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Does a strategy enhance inter-institutional performance? Rational and emergent logics in the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan

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Abstract

Purpose – This article examines how a broad and overarching strategic framework influences the performance management of inter-institutional collaboration, contributing to the debate on rational and emergent approaches to strategy and the boundary object literature in public sector settings.

Design/methodology/approach – The article conducts an embedded qualitative case study of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), based on 23 semi-structured interviews with representatives of 20 public organizations involved at different governance levels.

Findings – The case reveals a mechanism of cascading rationalization whereby supranational results-based conditionality is translated into domestic compliance-oriented financial control, progressively displacing the deliberately emergent character of the umbrella strategy. This cascade produces a double exclusion of peripheral actors and constrains the strategy's capacity to function as a boundary object, as financial accountability crowds out outcome accountability across governance levels.

Originality/value – The article introduces three theoretically grounded propositions and a systematic five-criteria assessment of boundary object functionality, specifying the conditions under which shared indicator systems fail to activate inter-institutional collaboration in multi-level public programs. The findings contribute simultaneously to the rational versus emergent strategy debate, the boundary object literature and the study of inter-institutional performance management.

Keywords Inter-institutional performance management, Rational and emergent strategy, Boundary objects, Collaborative governance, Recovery and Resilience Plan

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

In recent decades, issues related to collaboration in the public sector have received growing interest from the scientific community and practitioners. The evolution of managerial regimes in public administration (Gow and Dufour, 2000), from the Weberian to the New Public Management, and subsequently to the New Public Governance, has increasingly stimulated public organizations to interact with other public actors (Osborne, 2010) and those from the private sector.

Thus, collaborating with other state and non-state actors has been viewed as a potential solution to address what have been defined as *wicked problems*. These are issues that, in the eyes of policymakers, are complex, multifaceted, and unpredictable (Huxham and Vangen, 1996; Agranoff and McGuire, 1999). These characteristics make wicked problems difficult to address and challenge the public sector regarding the measurability of the results achieved (Noto *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, addressing and finding solutions to these issues goes beyond the capabilities of an individual public organization, highlighting the need to activate collaborative mechanisms between several autonomous government bodies and, often, even

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with international organizations, private for-profit and non-profit companies, and citizens (Weber and Khademian, 2008; Cristofoli *et al.*, 2017).

Solutions to wicked problems based on collaborative approaches can foster increased knowledge about the issue, the development of innovative response options, and broad support from key stakeholders in adopting these strategies to address the need (Head, 2022).

Public management studies on collaborative dynamics have predominantly focused on the relationship between public administrations and non-governmental entities, aiming to describe the enabling factors and barriers that can facilitate or hinder their joint work (Provan and Sebastian, 1998; Provan and Milward, 2001; Turrini *et al.*, 2010). However, less attention has been given to collaborative relationships within the public sector, or what this study defines as inter-institutional collaboration (Ansell and Gash, 2008).

Inter-institutional collaboration refers to the formal and informal interactions between autonomous public organizations that collaborate to achieve cross-cutting objectives defined in a broad and overarching strategy (Costumato, 2021). It materializes in response to a growing awareness that the action of a single entity is insufficient to achieve shared results and the recognition of cross-cutting needs. Coherently, Inter-institutional performance refers to the outcomes achieved through the joint action of formally autonomous public organizations, measured against shared goals and indicators defined within a broad overarching strategic framework (Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2018; Costumato, 2021). It extends beyond the performance of individual organizations to capture the collective results that emerge from coordinated inter-institutional action, and that no single entity could achieve alone.

National or international strategies are one of the primary areas where a trend toward measuring inter-institutional performance is evident (Guarini *et al.*, 2022). In these broad and overarching strategies, performance is planned, and objectives are achieved through joint intervention by formally autonomous public sector organizations (Mackie, 2017).

This occurs when long-term agendas' implementation involves multiple actors and is often associated with performance frameworks shared by various institutional actors, such as the UN 2030 Agenda or the European Member States' Recovery and Resilience Plans (hereafter NRRPs or Plans), which is the case study presented in this research in the specific Italian context. Defined by the European Commission as performance-based strategies, the NRRPs are comprehensive strategies aimed at achieving a more sustainable and resilient economy and society, encompassing highly relevant long-term goals, financial resources allocated to specific public actors, clear responsibilities, and performance targets to be met. They ask for the contribution of the whole public sector (from central to local government authorities and agencies) in coordinating, managing, and achieving cross-cutting priorities.

The Italian government presented its NRRP to the European Commission in April 2021. It represents the key tool for relaunching the country after the pandemic crisis through green and digital transitions, accompanied by structural economic changes that address gender, territorial, and generational inequalities. Following its adoption, the NRRP entered the implementation phase and is expected to be completed by June 2026.

The NRRP represents a significant opportunity for the country. Still, at the same time, it poses a challenge in a context where public organizations are often rigid and closed off to their organizational boundaries (Osborne, 2010). Indeed, the NRRP can serve as a stimulus for the public sector to test and validate a modern approach to governing broad public strategies by focussing on inter-institutional collaboration (Costumato, 2021).

To date, considerable attention has been devoted to the vertical supervision of the NRRP and the relationships between the central government, the Italian Ministry of Finance, and the European Commission (Di Mascio *et al.*, 2022). Less attention, however, has been given to the governance of the NRRP implementation and, more specifically, to the coordination between the public entities responsible for the interventions. Nevertheless, the cross-cutting nature of the objectives and priorities of the Plan highlights the need to provide clear indications to avoid silo management of the interventions, which often lack an integrated approach between the institutions involved at various levels and with separate but interconnected responsibilities.

The NRRP, thus, represents an ideal laboratory where new collaborative dynamics can be tested around a broad and overarching framework of shared and cross-cutting objectives. This article hypothesizes that a broad and overarching strategic framework can only represent a potential attractor under certain conditions, around which to recognize and activate virtuous collaborative mechanisms of an inter-institutional nature. Drawing on the concept of *boundary objects*, and *rational strategy* (hereafter RS) versus *emergent strategy* (hereafter ES), the article examines when and why a broad strategy can perform this function, and under what conditions it fails to do so.

Consequently, through a qualitative case study in the Italian context, this article addresses this theoretical and practical gap by answering the following research question:

> *RQ.* How does a broad and overarching strategic framework influence the performance management of inter-institutional collaboration?

To answer this question, we identify three propositions that specify the conditions under which a broad strategy can activate inter-institutional collaboration and performance management. Our findings suggest how to scale the NRRP experience to other broad strategies in which inter-institutional collaboration plays a crucial role, such as sectoral national strategies, other EU programs, and international frameworks (Guarini *et al.*, 2022).

The Italian context is relevant to this question for an implicit trade-off: on the one hand, the expected impact on the society and economy of the Italian Plan is higher than in other EU Member States, due to the massive amount of resources allocated by the EU to Italy (191.5 billion which are approximately 25% of the total foreseen for Next Generation EU, and represent the 14% of the Italian GDP) which has attracted unprecedented attention from the public sector in carrying out the planned activities; on the other hand, although recent national normative push towards a more collaborative approach to public management, the bureaucratic administrative tradition in Italy ideally represents an obstacle to the inter-institutional collaboration which is at the basis of the entire Plan.

Moreover, we believe this research may have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it derives three propositions from the RS versus ES distinction and the boundary object lens, specifying the conditions under which a broad overarching strategy can function as a performance attractor for inter-institutional collaboration and the mechanisms through which compliance rationality, defined here as a lever to RS stimulated by compliance-oriented financial control, displaces ES design across governance levels. The resulting framework can guide new empirical and theoretical research on inter-institutional collaboration and performance management and can also inform policymakers in developing broad and long-term national public strategies. This aspect provides relevance to the context and allows us to generalize our findings for an international audience (Tsang, 2014).

The article is organized as follows: in section 2, the theoretical background is presented, including the RS versus ES distinction, the boundary object concept, and the three propositions derived from the framework; in sections 3 and 4, the research design and the characteristics of the case study are described; in section 5, the results are presented in narrative form, including an empirical mapping of RS and ES logics and a systematic assessment of the NRRP's boundary object role; these are discussed in section 6, returning to the four-quadrant framework and the three propositions; finally, the conclusions are summarized in section 7.

2. Theoretical background

Inter-institutional collaboration and performance management can contribute to the cultural shift from an output-oriented to an outcome-oriented performance management approach (Borgonovi *et al.*, 2018). The organization's orientation towards achieving outcomes underlies the evolution from a strategy focused on efficiency to one in which the performance management system is fully integrated into the strategic management processes (Bonomi Savignon *et al.*, 2024). This model, defined by Bouckaert and Halligan (2008) as the *performance governance* ideal type, examines individual and organizational performance and its effect on the external context. By doing so, the organization acknowledges itself as part of a system of public and private actors interested in addressing a complex and multifaceted problem (Head, 2022).

Our background focuses on the antecedents of inter-institutional collaboration and performance management, informing the theoretical framework proposed. To date, the literature has only sporadically addressed this case (Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2018).

Inter-institutional collaboration and performance management are situated within the enduring scholarly debate on the role of strategy, contributing to the consolidated discourse on rational and emergent approaches to strategy.

