service providers.

During the peak of the pandemic, inter-institutional bodies such as the Covid Municipal Task Force and Civil Protection played a crucial role in coordinating the re-allocation of tasks required for the provision of social services to citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. These collaborations were essential in ensuring the efficient and effective distribution of resources, including food, shelter, and medical aid, to those in need. As the situation began to improve in the latter half of 2022, these inter-institutional bodies gradually resumed their pre-pandemic functions. Conversely, relationships between third-sector organizations that had been strengthened during the pandemic were sustained even after 2022 (see Figure 12). According to one interviewee, this is due to the recognition of the valuable contribution made by new collaborations in addressing community needs, and to “learning processes activated during the crisis” (interview P3).

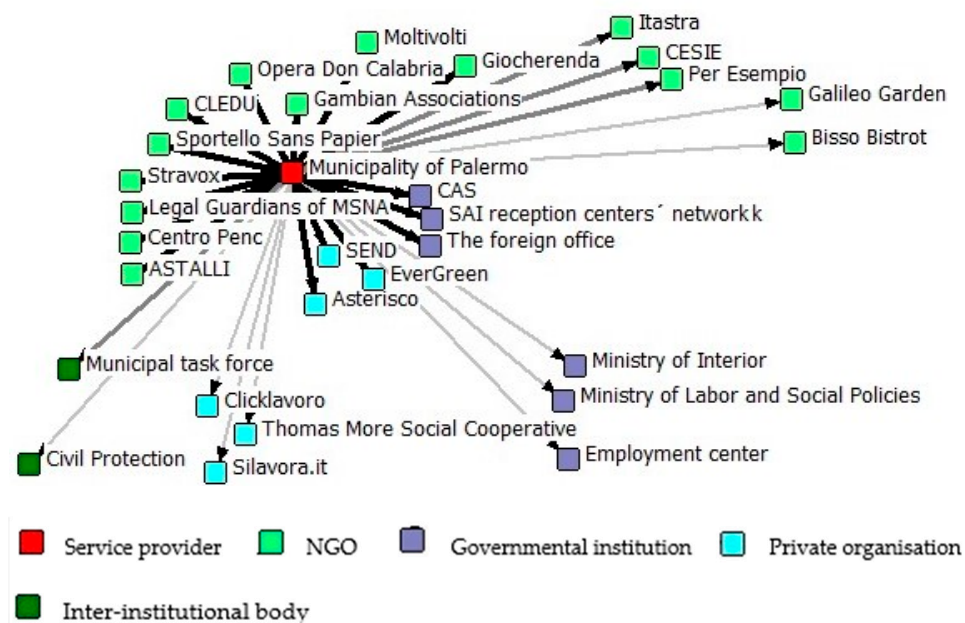


Figure 12. Palermo's post-crisis network of actors.

Unlike in other areas such as health, governmental decisions regulating the provision of public social services did not provide one-size-fits-all approaches, and therefore did not entail conflict between and across administrative levels. According to an interviewee, “national decrees had the required flexibility to work under emergencies, for instance, to review contracts for public calls, or adjust working methods to individual needs. So, we had good autonomy at the municipal level in the response” (interview P2). At the same time, our findings show that the presence of collaborative approaches to service provision for migrants and refugees was even more important than the formal governance structure. While in pre-pandemic times, collaborations across units and between actors were one of the possible options—sometimes selected, sometimes ignored—COVID-19 was an important trigger. As one civil servant put it, “the pandemic added the ineluctable need for cooperation” (interview P2). Municipal councilors, for instance, actively started looking for good practices implemented in other localities via a chat involving mayors and civil servants across Italy. While the final use of this and other collaborative tools also depended on the personal willingness of individuals to find effective solutions and make sure that services could be delivered, the administration's commitment to developing new ways of operating positively impacted the actors' capacity to learn, as well as learning opportunities more generally. In their analysis of organizational capacity for service delivery, [Sullivan and Skelcher \(2002\)](#) argued that “the contribution of individuals to collaboration is insufficient if it is not supported by a culture of operating that engenders the development of new activities, roles and relationships”. In the case of Palermo, we see that increased cooperation at the intersectoral level during COVID-19 “strengthened the sense of belonging to the institution and the degree of knowledge among colleagues” (interview P2). Pre-existing public engagement activities could be adapted to the new circumstances (by paying extra attention to safety measures, for instance), and prevented inefficient free-riding by associations.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The impact of COVID-19 on the governance of public services for migrants and refugees, as well as the factors that contribute to different coping mechanisms, remain largely unexplored, and filling this research gap is of paramount importance for multiple reasons. Firstly, exploring the micro-dynamics of public service provision during the pandemic complements the growing body of research on public administrations' and local

