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To cite this article: Dionys Zink (11 Jun 2026): When coping becomes structure: organizational corrosion under sustained administrative overload, Journal of European Public Policy, DOI: [10.1080/13501763.2026.2684997](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2026.2684997)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2026.2684997>



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Published online: 11 Jun 2026.



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When coping becomes structure: organizational corrosion under sustained administrative overload

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ABSTRACT

Modern democracies face a growing mismatch between the policies governments adopt and the administrative resources available to implement them. Yet while research has documented the consequences of this mismatch for policy outputs, what sustained resource shortfalls do to the implementing organizations themselves has largely been overlooked. This paper addresses that gap by introducing the concept of organizational corrosion. Organizational corrosion is defined as the incremental, self-reinforcing degradation of public agencies along three observable dimensions: performance, internal capabilities, and external standing. To illustrate the concept's explanatory power, contrasting trajectories are traced in two environmental regulators: England's Environment Agency, which exhibits advanced corrosion following sustained austerity and Brexit-induced task expansion, and Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency, which largely avoided corrosion through timely resource alignment and capacity-preserving internal practices.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 5 October 2025; Accepted 29 May 2026

KEYWORDS Administrative overload; organizational theory; bureaucratic capacity; public administration; policy implementation

Introduction

Modern democracies are characterized by a perennial tension between the proliferation of policy mandates and the resources dedicated to their administration. Over recent decades, scholars have documented a steady 'policy accumulation', whereby governments layer new regulations onto existing frameworks to address emerging societal challenges and demonstrate

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2026.2684997>.

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responsiveness to voters (Adam *et al.*, 2019; Jakobsen & Mortensen, 2015; Thelen, 2004). Yet the expansion of policy portfolios often occurs without commensurate increases in bureaucratic capacity: public administrations face stagnating or shrinking budgets, hiring freezes, and limited infrastructural support even as their workload intensifies (Bauer *et al.*, 2012; Dasgupta & Kapur, 2020; Lobao *et al.*, 2018). This mismatch – what Fernández-i-Marín *et al.* (2024) label the ‘burden-capacity gap’ – creates a structural risk of administrative overload, undermining both the delivery of individual mandates and the broader legitimacy of governing institutions.

Research on implementation deficits has richly detailed how overextended bureaucracies resort to ad hoc coping strategies to manage surging demands under resource constraints (Kaplaner *et al.*, 2025; Knill *et al.*, 2024; Lipsky, 2010). Yet by focusing predominantly on policy outcomes, this literature largely overlooks the internal transformations that chronic overload precipitates within public agencies themselves. We know that strained administrations produce poorer policy outputs, but we know far less about how sustained resource shortfalls reshape organizational structures and routines over time. Without such a perspective, analyses risk treating implementation failures as isolated events, rather than the symptoms of a slow-burn ‘organizational corrosion’ process that can hollow out even seemingly well-resourced agencies.

This paper introduces the concept of organizational corrosion to capture the incremental erosion of an agency’s performance, internal capabilities, and external standing under a persistent burden-capacity gap. Drawing on insights from organizational theory and public administration, the article argues that when workloads chronically outpace resources, temporary compensatory measures give way to institutionalized coping strategies that corrode staff expertise, weaken institutional memory, and sap morale. Over time, these dynamics produce a self-reinforcing cycle: degraded performance damages an agency’s reputation, further constraining its access to resources and embedding dysfunction into everyday routines.

To illustrate the explanatory power of organizational corrosion, this article undertakes a most-similar-systems comparison of two environmental organizations: Ireland’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and England’s Environment Agency (EA). Although both organizations faced robust policy growth under comparable administrative traditions, their resource trajectories diverge sharply. The article shows that the Irish EPA has successfully maintained a balance between workload and capacity – thereby avoiding corrosion – while the English EA, particularly in the wake of austerity and Brexit, has slipped into deepening stages of corrosive decline. By tracing these contrasting case studies, the article offers both a novel conceptual framework for understanding administrative overload and its consequences as well as a set of empirical tools for diagnosing slow-burn organizational decline in the public sector.