The concept of RS refers to the implementation of a structured cycle (strategy and measurement) that guides decisions logically, responds to external pressures, and ensures alignment between established objectives and achieved results (George *et al.*, 2017; Vandersmissen and George, 2024). Conversely, the concept of ES is defined as "a pattern in a stream of decisions" or actions. In ES, the decision-making process opens to the notion of strategic learning, allowing managers to act before everything is fully understood. This does not mean chaos, but essentially "unintended order" (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). The debate between these approaches has developed into two distinct but interconnected research trajectories, each generating specific theoretical and empirical contributions to our understanding of how strategies form and evolve in practice (Hernández-Betancur *et al.*, 2020). While RS presents itself as an ideal solution for achieving predefined objectives controlled by centralized leadership in a predictable environment, ES offers a valid approach in complex and unstable contexts, thanks to continuous learning and adaptation. Research on strategizing in public organizations has shown that this tension between rational and emergent approaches generates specific challenges in practice, as rational logics tend to prevail even in contexts where emergent adaptation would be more appropriate (Axelsson and Höglund, 2024). Within RS, two sub-concepts can be described. *Strategic rationality* refers to the ex-ante planning logic through which objectives, means, and indicators are aligned in pursuit of intended outcomes, and represents the deliberate component of an umbrella strategy. *Compliance rationality*, by contrast, refers to the ex-post control logic through which actors are held accountable for the regularity of expenditure and the formal fulfilment of obligations, irrespective of outcome attainment. The two are conceptually independent: a strategy may be strategically rational yet weakly compliance-oriented or dominated by compliance rationality while its strategic-rational alignment with cross-cutting outcomes remains underdeveloped. This distinction is central to inter-institutional performance management, because the cascading rationalization we identify through the case is driven not by an excess of strategic rationality but by compliance rationality detaching from it and progressively crowding out outcome accountability across governance levels (Favoreu *et al.*, 2016).

As often happens in real-world situations, the case under investigation may represent a fusion of the two approaches. While the centralization of the decision-making process and resource allocation during the planning phase reflects the idea of strategic rationality, the strategy implementation phase itself calls for the need to foster an emergent approach and continuous learning. This approach is further emphasized by the collaborative perspective (Mirabeau and Maguire, 2014). Indeed, an emergent approach aimed at finding operational solutions that adapt to the context can both foster greater collaboration and stimulate the use of performance information among actors (McGuire, 2002; Andrews *et al.*, 2011).

In the following paragraphs, we describe the theoretical antecedents of inter-institutional collaboration and performance management, focussing on two main variables: time and the point of observation. The elements proposed in the framework, when analyzed empirically, highlight the need to employ a combination of RS and ES in managing a long-term strategy that involves multiple institutional actors.

2.1 Time – pre-collaborative (planning) and fully collaborative (implementation) factors

In this pre-collaborative phase, the definition of the shared system of goals should be an attractor for subsequent inter-institutional performance management (French and Mollinger-Sahba, 2021). Notably, being consciously part of an institutional value chain may result from a public body's active involvement in designing a broad strategy (bottom-up formation, which recurs in ES). The adoption of long-term strategies or plans by national governments (Mackie, 2017) or supra-national entities (Guarini *et al.*, 2022), even without a strong co-design approach, can also perform this function as long as their performance measurement and evaluation systems are shared between the organizations, thanks to a precise distribution of responsibilities (top-down formation, which is typical of RS).

Ideally, the NRRP represents a blend of these two approaches, as the shared priorities and goals are derived from top-down input provided by the European Commission and the Next Generation EU program, and a bottom-up definition of the specific initiatives (reforms and projects) to be implemented accordingly. The tension between strategic planning and adaptive management is particularly acute in turbulent contexts, where rational planning tools must accommodate high uncertainty and rapidly shifting conditions (Johnsen, 2023). Therefore, the NRRP falls within what Mintzberg and Waters (1985) define as an *umbrella strategy*, which is partially rational and partially emergent, or, in other words, *deliberately emergent*. Central leaders establish general boundaries or control systems for the process (the deliberate part) but allow other actors to define the details and specific content of the strategy within those boundaries during the implementation (the emergent part).

The concept and features of *boundary objects* can enhance the description of a deliberately emergent strategy as a potential inter-institutional performance attractor (Wenger, 1998; Star, 2010; Sullivan *et al.*, 2013) and may represent the theoretical bridge for a deliberately emergent strategic management. Boundary objects can take on different configurations (material or immaterial) and connect communities or interest groups by activating collaboration even without explicit consent. Indeed, *boundary* refers to the idea of a border shared by several subjects, while *object* refers to the concept of an immediately recognizable element. Consequently, an *object* placed on a *boundary* is something towards which (and with which) different actors interact, activating collaborative mechanisms.

The literature presents numerous examples of boundary objects (Arena *et al.*, 2017; Bracci *et al.*, 2022; Feldman *et al.*, 2006): even a strategy with its goals and indicators can perform their typical functions (Rajala *et al.*, 2020), activating a collaboration oriented towards creating public value (Carlile, 2002).

To evaluate whether and to what extent a broad overarching strategy can function as a boundary object in inter-institutional settings, we draw on the consolidated scholarship on boundary objects (Star, 2010; Carlile, 2002; Wenger, 1998; Rajala *et al.*, 2020; Sullivan *et al.*, 2013) to identify five criteria that serve as our evaluative template. First, *interpretive flexibility.* A boundary object must be sufficiently plastic to accommodate the local needs and interpretations of different actor groups while maintaining a shared common identity (Star, 2010). Second, *shared structure with local use*. The boundary object must provide a common structural reference, such as shared goals and indicators, that each actor can use within their specific context without losing connection to the collective framework (Carlile, 2002). Third, *boundary-spanning capacity.* The boundary object must be able to connect communities or groups with different logics, interests, and vocabularies, activating collaboration even in the absence of explicit consensus (Wenger, 1998; Sullivan *et al.*, 2013). Fourth, *perceived interdependence*. The boundary object must generate among actors the perception that their individual objectives are interdependent with those of others, making the need for collaboration structurally visible (Rajala *et al.*, 2020; French and Mollinger-Sahba, 2021). Fifth, *legitimacy and recognizability.* The boundary object must be perceived as legitimate and immediately recognizable by all actors as a shared reference point, regardless of their hierarchical level or organizational function (Star, 2010). These five criteria are used as an analytic template in the findings and discussion sections to assess the boundary object role of the NRRP systematically.

When implemented, a broad and overarching strategy with shared goals can perpetuate its performance-attractive function. Indeed, in a fully collaborative phase, organizations gathered around one or more strategic goals are expected to act together to achieve them. However, during implementation, the nature of a strategy may no longer be sufficient to guarantee the ability to attain cross-cutting or shared objectives. Conversely, it is necessary to identify which factors impact the effectiveness of inter-institutional collaboration (Costumato, 2021).

Over the years, the literature on collaborative governance and network management has helped identify potential sets of factors that influence collaborative performance, often simultaneously considering pre-collaborative factors (relating to how the negotiation of purposes is managed) and fully collaborative factors (relating to how collaboration is handled in practice) (Ansell and Gash, 2008). This study aims to distinguish between the two phases and, therefore, builds on a preliminary group of factors that can influence "effective" collaboration, including: trust, power distribution, managerial strategies, leadership, formalization of rules and procedures, and performance dialogue (Costumato, 2021).

Although many authors have underlined that building trust is a lengthy and costly process which requires the attitude of all organizations to share tangible as well as intangible resources (Henneman *et al.*, 1995; Mu *et al.*, 2019), what emerged from the literature suggests that a high degree of trust, understood as a nudge to the mutual understanding of common interests, should be considered an essential element for the effectiveness of the inter-institutional collaboration (Ran and Qi, 2019; Spink *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, scholars mainly agree that the more decision-making power is shared, the more effective collaboration can be (Torfing, 2019). This dynamic is also reflected in a much larger number of articles on public management. Since the advent of the New Public Management, inter-institutional performance and power distribution have positively correlated (Huxham *et al.*, 2000). Sharing power incentivizes the exchange of knowledge and resources, as well as responsibilities and risks (Linder, 1999), and can contribute to the trust-building process (Ran and Qi, 2018, 2019; Chen and Yi, 2024).

One of the most recurring factors concerns the adoption of specific managerial strategies for collaborative environments (Provan *et al.*, 2009; Klijn *et al.*, 2010). The literature shows how the positive effect of specific managerial strategies to manage collaboration and performance is valid both for network contexts in which the public interacts with non-state actors and for inter-institutional collaboration (Kickert *et al.*, 1997; Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; Meier and O'Toole, 2001; Bel and Elston, 2024; Nolte and Lindenmeier, 2024).

Leadership may also influence the performance of inter-institutional collaboration (Cepiku and Mastrodascio, 2021; Cepiku *et al.*, 2014); however, only certain leadership styles are more effective in a collaborative context. The one defined as "transformational" allows the leader to direct the organization or team toward complex and sometimes transversal purposes (Cremers *et al.*, 2024; Uster *et al.*, 2022; Head and Alford, 2015).

The formalization of rules and procedures can be considered a further enabling factor of inter-institutional collaboration and performance, even when organizations with very different characteristics and belonging to various levels of government collaborate (Turrini *et al.*, 2010; Cho *et al.*, 2025; Fadda and Rotondo, 2022; Rajala *et al.*, 2020; Siciliano and Whetsell, 2023).