governments' behaviors in times of crisis, such as that by [Landau et al. \(2021\)](#), [Altiparmakis et al. \(2021\)](#), [Capano \(2020\)](#), [Oliver et al. \(2020\)](#), and [Petridou \(2020\)](#). This research is crucial for understanding the challenges faced by public service providers in the context of the pandemic and identifying potential strategies to improve service delivery. Secondly, the pandemic has further exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities among specific communities, as numerous scholars such as [Arias Cubas et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Crawley \(2021\)](#) emphasized. The accessibility of basic services plays a significant role in the "racialized consequences" of COVID-19 ([Arias Cubas et al. 2022](#), p. 1), making it critical to understand how public services are being delivered to vulnerable communities, including migrants and refugees during this period. This research sheds light on the institutional arrangements and collaborative practices that could reduce inequalities and promote greater equity in service provision.

Based on the Horizon2020 project easyRights, which aimed at improving migrants' access to public services in four European pilot cities (Birmingham, Malaga, Larissa and Palermo), we compared the strategies, practices, and organizational arrangements put forward by all the actors of the services' ecosystems, namely, public administrations, service owners and migrant support organizations, to adapt to COVID-induced disruptions, and provide public services for migrants' integration. Moreover, assuming that embeddedness ([Marsden 1981](#)) and the relevance of stable relations that have grown over time within an organization (or a network) shape the options of actions of network actors, we disentangled the conditions that are conducive to more or less adaptive capacity.

We examined how the cities of Birmingham, Larissa, Malaga and Palermo reacted to the COVID-19 crisis in the provision of public services for migrants and refugees. To tackle the how aspect, we confronted the empirical records with the manifestations of the outcome, namely, adaptive capacity in public service provision from 2020 to 2022. We found that, unlike in other areas—notably in health—where the UK public sector struggled to deal with the impact of the pandemic ([Joyce 2021](#)), the ecosystems in Birmingham were able to put in place coping strategies to deliver the two selected public services (access to English and issuance of clear air zone permits). Palermo's and Malaga's ecosystems displayed a medium level of adaptive capacity, with some variations over time. Unlike in the health sector, wherein Greece seems to have successfully managed the emergency ([Petridou and Zahariadis 2021](#)), actors in charge of the provision of the selected services (issuance of nationality certificates and birth registration) substantially struggled to adapt to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis and find "repertoires of possible solutions" ([Engle 2011](#), p. 648) in their everyday work.

To understand why public administrations reacted as they did in delivering public services, we performed a comparison of the four cases. Our research findings not only support, but also extend, recent research on crisis management in multi-level settings. Specifically, we compare the impact of two conditions, and suggest that the ability of local governments to manage pandemic challenges is highly dependent on the distribution of comprehensive competencies across various levels (i.e., structure of governance in our paper), as argued by [Kuhlmann et al. \(2021\)](#), as well as the quality of network cooperation between different administrations and civil society (i.e., dynamic capabilities in our study), as noted by [Schomaker and Bauer \(2020\)](#). Our analysis reveals that while both of these conditions are critical for the level of adaptive capacity in public services provision, the structure of governance is more likely to act as a constraint or trigger for coping strategies.

