

# Street Level Bureaucrats Between Frustrations, Powerlessness, Bottom-up and Resilience Processes

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**Abstract:** In this paper the main outcomes of four researches carried out from 2014 to 2021 in three Italian regions (Abruzzo, Marche and Tuscany) will be shown, focused on the migrant's integration processes. In these researches social workers, educators, schools and L2 teachers, Intercultural mediators who work in the field of migration were interviewed about their difficulties in their daily work. The reading key use to understand their difficulties was the street level bureaucrats theory of Lipsky. Thanks to their statements, it was possible to better understand the importance of the role of the context that affects their work in providing services and how the changes of migration and welfare policies are very important in the influencing of relationship with migrant people. Their strengths and weaknesses will be highlighted. In all the researches those professionals showed about their frustration because of the politicians' decisions to cut or to limit migration and welfare services in a framework characterized by a lack of inclusive paths' programming. However, these professionals can play an important role of change in migration's local policies, if they are supported by researchers and Institutions. Indeed, in one of the researches their points of view about the bad consequences funding cuts to migration policies were used to propose to a Regional Councillor of Abruzzo to finance migration policies again, previously deleted from her predecessor and she have done it. So in this case a bottom-up process was effective. Another important factor that emerged concerns the attitude of these professionals to understand the complexity of the mix of international and local migration policies and their skill to propose virtual improvements in order to provide a better service to their users.

**Keywords:** Street-Level Bureaucracy, Migration Policies, Bottom-up Processes

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## 1. Introduction

The theoretical framework of the Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB), introduced by Michael Lipsky [1], focuses on the role of workers in the frontline in providing public services. It is important to reflect on the potential and challenges of this approach in order to understand the delivery of public services in contexts where welfare systems are fragmented and leave ample room for maneuver and action for frontline workers. According to bibliographic research on the Scopus dataset, scholars have only recently begun to highlight the potential of the SLB theory to study the impacts of neoliberalism, the economic crisis, the impoverishment of the population, the processes of immigration and emigration, development and the COVID-19 pandemic on the working practices of frontline workers in unexplored contexts.

Specifically, with the term street-level bureaucrats, Lipsky

intended to describe and analyze the discretion of employees of public bodies (SLB) and their way of translating and applying laws, rules, regulations and guidelines of their public officials or of what is foreseen by the institution for which they work. The street-level bureaucracies, in fact, are all the public agencies that provide a service directly to citizens in carrying out their activities such as education, social services (therefore also services for immigrants), education, municipal services (public relations office, registry office, etc.), law enforcement, justice, and healthcare. In these agencies, by interacting directly with the citizens, SLB influences the distribution of public welfare goods and services. In other words, SLB has to find a balance in discretion, which can be of three types: "intra legem" is when the formal regulatory tools attribute to the workers the responsibility for translating general objectives into specific actions; extra legem when the decision-making responsibility

of the Street Level Bureaucrats (Slbs) fits into the gaps and overlaps between one formal rule and another; *contra legem* when the autonomy of the Slb goes beyond the constraints imposed by the formal regulation". However, Lipsky underlined that a paradox is inherent in the definition of street level bureaucrats. Bureaucracy implies rules organized and established by a central authority, while the concept of street level assumes a distance from that center in which the same bureaucracy is based, as the Slbs implement public policies in direct contact with citizens.

## 2. Street-Level Bureaucrats in the Migrant Integration Field in Italy

The link between the Slbs and the professionals who, in various capacities, work to carry out support activities and to favor the integration processes of migrants (social workers, L2 teachers, educators, social workers, psychologists, linguistic-cultural mediators, etc.) lies in the fact that today the Slbs, in addition to being those described by Lipsky, are also those who work with migrant users, given how welfare services have evolved in the last three decades in Italy [2]. In fact, in many contexts, these are becoming increasingly decisive in the processes of discretionary allocation of welfare resources. Accordingly, they find themselves having to manage both discretion and complexity, tending to make migration policies, i.e. the regulatory tools, decided by policy makers, practical and adaptable to migrants. The interaction between migrants and these professionals takes place within spaces in which the former experience what the government has decided for the integration process of the latter, including paths of citizenship of which the Slbs have the keys, having to mediate between the central government and the citizen. These professionals, like other The interaction between migrants and these professionals takes place within spaces in which the former experience what the government has decided for the integration process of the latter, including paths of citizenship of which the Slbs have the keys, having to mediate between the central government and the citizens, but certainly much more than most of them, can sometimes experience the frustration of not feeling able to provide adequate answers to users who come from different cultural backgrounds [3]. In fact, these difficulties have been highlighted in some researches, in which it emerged that the workers of services for immigrants found themselves having to manage emergency situations by circumventing the national law, taking into consideration the constitutional norms and/or the Eu norms, to prevent the expulsion of immigrants who were in serious socio-economic situations and who did not have have the right to remain in Italy, according to Italian law. In these situations, management is very difficult even for these workers [4].