Finally, a structured dialogue on shared performance between the actors involved in the strategy implementation concerns the performance information used and the meaning each organization attributes to this information, which is relevant to inter-institutional performance management (Laihonen and Mäntylä, 2017). In performance dialogues, data produced should stimulate discussion on shared issues and translate what emerges into subsequent concrete actions (Moynihan, 2005).

2.2 Point of observation – inter-organizational and organizational factors

The perception of a shared strategy could also vary based on the observation point. Although the primary interest of this research is to focus on inter-institutional collaboration, the organizational perspective must be considered as a precondition affecting an organization's aptitude to collaborate with others by distinguishing what happens in the design and implementation of a strategy.

The literature on collaborative governance and network management offers a complete perspective. Indeed, authors who have taken the point of view of individual organizations describe how being part of a network could help the organization achieve its own goals (Provan *et al.*, 2005; Kiefer and Montjoy, 2006; May and Winter, 2009; LeRoux *et al.*, 2010; Giacomini *et al.*, 2018). Those who tried to look at networks as a precise unit of analysis explain how to measure the results of the collaboration (Mandell, 1994; Provan and Milward, 1995; Provan and Sebastian, 1998; Keast *et al.*, 2004; Van Raaij, 2006; Lindencrona *et al.*, 2009; Provan *et al.*, 2009; Herranz, 2010). Finally, those who have analyzed inter-institutional performance management specifically, highlight the needs of the final beneficiaries of the delivered services (Provan and Milward, 1995; Provan and Sebastian, 1998; Raab *et al.*, 2015; Cristofoli *et al.*, 2015; Cristofoli and Macciò, 2018; Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2018).

In the strategy design (pre-collaborative) phase, the concept of "organizational adaptation" describes an organization's ability to adapt its structure and processes to collaborate and achieve shared and cross-cutting objectives (Molenveld *et al.*, 2021). Research on strategic projects in inter-institutional contexts has further shown that the absence of clear structures for participation and shared responsibility can inhibit organizational adaptation, especially when strategic practices migrate from central units to peripheral actors without adequate governance support (Hedborg *et al.*, 2024). Incorporating cross-cutting goals is a process that, in most cases, implies reorienting existing activities, modifying procedures, introducing new activities, and increasing interaction with other players in the supply chain. Typically, the first barrier is the low interest of individual organizations in directing their efforts towards shared purposes (Bouckaert and Halligan, 2008). Secondly, the fear of collaborating to achieve medium-to long-term objectives without immediate benefits can inhibit the organizational propensity.

Nevertheless, the willingness to collaborate can be influenced by structural factors. The literature has stressed the positive impact of autonomy in choosing priorities, involvement in defining the intervention (planning or implementation), a culture characterized by a strong propensity for innovation, and internal accountability towards cross-cutting purposes (Molenveld *et al.*, 2021).

When the organizational perspective is considered during implementation (*fully collaborative*), additional factors come into play, contributing to the effectiveness of collaboration and ensuring the achievement of shared goals. The first of these factors, perhaps the most significant, is the commitment to the shared purpose (Provan and Milward, 2001), that can be enhanced by properly managing (Scott and Boyd, 2023): the selection of the actors (in which the number of entities involved, the previous relationships between them and the governance is considered), the goal setting (in which we have the needs analysis, political commitment, definition of intermediate outcomes, and alignment with shared indicators) and monitoring of objectives (where we have the alignment of monitoring and reporting systems, learning techniques and information sharing).

A second factor of a predominantly value-based nature is the motivation of people within the organization to collaborate with external stakeholders (Rajala *et al.*, 2020). An intrinsic motivation is spontaneous and is the result of the awareness of being able to achieve specific results only thanks to the contribution of several actors; in contrast, an extrinsic motivation refers to the presence of external stimuli (such as incentives or sanctions) which compensate for the absence of the first type (Scott and Boyd, 2023).

Both goal commitment and motivation factors impact the perception of the organization's interdependence (O'Toole, 1997).

These factors can foster mutual recognition of roles within the strategy and provide an interpretive key for managing collaboration in a deliberately emergent approach that represents a virtuous mix between RS, which promotes a more hierarchical approach, and ES, which stimulates bottom-up strategy formation.

2.3 Theoretical framework and propositions

The theoretical framework that guides the following case study is presented in Figure 1. It summarizes graphically what has been described so far. Four quadrants emerge from the intersection of the two variables (point of observation and time). In the strategy design, policymakers must encourage the definition of a shared goals system that acts as a boundary object at an inter-institutional level and foster an organizational attitude to collaborate at an organizational level (Oppi *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, in the implementation, the group of factors described can contribute to a better understanding of inter-institutional performance management.

The framework is further operationalized through three propositions that translate the RS versus ES distinction and the boundary object lens into empirically testable expectations. These propositions guide the subsequent analysis and are revisited in the discussion and conclusions.

P1. *Boundary object conditions:* A broad overarching strategy can act as a boundary object for inter-institutional collaboration only when its system of goals and indicators generates perceived interdependence across governance levels. This requires explicit chains of shared outcome indicators connecting outputs to intermediate and final outcomes, rather than the mere assignment of individual organizational responsibilities. Without such chains, organizations will perceive their accountability as self-contained, limiting the strategy's capacity to activate spontaneous collaborative mechanisms.

P2. *Cascading rationalization:* When supranational results-based conditionality is translated into domestic compliance-oriented financial control, the deliberately emergent character of the umbrella strategy is progressively displaced by rational

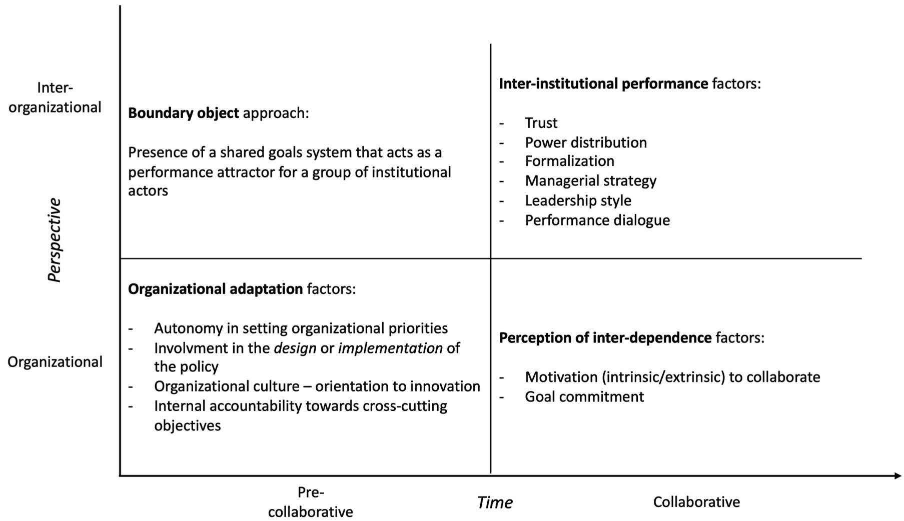

Figure 1. Theoretical framework. Source: Authors' own elaboration

expenditure logic. This displacement cascades across governance levels - from central to local administrations - producing a double exclusion of peripheral actors: first from participatory strategy formulation, driven by political and temporal constraints that favour top-down design; and then from implementation support, driven by the financial cascade pressure that central administrations transfer to local executors. As a result, the balance between RS and ES shifts de facto toward rationality, independently of the strategy's original deliberately emergent design

P3. Contingent effectiveness of collaboration enablers: The effectiveness of inter-institutional collaboration enablers is contingent on the degree to which the overarching strategy maintains an outcome-oriented logic across governance levels. When compliance rationality prevails and cascades downward, these factors tend to operate within organizational silos rather than across institutional boundaries, constraining their collective impact on inter-institutional performance.

3. Research design

We conducted a qualitative case study to answer the research question. The case aims to validate the theoretical framework and the propositions, with a focus on the inter-institutional perspective. Our purpose is to verify whether and under what conditions a long-term strategy, such as the NRRP, can serve as a boundary object, and secondly, whether the factors of inter-institutional performance are perceived as significant by the organizations involved in implementing the Plan.

For several reasons, we have chosen a descriptive case study approach for our research design. First, the research question to be answered investigates the "how" of a phenomenon over which the authors have no direct control. Furthermore, the case study represents an ideal research method for understanding how the proposed theoretical framework works in practice. A case study will allow us to seek analytical generalizability starting from what was observed during the semi-structured interviews. The case study is therefore configured as an *embedded case study*, as we investigate the phenomenon of collaboration from the perspective of multiple interdependent units of analysis and key public players within the context of a long-term national strategy (Yin, 2018).

The Italian NRRP is an "intrinsic case" (Mills *et al.*, 2010) because it is exceptional and unusual among others. First, it represents the most significant investment in the country's history, with several policies explicitly interconnected. It is also interesting since it displays both project and policy features. Secondly, it represents the first attempt to define a shared performance framework, in which the involvement of multiple state and non-state actors is central (Castelnovo *et al.*, 2025), in a context in which Italian public organizations traditionally feature a silo-based orientation to performance management (Bonomi Savignon *et al.*, 2024). Finally, the Italian NRRP connects vertically with pre-existing policies at the national and EU levels. As such, it is an organic representation of national priorities and how to achieve them.