Blindspots at the nexus of rule growth and administrative overload, and organizational failure

A wealth of research demonstrates that governments tend to adopt more policies over time, a phenomenon labeled variously as ‘policy accumulation’ (Adam *et al.*, 2019), ‘rule growth’ (Jakobsen & Mortensen, 2015), ‘policy layering’ (Daugbjerg & Swinbank, 2016), ‘policyscapes’ (Mettler, 2016), or ‘legislative growth’ (Kosti & Levi-Faur, 2019). These different analytical approaches converge on a number of common findings: politicians typically use policies as their main problem-solving tool because they allow them to deal ‘with issues and problems as they arise’ (Orren & Skowronek, 2017, 3); and they prefer to adopt new regulations – in response to evolving societal needs or to signal responsiveness to voters (Adam *et al.*, 2019; Teles, 2016) – instead of streamlining or discarding older ones (Bauer *et al.*, 2012; Knill *et al.*, 2020; Pierson, 1994).

Yet, despite the political popularity of passing new legislation, there is far less enthusiasm for funding and expanding the administrative apparatus to support them (Lobao *et al.*, 2018). In other words ‘policymaking neglects administration’ (Derthick, 2011, 4). Voters rarely credit politicians for improvements in bureaucratic functions (Dasgupta & Kapur, 2020; Wilson, 1991), leading to persistent hesitancy around supporting and enlarging public administrations (Ansell, 2019; Blyth, 2013). On a global scale, those claims are substantiated by a trend of stagnation or even decline in public sector spending and employment across advanced democracies since the 1980s (Lupi *et al.*, 2024; Ortiz-Ospina *et al.*, 2016). At the same time however, evidence consistently shows that successful government intervention crucially depends on administrations having sufficient resources available to carry out the additional tasks tied to those new policies (Adam, 2024; Limberg *et al.*, 2021; Zhao, 2023). Whether in the form of funding, staffing, training, or administrative infrastructure, these inputs are vital in ensuring that each additional mandate can be fulfilled effectively (Limberg *et al.*, 2023; Winter, 2012). This link between accumulating policies and increasing administrative burdens is widely recognized by scholars irrespective of their analytical lens (Ege *et al.*, 2024; Huber & McCarty, 2004; Tummers *et al.*, 2015; Winter & May, 2001).

Ultimately however, growing policy mandates set against static or shrinking administrative resources create a structural risk of overload (Crozier *et al.*, 1975; Fernández-i-Marín *et al.*, 2023; Huntington, 1975). Dasgupta and Kapur (2020) highlight the plight of such a scenario by showcasing how under-resourced authorities unable to fulfill statutory entitlements leave citizens with the legal right to benefits but no practical means to obtain them. Fernández-i-Marín *et al.* (2024) formalize these dynamics through the ‘burden capacity gap’ hypothesis – a scenario where sectoral administrative

responsibilities outpace the resources available to meet them (Adam, 2024). According to Gratton *et al.* (2021), if not addressed, such a burden capacity gap can transform what was once a rational and efficient Weberian bureaucracy into a ‘Kafkaesque’ one, overwhelmed by an avalanche of rules that outstrips its capacity. In such scenarios, organizations trapped in a downward spiral are increasingly forced to engage in ‘coping strategies’ (Lipsky, 2010) to manage growing implementation burdens under resource scarcity such as ‘policy triage’ – prioritizing the implementation of certain policies over others (Knill *et al.*, 2024).

These dynamics also connect to a broader literature on organizational and policy failure. Work on the latter emphasizes that ‘failure’ is a contested and politically charged label and often focuses on discrete episodes of breakdown, blame, and learning (Bovens, 2016; Howlett, 2023). The organizational failure literature likewise covers a wide range of breakdowns, including crises (Elliott, 2009), and disasters (Seibel *et al.*, 2017), typically analyzed as visible and punctuated departures from expected performance (Anheier, 1999; Probst & Raisch, 2005; Vaughan, 1999).

Yet, precisely because much of the failure literature gravitates toward punctuated breakdowns and visible crises, the more incremental dynamics linking rule growth, stagnant – or shrinking – resources, and mounting administrative overload often remain analytically underdeveloped. Even where scholars recognize this causal chain, research frequently treats implementation deficits as the endpoint (see Hinterleitner *et al.*, 2023). In other words, we have learned a great deal about *when* overload produces shortfalls, but much less about *how* sustained pressure gradually changes the organizations that must implement growing rule stocks.

To address this blind spot, research needs to complement outcome-focused accounts with an organizational perspective on slow-burn failure. Specifically, it must ask what protracted burden–capacity gaps do inside implementing organizations: how chronic shortages and escalating workloads reshape structures, routines, and capabilities over time and when coping responses become institutionalized. Developing such a framework is essential not only for diagnosing whether persistent pressure merely delays compliance, but also for detecting when it inflicts lasting structural damage that can lock in future implementation failure even without a single dramatic breakdown.