## 3. Migration Policies in Italy

On 31 December 2021, the foreign population living in

Italy was 5,193,669 people, with an incidence of 8.8% on the entire population [5].

A double plan for the management of migrant integration has been implemented in Italy since the late 1980s. On the one hand, immigration policies have been implemented, i.e. national laws aimed at regulating and controlling migratory flows. On the other hand, policies for immigrants, which consist in having regulations that guarantee access to social rights and citizenship, were implemented by local authorities and in particular by the Municipalities. These local bodies use the rules in a discretionary and autonomous way, even if they must necessarily deal with the national level [6, 7].

Despite the fact that in the last twenty years Italy has become one of the EU countries that attracts most immigrants, Italy has not been able to adopt an immigration law capable to manage the migrant phenomenon in a rational, continuous and realistic way. On the contrary, the question was tackled in emergency, alarmist terms and, even worse, with a 'securitarian' approach, so that the conditions for the creation of an integration model were not created [8]. Important indicators of political class's incapacity of the last three decades have been: the 8 amnesties/regularizations carried out from 1986 to 2020; the law on citizenship, which is still based on the principle of the *ius sanguinis*, whereas other European countries that had this approach have overcome it. By passing to the *ius soli* or to its temperate forms, they were able to provide a faster access to citizenship for the migrants' children on the basis of a number of years of school attendance in the country.

The peculiarity of Italy, compared to the other EU countries with strong migratory pressure, concerns the fact that it has not equipped itself with an integration model. Despite the scarce action of politics, immigrants have entered and stabilized in Italy, which led sociologists to speak of an implicit model or non-policy model [9].

In this scenario, the approach to the concept of integration has changed. Therefore, it was no longer understood as a set of wide-ranging and medium-long term policies and practices, but (again) resorting to emergencies providing hasty answers to buffer situations due precisely to the lack of a long-term vision (courses of civic orientation, linguistic literacy, information and legal assistance, scholastic recovery, assessment of skills, professional channeling and definition of curricula) administered to forced migrants in the few months of their stay in reception centers. On the Ministry of the Interior website, which was last updated on February 17, 2017 [10], it is specified that the integration of legal foreign citizens in Italy is favored by the State, local autonomies and associations. Migration policies are delegated to local bodies<sup>1</sup> which must plan integration policies within social policies every three years.

<sup>1</sup> Municipalities grouped in consortiums, that have an average of one hundred and twenty thousand people, named Social Territorial Sectors (*Ambiti sociali territoriali*), that have the function to manage in a coordinated way the social services.

## 4. Brief Presentation of Researches and Methodologies

This article is showing the main results of four researches that were carried out between 2014 and 2022 in three regions of central Italy (Tuscany, Marche and Abruzzo) in which SLBs professionals, working in the immigration sector, were interviewed with different methodological tools. The common theme of these researches is the analysis of the operating methods of these professionals in the light of the political choices of the Regions and of the central government in the migratory field. The first two projects were implemented in Abruzzo and were financed by Italian part of AMIF program, they are 'PAR.I. – Participation for Integration' and 'PART.NE.R – Partnership Network Reinforcing', carried out between 2014 and 2016, a period in which two regional administrations took turns: the first one of centre-right wing, with the Governor Chiodi (2009-2014); the second one of centre-left wing, with the Governor D'Alfonzo (2014-2018). The two projects have to be considered as an ongoing process, both because the same team worked on them and because there was continuity between them [11].