3.1 Data collection

We conducted 23 semi-structured interviews (Qu and Dumay, 2011) with representatives of 20 public organizations involved in the NRRP at different levels. In line with the theory on semi-structured interviews (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000), the interview protocol served to crystallize some critical elements of the methodology: we contacted the interviewee, asking about their availability for an interview lasting approximately 60 min; the interviewees received in advance a short description with information on the research project, and the purposes of the interview. Finally, the interviewee was presented with two initial questions through which we wanted to explore the contents of the groups of factors in Figure 1. The questions were: (1) Has adopting the NRRP influenced how your organization relates to other bodies involved in implementing the NRRP and the other central administrations in charge of interventions? Moreover, (2) By looking at the inter-institutional network involved in achieving the objectives of the NRRP, what factors can influence inter-institutional performance? Both questions investigate the pre-collaborative and the fully collaborative moment.

We conducted semi-structured interviews between June 2022 and January 2025, encompassing a significant portion of the NRRP's timeline. We conduct interviews in person or via Microsoft Teams web conferencing software. Overall, eight directors of mission units of the NRRP were interviewed, with another fourteen managers and one NRRP Advisor from central government ministries (as NRRP leader with tasks of financial monitoring and national contact point), agencies and one research institute (as executor of specific interventions), and regions and municipalities (as executors of specific interventions at the local level).

It is worth noting that, at the outset of the NRRP, national legislation also included guidelines for internal governance within organizations. Each ministry responsible for NRRP resources was required to establish an organizational unit dedicated solely to managing NRRP resources and initiatives. These units helped ensure the availability of human resources and specific expertise for managing the NRRP. Their sustainability was also facilitated by not being subject to the spoils system, i.e. the political practice whereby public administration managers are appointed or removed based on their affinity with the government in office, rather than on their professional competence. We also consider the government's contact point with the European Commission and those having operational coordination, monitoring, reporting, and control tasks. We then wanted to add the point of view of some local government authorities (Regions and Municipalities) to understand how horizontal and vertical collaboration between institutions interacts within the Plan. While the number of individual local authorities represented in the sample is limited, the local governance perspective is nonetheless adequately covered for the purposes of this study. First, three of the six local representatives belong to regional and municipal coordination bodies, whose institutional mandate is precisely to aggregate and represent the positions, needs, and experiences of their member authorities vis-à-vis the central government. Their inclusion ensures that the local perspective captured in the interviews reflects a broader institutional standpoint rather than the experience of individual administrations. Second, the interviews with local representatives consistently produced distinct and coherent perspectives, particularly regarding the double exclusion dynamic identified in P2, that differ systematically from those of central actors, confirming that the sample captures the relevant variation the framework requires.

To understand the point of saturation in the interviews, each interviewee was asked whether they could identify other actors that might have contributed to the research project. The indications from the interviewees duly referred to people already considered by the authors; therefore, the sample was considered sufficient (Dai *et al.*, 2019). Supplementary Table 1 summarizes the data of the subjects involved in the interviews.

3.2 Data analysis

The data analysis broadly followed a prevalent deductive thematic analysis approach (Crabtree and Miller, 1999), although we incorporated an inductive approach during data analysis, which enriched the overall theoretical framework. Deductive approaches in our thematic analysis involve identifying themes that have been previously theorized in the literature, using them as a lens to organize, code, and interpret the data (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). Indeed, our codebook encompasses first-order concepts that align with the literature described in the previous sections and that inspire the research question and the theoretical framework.

The initial codebook was explicitly structured around the four quadrants of the theoretical framework, using the two variables (time and observation point) as the primary classification dimensions. As shown in the supplementary Table 2, first-order concepts derived from the literature were assigned to the relevant quadrant prior to data collection: concepts related to the boundary object role of the overarching strategy and its relationship with rational strategy logics were coded under pre-collaborative quadrants, while concepts related to the enabling factors of inter-institutional collaboration and their relationship with emergent strategy logics were assigned to collaborative quadrants. This deductive structure provided a systematic correspondence between the theoretical framework and the coding protocol, ensuring that the four quadrants served as analytic anchors throughout the data collection and analysis process. The inductive component operated at a different level: rather than introducing entirely new first-order concepts, it served to specify the relational logic connecting the elements already present in the framework. Second-order themes and the subsequent aggregate dimensions describe how we organize data and results according to what we observed during the semi-structured interviews. Thus, this form of data analysis is primarily interpretative, shaped and informed by pre-existing theory and concepts, yet contrasted with emerging themes, to understand how a broad and overarching strategic framework influences the performance management of inter-institutional collaboration.

The interviews were coded independently by two researchers; in the event of conflict, the codes were systematically reviewed and agreed upon. Portions of each interview were associated with the individual themes, allowing for the organization of the description of the main findings and the reinterpretation of the theoretical framework.

4. Case description

The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which supports the European NRRPs, is a financing instrument based on results rather than expense reimbursement. The disbursement of funding is conditional on the achievement of quantified objectives and/or the completion of structural reforms (Article 24 of Regulation (EU) 2021/241). Member States may submit payment requests (up to twice a year) only after achieving the *targets* and *milestones* agreed in their NRRPs.

The Commission, after assessing whether these goals have been satisfactorily achieved, authorizes the disbursement of the financial contribution. The European Regulation, however, makes no mention of whether individual projects are to be financed based on *pay-by-result* clauses that incentivize a results-oriented approach. In Italy, individual public administrations provide the implementers with the necessary funds to complete the projects and exercise purely financial control over them. The national reimbursement mechanism, therefore, combines a truly *compliance-based* nature, based on expenditure reporting, with a results-based incentive mechanism centred on *pay-by-result* clauses related only to Italy's relationship with the European Commission.

This mechanism exerts two opposing forces on inter-institutional collaboration and performance management. The first, negative, pushes individual organizations to be responsible for their spending and to exercise control over implementers that is not tied to the achievement of performance objectives. The second, positive, emphasizes the final effects of spending within a system of inter-organizational objectives overseen by the European Commission, which aims to achieve long-term outcomes.

Individual administrations, therefore, are required to focus and be accountable for both short-term outputs and intermediate outcomes that contribute to the achievement of final outcomes shared with other institutional actors. This potentially gives rise to a hybrid governance system that combines centralization and decentralization in the measurement and evaluation of strategy performance and can be seen as a way to operationalize a deliberately emergent approach.

In the case study design, we refer to the original version of the Italian NRRP and its governance, without considering the subsequent adjustments agreed by the European Commission. Indeed, we are not interested in all the minor changes in resource allocation, but rather in how these resources are managed on a daily basis.

Thus, we started with an in-depth document analysis of the NRRP and its normative *corpus* on the governance of the Plan to identify the strategic elements acting as boundary objects. The purpose was to identify the inter-institutional network by connecting several public actors with shared priorities, objectives, and indicators. Although the responsibility for reforms or interventions is attributed to individual organizations from time to time, the overall strategic framework of the Plan reveals the need to integrate these actions according to extremely cross-cutting goals.

To this end, we decided to analyze the sixteen *components* of the NRRP from the governance lens, rebuilding the role of public institutions involved in carrying out the interventions, and evaluating, within each component, the weight of each organization.

Four governance clusters emerged from the analysis: a first cluster is made up of the components in which the responsibility for carrying out all the interventions is attributed to a single entity without others being involved; a second, larger cluster is made up of components in which two organizations share responsibility for implementing the planned interventions; a third cluster brings together the components in which strong leadership by a single organization is conceivable with the others involved to a lesser extent; finally, a fourth cluster is made up of components characterized by heterogeneous governance in which it is not possible to identify *a priori* the presence of one or more leading organizations.

Supplementary Table 3 summarizes the information briefly described, reporting for each component the number of interventions divided between reforms (R) and investments (I), the owner entities, the number of investments per entity, and the cluster to which they are attributed.

In selecting the organizations involved in the interviews, we focus mainly on the first cluster, where multiple public entities share objectives and indicators with an undefined governance structure. The choice of this type of component was made for two main reasons. The first is that in these components, the nature of the general objectives is cross-cutting across various institutions involved without clear leadership. Thus, we believe such a configuration is ideal for investigating whether and how inter-institutional collaboration can spontaneously emerge around a boundary object. Secondly, these components appear to be fertile ground for empirical research, as they belong to the three main priorities of the Italian NRRP: digital (M1) and green transition (M2), and social inclusion (M5).

5. Results

In the first part of the interviews, we aimed to investigate the preconditions that a strategy, with its goals and indicators, should foresee to be considered an incentive for inter-institutional collaboration (Star, 2010; Rajala *et al.*, 2020) and a catalyst for performance (French and Mollinger-Sahba, 2021).

In this way, we sought to understand the levers of greater collaboration within the context of a strategy that exhibits characteristics of both RS and ES. Therefore, the interviewees were asked whether and why adopting the Plan contributed, even indirectly, to encouraging interaction between their administration and the other.

Each quotation reported in this section is assigned a unique code corresponding to the interviewee's role and organizational function, as detailed in the supplementary Table 1. When a quotation is recalled in subsequent analytical subsections, it is referenced directly by its code rather than repeated in full.

5.1 Factors affecting the boundary object nature of a broad and overarching strategy

The top-down definition of objectives and indicators is a necessary but insufficient condition for activating spontaneous collaborative mechanisms. In other words, to be a boundary object, it is not enough for a strategy to assign responsibility for individual objectives and indicators to different stakeholders. Instead, it is essential to create a chain of intermediate and final objectives (and related indicators) sharing ultimate responsibility for their achievement. The weakness of the Italian NRRP is the lack of a consistent chain of goals and indicators. The NRRP indicators have been linked exclusively to the objectives of the interventions assigned to the individual bodies, without considering the opportunity to define shared outcome indicators. More precisely, while the outputs are measured at the organizational level, the intermediate and final outcomes (which cut across the actions of multiple actors) do not have their own performance indicators. Indeed, the general objectives of NRRP's missions and components lack a set of indicators and do not explicitly envision the joint contribution of the organizations involved.