The recent literature on the integration of refugees and migrants suggests that service providers and street-level bureaucrats can play a critical role in facilitating integration opportunities and countering marginalization. By acting as "nodes" in the service ecosystem, they can facilitate access to essential resources and services ([Käkelä et al. 2023](#); [Gidley et al. 2018](#); [Belabas and Gerrits 2017](#)). This is especially crucial in times of crisis, when the vulnerabilities and needs of these populations are magnified, and when institutional channels and practices are disrupted. Building on these arguments, our findings highlight the critical importance of the structure of the service ecosystem and the nature of relationships among

actors in enabling or constraining the roles and performances of migrant support organizations or street-level bureaucrats. In Birmingham and Palermo, the relative flexibility of the governance system facilitated the adaptation of working practices to the new circumstances imposed by the pandemic. For instance, although decisions on lockdowns were taken at the central level, as in many other cases in Europe, decentralized implementation enabled local administrators to take swift action by using funds, reallocating staff, and coordinating operational activities. This was not the case in Greece where, as effectively summarized by one interviewee, “any new practice in the Municipality should follow national provisions [. . .] or wait for a central confirmation, and this takes time. And if you have no time to wait, you don’t advance” (interview L1).

The level of adaptive capacity is also dependent on the heterogeneity of the services ecosystem. When the actors’ landscape included governmental/municipal bodies, NGOs, and private sector entities, challenges and deadlocks affecting one specific group of actors, such as municipal institutions, could be overcome by third-sector organizations. In these cases, however, we also observed that coping strategies could more effectively be implemented if participatory forms of governance—such as those put in place through the Social Council of the City in Malaga—and collaborative learning—such as the horizontal exchange of practices across municipalities, in the case of Palermo—are present and activate.

While our study does not delve into the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, our findings suggest that it has not prompted any systemic changes. In all the cases analyzed, we found that the majority of the adaptations implemented to deal with the pandemic were not sustained beyond the peak of the emergency. This finding aligns with broader research on policy change in and beyond the migration realm, which has demonstrated that actors tend to take incremental steps and be influenced by status-quo biases during times of crisis and high uncertainty, as noted by Guiraudon (2018) and Czaika et al. (2022). Future research could focus on the micro-dynamics within the services ecosystems to provide further insights into the implementation of the digital transformation of public administrations and services⁸. An in-depth analysis of the governance of the delivery process could identify the factors that facilitate or hinder the integration of digitalization in public services, and the ways in which it can be optimized to support vulnerable groups.

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Notes

- ¹ We use the term “refugees” to refer to individuals who have been granted international protection by the state where they sought asylum. Furthermore, we use the term “migrants” to cover asylum-seekers, who are individuals waiting for a decision on their asylum claim, third country nationals residing in an EU country without refugee status, as well as EU citizens with a migrant

background (in line with the wording used by the European Commission in its Action Plan for Integration 2021–2027). In doing so, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various groups impacted by the services under scrutiny.

- 2 The Quadruple Helix approach to learning describes a process whereby transformation (within an institution, an organization, etc.) is achieved through the interaction between four levels of actors, namely, the national and/or local government, academia, business, and the general public. The approach assumes that the so-called ecosystems are open socio-technical communities, wherein the four groups of actors involved (people, businesses, academics and institutions) share a similar transitional tension and contribute to the development of new practices, also benefiting from experience and knowledge related to the digital world. This transitional tension is considered the engine activating and (possibly) maintaining the Triple Loop Learning mode along the different levels.
- 3 easyRights deliverable 5.4: D5.4: Institutional Sustainability Assessment. Soon available at Immigrate Services | EasyRights.
- 4 For a thorough description of the integration process in network analysis, see [Creswell et al. \(2011\)](#). Their approach conceptualizes four strategies to integrate network data assessment and analysis: (1) connecting; (2) building; (3) merging; and (4) embedding, though more may be applied in a research design.
- 5 The choice of the egocentric network analysis was constrained by the structure and goals of the easyRights project. Compared to complete network analysis, where each node is an ego and the relationships between actors and nodes are included ([Hanneman and Riddle 2011](#)), the ego network explores the actors directly linked to the focal points. The semi-structured interviews compensated for this limitation, and identified, to some extent, the relationships between actors irrespective of the focal point.
- 6 See the list of interview.
- 7 Brum Breathes—monthly dashboard (March 2021).
- 8 For an overview of the debate on the digitalization of services for migrants and refugees, see: [Tazzioli \(2023\)](#); [Mengesha et al. \(2022\)](#); [Razali et al. \(2022\)](#).

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