The objective of Pari was the identification of shared strategies with local authorities to encourage the participation of migrants in public life, by favoring their involvement in the processes of analysis of territorial needs and in the integrated planning of services. The methodology used in the research involved the administration of three questionnaires submitted to school headmasters and intercultural representatives of secondary schools, representatives of the planning office and of migration sector of Eas<sup>2</sup>, associations for migrants operating in the area of the province. 7 focus groups were attended by 58 privileged witnesses, including representatives of Eas/Municipalities, secondary school teachers, students of foreign origin, representatives of immigrant associations and desk research to support the field survey.

Partner project had the main objective of expanding and strengthening the governance and coordination networks in the territory to qualify the public services dedicated to migrants. The assumption was to return to giving centrality to this part of the population, with the intent to redefine territorial boundaries and responsibilities. The implementation of the project was carried out through a questionnaire addressed to all 11 Eas to map the services provided to immigrants. In 5 focus groups 75 among school headmasters, teachers, health professionals, members of associations of/for immigrants, educators, social operators and social workers were involved. The third research was carried out in 2018 as part of Lab (Language As a Bridge) project, funded by the Erasmus plus program. General objective of Lab was to help reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion of newly arrived young adult refugees

(henceforth Nap: new arrived people), by promoting social inclusion and by improving learning of the language of the host country. However, the research, conducted in 6 countries, 4 of which in southern Europe, focused more on teaching methodologies, on the difficulties of L2 teachers and on their proposals to improve their operating methods. Specifically, the research involved two steps: structured interviews with 20 L2 teachers for each country (the items of the interviews were: background, methodology, problems, policies, ideas) for a total of 120; each partner organized a focus group which was attended by both L2 teachers and their coordinators, grounded on the main topics that emerged from the interviews. In the focus groups, the teachers were stimulated to discuss their operational modalities and difficulties and were solicited to provide recommendations for an innovative L2 teaching methodology. In this article, it will be taken into consideration only what emerged from L2 teachers working in Italy, specifically in Tuscany.

The fourth research was carried out within the R. I. T. I. (Integrated Territorial Inclusive Networks), also funded by the AMIF program, implemented between 2021 and 2022 in the Marche region. Objective of R. I. T. I. was to understand the difficulties and training needs of operators who work with young people with a migrant background. The research was carried out through 20 semi-structured interviews to key informants including: educators, coordinators of services for minors, religious leaders, managers of social sectors, social workers, teachers and volunteers.

## 5. Strengths and Weaknesses of SLBs Between Frustrations and Results Obtained

In the focus groups with the Eas' employees, during the implementation of Pari, a problematic scenario emerged because of the decision of Regional Council (the Governor was Chiodi) to interrupt the funds for the immigration sector within the 2011-2013 Area Plan. This decision caused the disruption of the services activated and limited the intervention to strong inconvenience with stop-gap measures, disregarding the same mission of the Eas. The main criticalities were: lack of economic resources; lack of linearity in coordination and planning; difficulty of involving foreign presences in the Eas. The implications of these criticalities have involved several spheres, from the difficulty of managing problematic families (single-parent and jobless) to the scarce presence of linguistic-cultural mediator in health services, the neglect of prevention to social discomfort and the incapacity to take advantage of the opportunity to plan to find funding, in addition to the difficulties that the Eas have in communicating with other local bodies and Third sector players in the area. In the education field, it emerged that headmasters and teachers have not been able to seize the opportunities provided by students with a migrant background for a cultural growth that would activate systemic approaches to the migration issue. The teachers who

<sup>2</sup> Ente di Ambito Sociale: the name of consortium of social services of a group of Municipalities in Abruzzo.

were more inclined to include these students felt alone because in many schools ideological and cultural mistrust towards migrant people persisted. The teaching staff was generally unprepared on the migration issue, often considered irrelevant, marginal and temporary. Not surprisingly, the students reported an often hostile environment, which they reacted to using their resilient capacity.

The implementation of Partner project was simultaneous with the thematic meetings that led to the drafting of both the 2016-2018 Regional Social Plan and the Guidelines of the 2016-2018 Regional Health Plan. The main criticality that emerged was a substantial distrust of the regional political class, because managers of the Eas and other employees were not involved in the drafting of the second of the documents aforementioned. In the focus groups, distrust was accompanied by a resignation, which led them to do what they could, aware of the enormous difficulty of influencing the 'highest levels'. Public managers and Regional Councillors were considered to have very little attention to social problems, and even less to those experienced by immigrants. Despite this, the focus groups performed a bottom-up function, because the actors involved acted as spokespersons for the demands of those who are on the front line in managing immigrant problems.