On how the NRRP performance management system is only partially designed to foster a greater perception of interdependence between public administrations, the central director of a ministry (I-CA-MIN-GO-03) said that:

> The NRRP could have been a tool through which to coordinate the action of the administrations only with explicit chains of cross-cutting objectives associated with transversal indicators, which explain how to arrive at a certain result.

The effect of such an arrangement is that many administrations do not perceive interaction as indispensable for achieving the expected performance. Consequently, they feel responsible exclusively for achieving objectives that are disconnected from those of others. The presence of common indicators defined at the European level partially compensates for this lack. However, the contribution of each national plan to them remains unclear.

Moreover, by looking at the balance between centralized and decentralized governance, the manager of a region (I-LA-REG-EX-01) said that:

> The governance of the NRRP has centralized decision-making power in the government from the beginning. The role of the regions has emerged over time, but a co-creation approach with the government has been lacking.

This has led to several coordination issues at both horizontal and vertical levels. Indeed, we found a divergent perception of how the Plan encourages interactions between public entities. Whether central government organizations mainly appreciate the centralized governance of the Plan, local entities feel a twofold need: first, to be more autonomous in identifying the projects to be delivered during the strategic planning; and secondly, to have a dedicated and structured peer dialogue during the implementation, for sharing drivers and obstacles with other regions and local entities.

Regarding how the system of objectives and indicators was formulated in the strategy design, the central director of a ministry (I-CA-MIN-GO-04) recalls that:

> We were asked by the government to quickly tell how we wanted to contribute to the outcomes of the NRRP, but we did not have time to think about new solutions. Only a new approach to the problems could have triggered new managerial approaches to inter-organizational performance.

Given the short time for planning, the definition of projects and reforms relied on a top-down formation. Even when organizations are involved in planning, due to time constraints, many propose projects that could be implemented immediately, but innovation and integration with other interventions remain weak, also because of limited co-planning skills in the public sector.

The lack of dialogue with pre-existing programming tools at the national level was introduced by a manager in a ministry (I-CA-MIN-GO-01), who said that:

> Reconnecting the NRRP to pre-existing policies and international performance frameworks only ex-post involves the emergence of decoupling phenomena, generating misalignments that make it difficult to reconstruct the overall planning of the country's economic policy.

This presents an additional obstacle to activating collaborative mechanisms around the NRRP. Especially in emergency contexts, to provide for the lack of a co-created planning, it would have been appropriate to immediately reflect on the international performance frameworks to which Italy adheres (such as the European semester, of which the NRRP is a part, and other shared systems of objectives and indicators, such as the Sustainable Development Goals) and on the sectoral strategies already present in the country in which multiple institutional actors are involved around a defined performance framework (such as the digital transformation framework of the public sector) (Argento *et al.*, 2025).

However, despite the critical issues mentioned, some innovative features of the NRRP design, which encourage collaboration, were recognized. The central director of a ministry (I-CA-MIN-FM-01) highlights that:

> The centralization of steering and reporting responsibility to a central government political body has ensured even more cross-cutting supervision and a form of inter-institutional cohesion concerning common problems and issues.

This reflection translates into a perception of indispensable strong political input, which is reflected not only in the preparatory phase of the strategy but also in constant technical monitoring during the implementation of the interventions. As in RS, political leaders establish the vision and, thanks to control systems, support other actors in implementing the strategy with continuous guidance.

The interviewees also emphasized the positive effect of NRRP governance in ensuring cohesion among entities involved in the Plan. As explained by a manager from an executing agency (I-CA-AG-EX-01):

> Matrix-type arrangements, in which cross-cutting teams have been set up for each intervention, asking people from various departments to find common solutions and pool critical issues and information, have generated inter-organizational routines.

The legally mandated governance framework required ministries to establish mission units, which oversee project implementation and strengthen inter-institutional relations by providing internal and external legitimacy. These units have also generated organizational benefits by fostering collaboration across departments. In addition to these mandatory structures, some ministries have introduced further changes, such as creating new departments to link previous policies and interventions with the new NRRP tasks.

Another important feature of the Plan that fostered spontaneous inter-institutional relations is the provision for enabling reforms. As noted by a manager from a local administration (I-LA-MUN-EX-01):

> The adoption of enabling reforms connected to the milestones of the Plan, as a requirement for the implementation of the most operational interventions, facilitates the achievement of the expected results from an individual and collaborative perspective.

These enabling reforms were designed not only to support the Plan's implementation but also to address the needs of institutions beyond those directly responsible for the Plan. As a result, they are expected to remain permanently within the national system and contribute to ordinary policymaking. A clear example is the administrative simplification reform, which aims to make public procedures more efficient and effective.

By using these interview evidence it is possible to assess the NRRP's boundary object role against the five criteria identified in the theoretical framework.

In summary, regarding *interpretive flexibility*, the NRRP exhibits this characteristic in its design architecture where the structure of missions and components provides common boundaries within which individual administrations define their specific interventions. However, flexibility is significantly compressed in the implementation phase by the compliance-oriented financial reporting system, which constrains local adaptation and reduces the space for context-sensitive emergent responses (I-CA-MIN-FM-01; I-LA-REG-EX-01). This partial presence of interpretive flexibility maps onto the asymmetry between the deliberate design intent and the de facto rational implementation logic identified in P2.

Regarding *shared structure with local use*, the NRRP provides a formal shared structure of goals and milestones, but critically lacks the outcome indicators that would connect local organizational action to the collective framework (I-CA-MIN-GO-03). Without these chains, the shared structure exists at the level of outputs and financial targets, but not at the level of inter-institutional outcomes.

Regarding *boundary-spanning capacity*, the NRRP has partially activated this function through the mission units, technical tables, and matrix-type arrangements that generated inter-organizational routines (I-CA-AG-EX-01; I-LA-MUN-EX-03). However, this boundary-spanning capacity remains geographically and relationally concentrated. It is active in proximate relationships between central structures and is not systematically extended to the vertical relationships between central and local administrations (I-LA-REG-EX-01).

Regarding *perceived interdependence*, this is the criterion most clearly absent in the NRRP case. The exclusive assignment of performance indicators at the organizational level prevents administrations from perceiving their action as structurally interdependent with that of others (I-CA-MIN-GO-03). As the interviews reveal, many administrations feel exclusively responsible for their own disconnected targets, while the contribution of each organization to shared outcomes remains unclear. The absence of shared outcome indicators is not merely a technical gap, but the mechanism through which the NRRP's boundary object function is most fundamentally undermined.

Finally, regarding *legitimacy and recognizability*, the NRRP fully satisfies this criterion. The strong political input from both the European Commission and the national government, the exceptional scale of resources allocated, and the legally mandated governance structures all ensure that the NRRP is perceived as a legitimate and recognizable institutional reference point across governance levels (I-CA-MIN-FM-01). This legitimacy, however, operates more as a compliance anchor than as a collaborative attractor.

The five criteria can be summarized as follows. Interpretive flexibility is partially satisfied: the missions-and-components architecture offers common boundaries, but compliance-oriented reporting compresses local adaptation in implementation (I-CA-MIN-FM-01; I-LA-REG-EX-01). Shared structure with local use is partially satisfied: a formal structure of goals and milestones exists, but the absence of cross-cutting outcome indicators severs the link between local action and the collective framework (I-CA-MIN-GO-03). Boundary-spanning capacity is partially satisfied: mission units, technical tables, and matrix arrangements generate inter-organizational routines, but these remain concentrated in proximate central relationships and do not extend systematically to central–local ties (I-CA-AG-EX-01; I-LA-MUN-EX-03; I-LA-REG-EX-01). Perceived interdependence is substantially absent: organizationally siloed indicators prevent actors from experiencing their objectives as structurally interdependent (I-CA-MIN-GO-03). Legitimacy and recognizability is fully satisfied: political investiture, resource scale, and mandated governance structures secure institutional recognition across levels, though this operates as a compliance anchor rather than a collaborative attractor (I-CA-MIN-FM-01).

5.2 Factors affecting the effectiveness of inter-institutional collaboration

A second question was posed to the interviewees aimed at verifying the relevance and completeness of the set of enabling factors of inter-institutional collaboration and performance management (Costumato, 2021). The interviews generally confirm the relevance of the six elements identified: trust, power sharing, formalization of rules, managerial strategies for collaboration, transformational leadership, and dialogue on performance. All of them can enhance the capacity of central leaders to leverage bottom-up contributions in strategy implementation. The interviewees emphasized the relevance of two key points: the formalization of rules and the need to establish a dialogue on performance.

Among the factors proposed in the framework (trust, power distribution, managerial strategies, leadership, formalization of rules and procedures, and performance dialogue), only one is mentioned not as an inter-organizational but an organizational factor helping the aptitude to collaborate of individual entities: namely, network-oriented managerial strategies.

The benefits of standard regulations can be observed in two distinct phases: strategy design and implementation. As explained by a manager from a ministry leading the NRRP (I-CA-MIN-GO-02):

> The structures that oversee the implementation of the NRRP deal with cross-cutting issues related to the monitoring of the Plan, the use of shared data platforms (REGIS), the interoperability of pre-existing databases, and the simplification of procedures belonging to individual organizations.