A holistic perspective on the effects of administrative overload: the concept of organizational corrosion

To this end, this paper complements research on rule growth, administrative overload, and policy failure by introducing a distinct organizational perspective. Building on the burden-capacity gap hypothesis (Fernández-i-Marín

et al., 2024), the concept of *organizational corrosion* offers a conceptual definition and operational dimensions that capture how sustained administrative overload reshapes public organizations from within. Crucially, the framework treats the burden-capacity gap and organizational corrosion as analytically distinct: the former is a structural condition characterizing the relationship between an organization's mandate and its resource base; the latter is the incremental organizational response that may unfold under such conditions.

Organizational corrosion is conceptualized as the gradual, self-reinforcing degradation of a public organization along three observable dimensions: (i) *performance*, manifested in implementation deficits and the institutionalization of coping practices such as policy triage; (ii) *internal capabilities*, including expertise, institutional memory, adaptive capacity, and staff morale; and (iii) *external standing*, particularly the organization's reputation among policy-makers, stakeholders, and the public. Corrosion is processual rather than punctuated: it accumulates incrementally as temporary compensatory measures harden into routine operating procedures, hollowing out the organization's capacity to deliver on its mandate and to recover under future pressure.

The driver of organizational corrosion is a persistent burden-capacity gap – a sustained mismatch in which administrative workloads outpace the staffing, budget, and infrastructure available to implement mandates effectively (Fernández-i-Marín *et al.*, 2024). The relationship between gap and corrosion is, however, neither automatic nor uniform. A persistent burden-capacity gap is a *necessary* condition for organizational corrosion: without sustained imbalance between workload and capacity, the slow-burning erosion captured by the concept does not materialize. It is not, however, a *sufficient* condition. Organizations facing comparable gaps may differ markedly in how, and how quickly, they corrode – depending on internal practices as well as on contextual factors that shape recovery opportunities.

Crucially, both the burden-capacity gap and the corrosion it can trigger unfold incrementally –often spanning decades rather than discrete crises (Adam *et al.*, 2019; Lindblom, 1959). If we measure these phenomena by focusing only on short-term shocks or isolated implementation failures, we risk missing the slow-burn processes through which sustained overload hollows out public institutions (Fernández-i-Marín *et al.*, 2023). The concept of organizational corrosion therefore emphasizes a processual understanding of organizational decline, offering an analytical lens to systematically trace how sustained overload conditions reshape public institutions over time.

To clarify the concept's boundaries, organizational corrosion is not triggered by ordinary, short-lived spikes in work or by temporary budget squeezes that leave the underlying organization largely intact (Zink *et al.*, 2025). It refers, instead, to prolonged periods in which workloads persistently

outpace available resources and in which the organization, in response, undergoes lasting adaptations along the three dimensions outlined above. Other influences described in the literature on organizational failure – such as poor leadership or ill-conceived New Public Management reforms – can certainly aggravate specific dimensions, for example by amplifying capability loss (Diefenbach, 2009). Yet they remain contingent modifiers rather than core drivers (Gerring, 1999). Empirically, well-led agencies with modern management systems have still deteriorated when confronted with relentless mandate growth and static budgets, while organizations facing political or managerial turbulence have avoided long-term damage so long as resources expanded in line with their tasks (Knill *et al.*, 2026). Leadership failures or reform side-effects may shape *how* corrosion unfolds and *how fast* it spreads, but the phenomenon itself originates in the chronic mismatch between accumulating obligations and the capacity available to meet them.

Theory: two stages of organizational corrosion

In the absence of a (persistent) burden–capacity gap, organizations are generally able to accommodate growing demands in a largely ‘business as usual’ manner without having to rely on compensatory coping practices. At this point, institutions can draw on slack resources such as unallocated staff time, budget margins, or general absorptive capacity to integrate additional tasks into routine operations (Cyert & March, 1963; Elston & Zhang, 2025). Managers may still reprioritize within normal workflows, but extraordinary measures such as sustained overtime, repeated emergency redeployments, or systematic backlog accumulation remain limited (Knill *et al.*, 2024; Wiley & Berry, 2018). In some instances, short-lived workload peaks can even trigger a ‘rally around the flag’ effect, as personnel experience camaraderie and shared purpose (Peled, 2002; Peretz, 2021), reinforcing confidence in the organization’s robustness (Goodsell, 2010; Honig, 2024).