In the Partner project, the consequences of the rescaling processes [12] clearly emerged, regarding the relationships between the various institutional levels and the consequences of these dynamics on those who are on the frontline having to manage and try to solve the problems of the most fragile people. In fact, public service operators in collaboration with the Third Sector have always made efforts to ensure equal access to services for everybody, solving relevant problems, in spite of the intervention of local authorities is not sufficient because the national context is not favorable to the inclusion of immigrants and to a political practice that goes in this direction. In this phase of uncertainty, two factors have taken over that have worsened the situation: the decrease in public funding, especially since 2008, and the xenophobic initiative. The latter has influenced many local administrations that decided to limit the services and benefits for migrant people. Some Eas employees are concerned at having noted a resurgence of intolerance.

However, these two projects, mainly Partner, have achieved the result of having stimulated the Councillor for Social Services Marinella Sclocco, belonging to the D'Alfonzo Council, to finance integration policies again. The final result of Partner is the outcome of a bottom-up work, in which the Sclocco listened to representatives of the territories before drawing up the Regional Social Plan, taking into consideration the results of the researches carried out in the two projects, in particular of Pari. The main outcome of Pari was the 'Participated Proposal Document for the social integration of foreign citizens', which was delivered to Sclocco in July 2014, a few weeks after she took office in the Regional Council. In this document, the researchers, in the light of what delineated in the implementation of the project, underlined the problems that emerged with the previous

Social Plan and encouraged the Region to involve local authorities and Third sector actors in the drafting of the new Social Plan, to make protagonists the migrants. Assessor Sclocco has fully transposed and implemented these indications.

In Lab, the Italian L2 teachers found it difficult to manage and satisfy the needs of the Nap for two reasons: firstly because of their geographical position, that is to say that being on the borders they are forced to manage difficult situations with new arrivals due to the unwillingness of most of the other EU Countries to welcome part of these migrants, through the relocation system envisaged by the EU itself. The second aspect is related to the previous consideration, because they are experimenting with various ways to teach Italian for migrants. This difference between geographical areas of the EU is also the result of the degree of ambivalence between the assignment of priorities and the ambiguity of political objectives that the Junker commission had expressed in the governance of mobility and migration [13]. The difficulty of L2 Italian teachers must also be sought in the profound difference between the political solutions imposed by policy makers and their implementation in contingent situations. However, the substantial lack of migration policies [9, 14, 15] and the dynamics of the labor market have addressed migrants to carry out the humblest jobs, becoming functional and complementary to the welfare systems of these countries. The interviewees work with an approach characterized by to promote the students' potential, providing them with input "understandable, (...) linked to real needs (...), answering their questions and demonstrating willingness to assist them for instances also of a non-scholastic nature" [16]. The approach is to constantly support them with constructive and encouraging feedback, also using body language, but in an unambiguous way.

The main problems of these teachers concern, in particular, resources, tools, lesson hours, legal procedures and consequently how to manage Naps, who may be unmotivated to attend lessons or because they do not know if they will stay in the host country, or why they prefer to gain money if they are offered temporary work in agriculture. These last two problems demonstrate that in Italy integration policies do not have a holistic approach, which, on the contrary, seems to be more present in the two partner countries of the project: Belgium and Norway. The Italian teachers felt to have scant skills in their teaching methodology. This entails having had to learn the teaching through experience in the field (learning by doing), consequently teachers fear not always being able to teach in a good way and not being able to always be flexible. These shortcomings have not allowed them to always work in a virtuous and serene way, so they can be the cause of uncertainties due to the complexity of the situation, the management of the phenomenon, the time that is used to make decisions and to implement migration policies.