During strategy design, standard regulations encourage organizations to prepare for coordinated interventions, thanks to the creation of organizational mission units with similar tasks and functions across ministries. In the implementation phase, central government structures play a key role by providing formal and informal guidance to all project executors and grant owners, ensuring consistency and efficiency through shared platforms and streamlined procedures.

Many interviewees emphasized that *technical tables* are a key enabler of performance dialogue, representing the highest expression of collaboration and teamwork. As described by an NRRP advisor from a local administration (I-LA-MUN-EX-03):

> Technical tables are the moment in which the administrations speak with each other, addressing contingent issues, but at the same time building a relationship of trust.

These moments create spaces for administrations to address immediate challenges while fostering trust among stakeholders. This dialogue not only enhances collaboration but also promotes the sharing of best practices and tested tools, thereby improving the overall effectiveness of NRRP implementation.

The leadership style adopted by the central government's financial monitoring and national contact point organization plays a crucial role in facilitating the implementation of interventions and promoting collaboration among institutions. As emphasized by a central director from a leading ministry (I-CA-MIN-GO-05):

> A shared vocabulary fosters the performance measurement in a homogeneous way and favors the consolidation of the collected data [performance information]. It also encourages the development of new skills and tools to improve the capacity of measuring and assessing potential long-term impacts of the interventions.

This statement illustrates how a leadership approach focused on creating a shared vocabulary and standardized measurement practices can strengthen coordination and build trust across institutions. It also highlights the need for power sharing, understood as the distribution of responsibilities among organizations. While the EU–Member State reimbursement mechanism ensures interventions are pre-financed and reimbursed upon achieving milestones, the absence of formal mechanisms within the Plan for shared accountability between the Ministry of Economy and Finance and implementing bodies underscores the challenge of balancing leadership with distributed responsibility (Frid *et al.*, 2024).

A final factor influencing the effectiveness of inter-institutional collaboration is the need for public managers to develop skills for measuring and assessing outcomes and impacts. As stated by a manager from a leading ministry (I-CA-MIN-FM-02):

> A broad and overarching strategy requires that the public actors ask themselves how to measure the input-output-outcome-impact strategic chain. This question suggests not to consider only the control mechanisms, but also the introduction of specific techniques and approaches to improve the ability of planning and measuring the achievement of long-term effects.

Broad and overarching strategies require intentional design before adoption, ensuring resources are monitored according to planned outcomes and impacts. Additionally, they call for introducing techniques and approaches that strengthen planning and measurement capabilities, enabling actors to assess long-term effects and share responsibility effectively.

5.3 Rational and emergent strategy logics in the NRRP: an empirical mapping

To make the rational versus emergent strategy distinction empirically visible, we map the coded themes and illustrative quotations from the interviews onto RS-type and ES-type features, distinguishing by phase (pre-collaborative and collaborative) and observation point (inter-organizational and organizational). Supplementary Table 4 synthesizes this mapping.

The analysis reveals a clear and asymmetric pattern: RS logics are structurally dominant in the pre-collaborative phase and at the inter-organizational level, while ES elements emerge spontaneously during implementation but remain localized and non-systemic.

In the pre-collaborative phase, at the inter-organizational level, RS logic is evident in the centralized definition of goals, milestones, and financial responsibilities, with limited space for participatory design across governance levels. The regional manager's observation that *"the governance of the NRRP has centralized decision-making power in the government from the beginning"* and that *"a co-creation approach with the government has been lacking"* illustrates how the deliberately emergent design of the umbrella strategy was de facto overridden by top-down formation. At the organizational level, RS logic in the formulation phase was driven not by financial pressure but by political and temporal constraints. As one central director recalled, organizations were asked to quickly declare their intended contribution to NRRP outcomes *"without time to think about new solutions"*, producing a planning dynamic that privileged implementability over integration and innovation.

A partial but important exception to the dominance of RS in the pre-collaborative phase is the centralization of steering and reporting responsibility, which one central director described as having *"ensured cross-cutting supervision and a form of inter-institutional cohesion"*. This finding is theoretically significant, as it shows that RS logic can simultaneously suppress bottom-up ES formation and produce a form of inter-institutional alignment, albeit one that is compliance-driven rather than outcome-oriented. The RS logic therefore exhibits both enabling and constraining effects in this phase, depending on the governance level from which it is observed.

In the collaborative phase, the pattern shifts. At the inter-organizational level, ES elements emerge spontaneously in the form of technical tables, peer dialogue, and shared vocabulary development. As one local administration advisor noted, technical tables represent *"the moment in which the administrations speak with each other, addressing contingent issues, but at the same time building a relationship of trust"*. These are recognizably ES dynamics: unintended order emerging from decentralized interaction. However, they remain localized rather than extending across the full inter-institutional network. At the organizational level, ES aspirations are visible in actors' acknowledgement of the need to manage the *"input-output-outcome-impact strategic chain"*, but the capacity and incentive to do so are undermined by the compliance pressure cascading from the national financial control system.

The analysis reveals a form of hybridization that partially confirms the deliberately emergent design of the NRRP as an umbrella strategy, but also shows how the permeability between pre-collaborative and collaborative moments operates asymmetrically in practice. RS logic formed in the pre-collaborative phase does not remain contained there. It permeates the collaborative phase through the financial cascade, constraining the ES dynamics that would otherwise emerge more organically. Conversely, the ES elements that do emerge in implementation remain fragile and localized, unable to feed back into and modify the rational strategy architecture established at the formulation stage. The umbrella strategy thus proves to be deliberately rational in practice, with emergent elements that are tolerated but not institutionally supported.

5.4 Mapping empirical evidence to theoretical propositions

The evidence presented above can be systematically read through the lens of the three propositions derived from the theoretical framework, making the *rational* versus *emergent* distinction empirically visible across observation points and phases.

With respect to P1, the interviews consistently show that the NRRP's system of goals and indicators was insufficient to generate perceived interdependence across institutional actors. Effective coordination would have required explicit chains of cross-cutting objectives associated with transversal indicators (I-CA-MIN-GO-03). The absence of shared outcome indicators (with performance measured exclusively at the organizational level) prevented the strategy from fully performing the integrating function of a boundary object. This finding applies across both central and local perspectives, although with different interpretive emphasis: central actors frame it as a technical design limitation, while local actors experience it as structural exclusion from a shared performance logic (I-LA-REG-EX-01) (Modell, 2022).

With respect to P2, the evidence reveals a differentiated mechanism of cascading rationalization operating differently across the two phases and the two governance levels. In the formulation phase, the displacement of ES was driven primarily by political and temporal constraints, resulting in a top-down formation typical of RS: organizations were asked to quickly declare their intended contribution without adequate time for co-design (I-CA-MIN-GO-04). Local administrations confirm this asymmetry, noting the absence of a genuine co-creation approach with the central government (I-LA-REG-EX-01). In the implementation phase, the cascade shifted from being politically driven to financially driven: central administrations transferred this pressure to local executors without activating adequate support mechanisms, generating what one ministry manager described as "decoupling" between the NRRP and pre-existing policy frameworks (I-CA-MIN-GO-01). This double exclusion characterizes the experience of peripheral actors and represents the clearest empirical signal of the *de facto* rationalization of a nominally deliberate ES.

With respect to P3, the enabling factors identified in the literature are broadly confirmed as relevant by the interviewees, but their inter-institutional effectiveness appears contingent on the dominant logic operating within the strategy. Formalization of rules and performance dialogue emerged as the most frequently cited enablers, yet their impact was primarily felt within the bounds of centrally governed structures (such as the REGIS platform, technical tables, and mission units) rather than across the full institutional network (I-CA-MIN-GO-02; I-LA-MUN-EX-03). Technical tables simultaneously address contingent operational issues and build trust, but this dynamic remains localized rather than systemic (I-LA-MUN-EX-03). Similarly, the development of a shared vocabulary and measurement practices, while fostering coordination among proximate actors (I-CA-MIN-GO-05), did not extend to generate systemic outcome-oriented accountability across governance levels. The cascade of compliance rationality thus does not suppress the enabling factors entirely, but limits their reach to the organizational and proximate inter-organizational level, rather than allowing them to operate as mechanisms of genuinely cross-cutting inter-institutional performance management.

6. Discussion

The case study evidence, read through the three propositions derived from the theoretical framework, allows us to refine our understanding of how a broad overarching strategic framework influences inter-institutional performance management. We structure the discussion by returning to the four quadrants of the framework, showing what the case demonstrates about each and how they interact.

The most significant empirical finding concerns the quadrant in which the boundary object function of the NRRP was expected to be most visible (French and Mollinger Sahba, 2021). P1 anticipated that a shared goals system would generate perceived interdependence only if organized around explicit chains of outcome indicators (Rajala *et al.*, 2020; Carlile, 2002).

The case confirms and specifies this expectation: the NRRP's performance architecture assigned responsibilities and indicators exclusively at the organizational level, without defining cross-cutting outcome indicators that would make interdependence structurally visible to the actors involved. This design choice (partly a consequence of the emergency context and the pace of formulation) prevented the NRRP from fully performing the integrating function of a boundary object at the inter-institutional level (Wenger, 1998; Sullivan *et al.*, 2013). The result is consistent with what Star (2010) identifies as a necessary condition for boundary objects: the capacity to simultaneously serve the needs of different communities while maintaining a shared identity. When indicators are organizationally siloed, this dual function cannot be activated (Modell, 2022). Importantly, this limitation was recognized by both central and local actors, though with different framings: central administrations identified it as a technical gap in the performance measurement system, while local administrations experienced it as a structural signal of their marginal role in the strategy.

In the organizational perspective, pre-collaborative phase, the framework expected organizations to develop an adaptive attitude toward collaboration, supported by autonomy in priority-setting and involvement in strategy design (Molenveld *et al.*, 2021). P2 anticipated that political and temporal constraints would favour top-down design, displacing the emergent component of the umbrella strategy at the formulation stage (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; George *et al.*, 2017). The case confirms this expectation with particular clarity for peripheral actors. Local administrations were not substantively involved in the co-design of the NRRP's goals and indicators, a dynamic that was not primarily driven by financial pressure at this stage, but by the emergency logic of the pandemic context and by the political centralization of the planning process (Johnsen, 2023). This is a theoretically significant finding: it demonstrates that the shift from deliberately ES to de facto RS can occur for different reasons at different phases (Mirabeau and Maguire, 2014), and that the organizational aptitude to collaborate can be structurally inhibited before the collaborative phase even begins. The mission units established by national legislation partially compensated for this gap by creating dedicated organizational structures for NRRP management, but could not substitute for the absence of genuine co-design (Ansell and Gash, 2008).

The inter-organizational collaborative quadrant confirms both P2 and P3. The cascading rationalization mechanism described in detail in Section 5, produced a divergent perception of the NRRP's collaborative intent across governance levels: central actors experienced the governance structure as a coordination achievement, while local actors experienced it as a continuation of the exclusion begun in the formulation phase (Axelsson and Höglund, 2024). In this dynamic, the shared reporting platform (REGIS) and its compliance-oriented monitoring routines must be understood not as an independent cause but as the operational vehicle through which compliance rationality cascades across governance levels: they channel and routinize the financial-control logic rather than generating it. Administrative capacity constraints (particularly the limited co-planning skills observed in the formulation phase) act as a contributing condition that amplifies the political-temporal displacement rather than as a separate explanation; where capacity is scarce the top-down shortcut becomes more likely, but the direction of the cascade is set by the conditionality–reimbursement architecture. Political turnover and the compressed administrative timeline operate similarly, as contextual conditions that reinforce the privileging of implementability over integration. Sector-specific administrative arrangements (the heterogeneous governance configurations mapped across the NRRP components) function instead as a scope condition that modulates the intensity of the dynamic across policy areas rather than negating it. The enabling factors included in the inter-organizational collaborative quadrant operated primarily within centrally governed structures rather than across the full institutional network (Costumato, 2021; Turrini *et al.*, 2010), confirming that their inter-institutional reach is contingent on the dominant strategic logic, as P3 anticipates.

At the collaborative organizational level during implementation, the evidence confirms the relevance of goal commitment and motivation as drivers of collaborative behaviour (P3) (Provan and Milward, 2001; Scott and Boyd, 2023). However, the case also shows that intrinsic motivation (the awareness that results can only be achieved through multi-actor contribution) was systematically undermined by the absence of shared outcome indicators and by the compliance cascade described above (Bouckaert and Halligan, 2008). When organizations do not perceive structural interdependence (O'Toole, 1997), the collaborative factors identified in the literature can sustain cooperation within proximate relationships, but cannot generate the systemic inter-institutional performance orientation that the NRRP's cross-cutting ambitions would require (Kenis and Provan, 2009). This dynamic parallels the isolation effect observed in strategic projects where central governance support dissolves over time, leaving peripheral actors to navigate competing demands without formal mandate or strategic direction (Hedborg *et al.*, 2024).

In summary, the four quadrants tell a coherent theoretical story. A strategy designed as a *deliberately emergent umbrella strategy* (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985) can be progressively rationalized through two distinct but cumulative mechanisms: a political-temporal displacement in the formulation phase, and a financial cascade in the implementation phase. When both mechanisms operate simultaneously across governance levels, the strategy retains its formal boundary object structure but loses its functional boundary object capacity, because the perceived interdependence that activates spontaneous collaborative mechanisms is replaced by compliance accountability that reinforces organizational silos (Borgonovi *et al.*, 2018). This finding specifies the conditions under which shared indicator systems fail to operate as boundary objects in multi-level public programs: not when indicators are absent, but when financial accountability crowds out outcome accountability, and when this crowding-out cascades from supranational conditionality through national compliance logic to local implementation pressure (Bracci *et al.*, 2022).

The systematic assessment of the NRRP against the five boundary object criteria, detailed in Section 5, yields a differentiated conclusion: the strategy fully satisfies legitimacy and recognizability, partially satisfies interpretive flexibility, shared structure with local use, and boundary-spanning capacity, but substantially fails to activate perceived interdependence, the criterion most central to the boundary object function (Rajala *et al.*, 2020; French and Mollinger-Sahba, 2021). This pattern suggests that legitimacy and formal structure, while necessary, are not sufficient conditions for a strategy to operate as a performance attractor: the missing condition is the perception of structural interdependence, which financial accountability crowds out when it displaces outcome accountability (Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2018).

The empirical evidence presented above allows us to reflect on how the inductive component of the analysis refined the original theoretical framework. The inductive process did not introduce entirely new conceptual elements, but rather specified the relational logic connecting the elements already present in the framework, explaining how and why they function, and under what conditions their effects are amplified or constrained. This refinement is captured in the three propositions derived from the case. P1 specifies that the boundary object function of a shared goals system depends not on its formal presence but on the existence of explicit chains of cross-cutting outcome indicators, a condition that was underspecified in the original framework (Carlile, 2002; Wenger, 1998). P2 identifies a differentiated mechanism of cascading rationalization operating asymmetrically across governance levels and phases, which the original framework had not anticipated as a distinct dynamic (Hernández-Betancur *et al.*, 2020). P3 establishes that the enabling factors of inter-institutional collaboration are contingent on the dominant strategic logic, a boundary condition that was implicit in the original framework but not explicitly theorized (Costumato, 2021; Ansell and Gash, 2008).

The analysis also encountered divergent evidence that proved theoretically productive rather than anomalous. The formalization of rules, while broadly confirmed as relevant

(Turrini *et al.*, 2010; Cho *et al.*, 2025), was described by several actors as insufficient in the absence of shared outcome indicators, suggesting that formal governance structures can coexist with collaborative failure when the underlying performance logic is compliance-oriented rather than outcome-oriented (Frid *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, the enabling role of political input, while acknowledged across the sample, was qualified asymmetrically: central actors experienced it as a coordination achievement, while local actors experienced centralized political steering as a source of exclusion rather than enablement (Ran and Qi, 2018, 2019). These divergent readings were treated as theoretically productive signals, contributing to the specification of the boundary conditions embedded in P2 and P3, and to the asymmetric pattern of boundary object functionality described in the five-criteria assessment.

The analysis also specifies the scope conditions under which the dynamic operates beyond the Italian case. The mechanism is likely to recur wherever four features coincide: external results-based conditionality; a domestic reimbursement mechanism anchored in expenditure compliance rather than outcome attainment; a milestone-and-target architecture tying disbursement to verifiable outputs; and a multi-level setting in which central administrations mediate between the supranational principal and peripheral executors. Where these hold the displacement of outcome accountability by compliance accountability is a plausible expectation. Moreover, these conditions are shared by the European Member States that benefited from NRRP funding, and they are likely to be reintroduced in the 2028–2034 European financial programming framework currently under negotiation. Other features are more context-specific boundary conditions: the legalistic-bureaucratic tradition, the REGIS infrastructure, the spoils-system exemption of mission units, the scale of resources, and the degree of political centralization. Finally, the emergency-driven compression of formulation is intermediate as it is pandemic-specific in origin, yet generalizable to any strategy formulated under acute time pressure.

Together, these inductive refinements produced the updated framework presented in Figure 2, which integrates the empirical evidence with the original theoretical architecture and makes explicit the mechanisms and boundary conditions that govern the relationship between a broad overarching strategy and inter-institutional performance management.

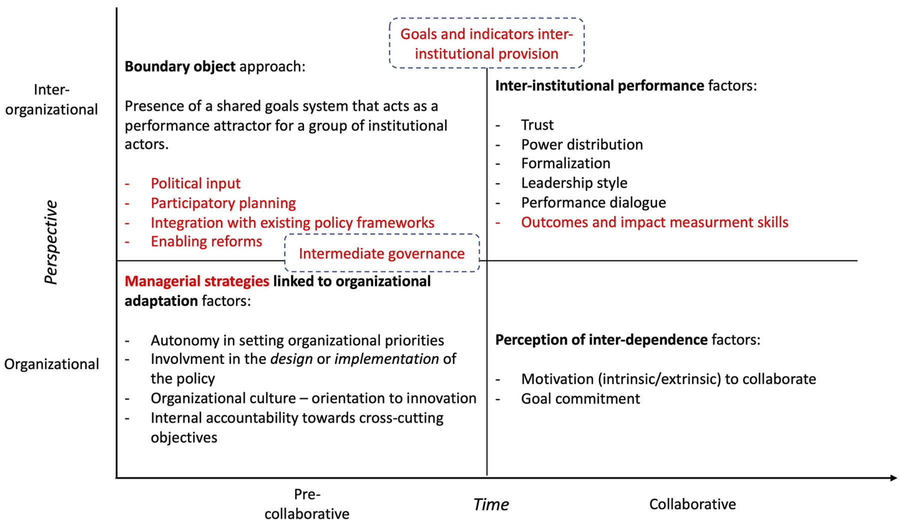

Figure 2. Theoretical framework integrated by the results of the interviews. Source: Authors' own elaboration

7. Conclusions

This article set out to answer the following research question: how does a broad and overarching strategic framework influence the performance management of inter-institutional collaboration? To address this question, we conducted an embedded qualitative case study of the Italian NRRP, testing a theoretical framework organized around two variables (time and observation point), and three propositions derived from the rational versus emergent strategy distinction and the boundary object lens. The conclusions synthesize what the case demonstrates about each quadrant, state the refined theoretical claims, and adjudicate the NRRP's boundary object role against the five evaluative criteria.