The interviewees were asked to propose suggestions on how to organize and improve L2 teaching. In the Italian focus group, the suggestions that emerged concerned the following points:

- 1) the use of extracurricular activities in particular watching films, trips to the local community and enactment of realistic and practical situations that students may encounter in their lives;
- 2) alternate between different types of teaching methodologies and it is necessary to have different guidelines on how to teach a topic with different methodologies;
- 3) seeing as how most of the Naps are vulnerable and poorly educated subjects, the interventions must therefore foresee a path that develops starting from the previous learning experiences of each one. In fact, didactic planning must come into contact with the analysis of the needs of newly arrived learners and to have as objectives the acquisition of problem solving skills and orientation in reality; he must therefore simultaneously deal with both the substantial aspects of language and content, and the contexts of use of the Italian language (jargon, courtesy, bureaucratic, literary, everyday).

In R. I. T. I. the interviewees, especially educators and social workers, mainly highlighted the difficulty of satisfying the educational and psycho-pedagogical containment needs of young people with a migrant background who attend youth centers and migrant families with economic, psychological and relational difficulties. This happens mainly because of the decrease of funds in social and educational fields that have been made in the last fifteen years. Like their colleagues from Abruzzo and Tuscany, the interviewees expressed great difficulty in achieving the minimum objectives. In 2019, in fact, some boys with a migrant background were guilty of gang rape against a girl. These boys lived in a situation of strong social and economic degradation, of which all the competent institutions were aware. However, the situation has reached a very serious point, precisely because of the limited economic resources and the little possibility of using more human resources.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper the difficulties of Slbs who work in the field of migrants' integration was analyzed thanks to the main results of four researches carried out in four Italian region. In spite of their big difficulties the have shown a big capacity of resilience as in following it will be explained.

The final positive outcome of the two projects implemented in Abruzzo was possible thanks to a bottom-up work carried out both in the implementation of the projects and in the preparation of the drafting of the 2016-18 Plan. In this Plan, Slb workers and migrants involved performed have in the function as a spokesperson for the requests and needs of the migrants themselves. Thus a virtuous rescaling was activated, because the higher body, the Region, did not overstep the other local bodies, but on the contrary listened to the representatives of territories and took into account what emerged in the meetings. This is also indicative of the need to go back to governing the integration processes.

The research of the Lab project had the objective of understanding the operational difficulties of L2 teachers and the possible solutions, which referred not only to the relationship with migrants. Thanks to this research the broader scope of the migration policies emerged, starting to the importance of the language learning, that it is preparatory to any process of integration. This goal has not only been achieved, but with it a holistic understanding of the contradictions of migration policies of integration at EU level has been obtained [17]. The theoretical premise to frame these teachers in the category of SLBs, the problem of the lack of uniformity and standardization of this figure, fundamental for the process of integration of migrants in EU member countries, have found a wide echo in the course of the research. This echo must necessarily be linked to the significant lack of a common definition of the L2 teacher role. A lack from which many of the difficulties that these teachers, their organizations and the migrants/beneficiaries themselves experience inevitably arise. Compared to Lipsky's reading, the enormous separation emerged between the center of the community bureaucracy, where policy makers give indications on integration policies, emphasizing the importance of L2 learning, and the many difficulties teachers experience in the field. This happens mainly to those who work in countries where immigrants arrive in large numbers, such as Italy and Greece, where these professionals are poorly trained in the use of formal, non-formal and informal approaches.

In R. I. T. I. the need to insert linguistic-cultural mediators in all the essential services in which migrants act emerged. The other important issue that emerged concerns working with youth, who have a migrant background, in a way that is aimed at stimulating their autonomy and making them socialize through recreational and sporting activities, rather than offering them an aid-based approach. The lockdown and its negative consequences contributed significantly to determining this approach.

The outcome of the four projects lead us to argue that when the Slbs are urged to make operational proposals to improve the condition of migrants and their own working conditions, they become de facto policy makers. As thanks to the research work they have been able to build action grammar and to change and make both theoretical and operational approaches change in working with users, despite the many difficulties and frustrations. It is important to highlight both their skills to understand the international and national mechanisms, that influence their daily work and their will to continue to work and experiment themselves in this field, despite the difficulties. No interviewees stated they want to change work.

This paper does not want to be exhaustive, but, even if it provided important signals about the capacities of this kind of Slbs to continue to work and to resist to the difficulties, it could be considered complementary to other researches, that could deepen the analysis and the experimentation of other bottom-up processes. In these other researches the resilient capacity of these Slbs could be studied and then it should be

interesting ask them suggestions for Eu and national bureaucrats in order to improve the integration policies.

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