In the inter-organizational pre-collaborative quadrant, the NRRP's capacity to function as a boundary object was structurally compromised by its performance architecture: indicators assigned exclusively at the organizational level prevented the strategy from generating the perceived interdependence that P1 identified as a necessary condition for boundary object functionality (Star, 2010; Carlile, 2002; French and Mollinger-Sahba, 2021; Rajala *et al.*, 2020). In the organizational pre-collaborative quadrant, the organizational aptitude to collaborate was inhibited before the collaborative phase began: the displacement of the emergent component was driven not by financial pressure but by political and temporal constraints linked to the pandemic emergency (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Mirabeau and Maguire, 2014; George *et al.*, 2017). In the inter-organizational collaborative quadrant, the cascading rationalization identified in P2 led central administrations to transfer compliance pressure to local executors without activating adequate performance dialogue and support (Laihonen and Mäntylä, 2017; Moynihan, 2005), producing a double exclusion of peripheral actors (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Molenveld *et al.*, 2021) and constraining the enabling factors to proximate central relationships, confirming P3 (Axelsson and Höglund, 2024). In the organizational collaborative quadrant, goal commitment and intrinsic motivation (Provan and Milward, 2001; Scott and Boyd, 2023) were undermined by the absence of shared outcome indicators and by the compliance cascade: without perceived structural interdependence (O'Toole, 1997), enabling factors sustained only proximate cooperation rather than systemic inter-institutional performance (Costumato, 2021; Kenis and Provan, 2009). The quadrants interact asymmetrically: rational logic established in the pre-collaborative phase permeates implementation through the financial cascade, while emergent elements remain localized and unable to modify the rational architecture.

Three refined theoretical claims emerge from the case. With respect to P1, we find that a shared goals system functions as a boundary object (Star, 2010; Wenger, 1998; Carlile, 2002) not through its formal presence but through explicit chains of cross-cutting outcome indicators connecting outputs to shared results; when this chain is absent, organizations perceive self-contained accountability and the strategy loses its collaborative activation capacity. This extends the boundary object scholarship (Rajala *et al.*, 2020; Sullivan *et al.*, 2013) by identifying the design condition that determines whether a strategy activates or fails to activate inter-institutional interdependence. With respect to P2, we find that cascading rationalization operates asymmetrically across governance levels and phases: while supranational results-based conditionality (Bouckaert and Halligan, 2008) and rational expenditure logic (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; George *et al.*, 2017) are established concepts, our case reveals that their interaction produces a double exclusion of peripheral actors driven by different mechanisms in each phase. This differentiated, cumulative dynamic across governance levels represents the paper's most original empirical contribution. With respect to P3, we find that enabling factors (trust, power distribution, formalization of rules, transformative leadership, and performance dialogue) identified in the literature as prerequisites for collaboration (Costumato, 2021; Turrini *et al.*, 2010; Ansell and Gash, 2008; Borgonovi *et al.*, 2018), are not universal but conditionally effective mechanisms whose inter-institutional reach is contingent on the dominant strategic logic: a boundary condition the existing literature had not explicitly theorized.

The systematic boundary object assessment yields a clear and differentiated conclusion. We find that the NRRP fully satisfies legitimacy and recognizability as defined by Star (2010): political investiture, resource scale, and mandated governance structures ensure institutional recognition across governance levels. It partially satisfies interpretive flexibility, shared structure with local use, and boundary-spanning capacity (Carlile, 2002; Wenger, 1998; Sullivan *et al.*, 2013): the umbrella architecture provides common boundaries, but, beyond what these criteria anticipate, compliance reporting compresses flexibility, absent outcome indicators break the local-collective connection, and boundary-spanning remains concentrated in proximate central relationships. Most significantly, we find that the NRRP substantially fails to activate perceived interdependence (Rajala *et al.*, 2020; French and Mollinger-Sahba, 2021), and identify the mechanism through which this failure occurs: organizationally siloed indicators prevent actors from perceiving structural interdependence, and financial accountability crowds out outcome accountability, transforming the strategy from collaborative attractor into compliance reference. In conceptual terms, this is the signature of compliance rationality overriding strategic rationality, rather than of strategic rationality as such.

The findings contribute to three interconnected strands of literature. With respect to the rational versus emergent strategy debate, building on the concept of umbrella strategies (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985) and existing accounts of strategy hybridization (Mirabeau and Maguire, 2014; George *et al.*, 2017; Vandersmissen and George, 2024; Hernández-Betancur *et al.*, 2020), we show that the deliberately emergent design of such strategies can be displaced through two distinct mechanisms (political-temporal and financial) that operate at different phases and produce cumulative effects on collaborative capacity across governance levels, a dynamic not previously identified in the literature. With respect to the boundary object literature, building on existing work on shared indicator systems in public sector settings (Rajala *et al.*, 2020; Bracci *et al.*, 2022), we specify the conditions under which such systems fail: not in the absence of indicators, but when financial accountability crowds out outcome accountability cascading from supranational conditionality through national compliance logic to local implementation pressure. With respect to inter-institutional performance management, extending prior work on collaboration enablers (Costumato, 2021; Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2018; French and Mollinger-Sahba, 2021), we demonstrate that their effectiveness is not a property of the factors themselves but of the strategic logic within which they operate, reframing them as conditionally effective mechanisms rather than universal prerequisites. Taken together, these contributions address the broader debate on centralizing or decentralizing public-led innovation strategies (Borgonovi *et al.*, 2018; Molenveld *et al.*, 2021), and lie at the intersection of collaborative governance and public sector performance management (Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2018; Costumato, 2021).

The practical implications follow directly from the four quadrants. In strategy design, a shared goals system must include explicit chains of cross-cutting outcome indicators (Borgonovi *et al.*, 2018; Guarini *et al.*, 2022); co-design must be substantive rather than consultative (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Molenveld *et al.*, 2021), as emergency-driven top-down planning weakens peripheral actors' collaborative orientation; and integration with pre-existing frameworks must be ex-ante rather than ex-post (Argento *et al.*, 2025; Guarini *et al.*, 2022). In strategy implementation, formal governance structures (Kenis and Provan, 2009) are necessary but insufficient without outcome-oriented logic: explicit mechanisms for shared accountability (Ran and Qi, 2018, 2019; Scott and Boyd, 2023), adequate implementation support and performance dialogue (Laihonen and Mäntylä, 2017; Moynihan, 2005), and investment in outcome measurement skills (Borgonovi *et al.*, 2018) are preconditions for genuinely inter-institutional performance management; and the risk of strategic isolation of peripheral actors must be proactively addressed (Hedborg *et al.*, 2024). The updated framework in Figure 2 provides both a practical input for policymakers and a theoretical platform for future research (Tsang, 2014).

The study presents two main limitations. First, the NRRP's exceptional nature as a pandemic-response initiative may limit transferability to ordinary policy settings; future research should test the framework and propositions in stable long-term strategies where political-temporal constraints are less acute (Johnsen, 2023). Second, the framework could be refined through comparative analysis across national contexts or EU programs (Guarini *et al.*, 2022; Tsang, 2014), and complemented by quantitative approaches to test the generalizability of the mechanisms and the relative weight of factors across quadrants.

The findings open a specific avenue for future research that this paper identifies but does not fully develop: the relationship between public financial management logics and inter-institutional performance management. The NRRP case reveals a tension between results-based requirements at the supranational level and compliance-based expenditure reporting at the national level, identified here as the primary driver of the cascading rationalization mechanism in P2. However, the paper does not include the analysis of how budgeting and financial accountability system at the supranational level impact the national context. Future research should address this gap directly, connecting the literature on collaborative governance and inter-institutional performance management with that on public budgeting and financial accountability. Comparative studies across EU member states implementing their NRRPs would offer a particularly productive empirical setting, given the variation in national financial management traditions within a shared supranational conditionality framework (Guarini *et al.*, 2022; Argento *et al.*, 2025).

List of abbreviations

MAECI –	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
MEF –	Ministry of Economy and Finance
MGIUS –	Ministry of Justice
MI –	Ministry of School
MIMS –	Ministry of Sustainable Mobility
MINT –	Ministry of Internal Affairs
MISE –	Ministry of Economic Development
MITE –	Ministry for Ecological Transition
MITD –	Ministry for Digital Transformation
MIPAAF –	Ministry of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Forestry
MSAL –	Ministry of Health
MUR –	Ministry of University and Research
PCM –	Presidency of the Council – Central Government

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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Further reading

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