Conjecture (A): No corrosion is observable when expanded demands are met through routine adjustment and existing slack: compensatory coping is absent or rare, backlogs do not accumulate, and no systematic capability loss occurs.

The onset of organizational corrosion

The first stage of organizational corrosion begins once the organization has to rely on compensatory coping to keep up with rising workloads. Here, the effect of corrosion becomes observable: Overtime becomes frequent, staff redeployments become routine, and contingency budgets are repeatedly drawn down. Importantly, however, in this first stage the organization can often still ‘hold the line’ on its core mandate: coping practices

compensate for overload, but the underlying substance of the organization has not yet been fundamentally damaged. What distinguishes this stage is that it can remain temporarily sustainable because recovery still occurs – through episodic replenishment of capacity (hiring, training, restored budgets, reduced task load) or through periods in which demands ease, allowing backlogs and strain to be partially reversed. In this phase, the organization experiences recurrent strain rather than permanent overload; compensatory effort is intensive but not yet constitutive of the operating model. If recovery windows shrink or disappear, prolonged reliance on coping increases fatigue and turnover, and declining responsiveness becomes more noticeable internally and externally (Junaidi *et al.*, 2020).

Conjecture (B): Early corrosion is observable when compensatory coping becomes a regular instrument for meeting routine demands: overtime, redeployments, and contingency drawdowns are frequent, but recovery windows still allow partial restoration of slack and staffing.

Advanced organizational corrosion

The second stage sets in when recovery no longer occurs and overload becomes systemic. Coping mechanisms that were initially adopted as emergency responses become institutionalized as the organization's default mode of operation. Strategies such as policy triage – deciding which tasks to prioritize while neglecting others – transform from an occasional crisis response into a durable operating procedure, and the boundary between 'what must be done' and 'what cannot be done' is redrawn (Knill *et al.*, 2024). At this stage, overload covers the organization as a whole and its implementation portfolio, rather than isolated units or specific tasks (Knill *et al.*, 2026). Constant strain produces high levels of job dissatisfaction, while elevated turnover and vacancies erode institutional knowledge (Galan, 2023) and diminish operational capabilities (Ansell *et al.*, 2021). The organization also risks reputational damage (Carpenter, 2014; Hall, 2002), which further undermines recruitment and retention (Silaban & Syah, 2018). As stakeholders lose trust, the organization struggles to fulfill its mandate (Derthick, 2011). This erosion can become self-reinforcing: chronic overload leads to poorer performance (Stensaker *et al.*, 2002), which undermines credibility and reduces the likelihood of securing resources that might restore equilibrium. Ultimately, cumulative stress can culminate in a Kafkaesque bureaucracy (Gratton *et al.*, 2021), overwhelmed by a volume and complexity of tasks that surpass the organizational and systemic capacity to manage effectively.

Conjecture (C): Advanced corrosion is observable when coping becomes structural and recovery no longer occurs: triage is routinized, backlogs and

performance shortfalls are chronic, turnover and expertize loss rise persistently, and reputational deterioration feeds back into weakened recruitment and retention.

Mitigating organizational corrosion

Organizational corrosion, being incremental and cumulative in nature, can in principle be reversed. Yet the feasibility and intensity of reversal depend on where an organization sits along the trajectory, because the stages differ in whether coping remains reversible and whether recovery still takes place.

During the first stage of organizational corrosion, the organization increasingly relies on compensatory measures, but recovery windows still exist such that strain remains cyclical rather than chronic. Reversal is therefore comparatively straightforward: realigning tasks and resources – through additional funding, targeted recruitment, or mandate streamlining – can replenish slack and return the organization to routine operations (Rose *et al.*, 2010). The central objective at this stage is to prevent compensatory coping from becoming the organization's default mode.

As organizations move into the second stage, reversal becomes markedly more difficult. Recovery no longer occurs and coping has become structural: triage is institutionalized as routine procedure, and the organization's expertize, institutional memory, morale, and external credibility have begun to erode. In this context, simply injecting resources is often insufficient, because organizational actors may lack the capacity or willingness to translate these improvements into renewed performance (Ansell *et al.*, 2021). Reversing advanced corrosion therefore requires interventions that both rebuild capabilities and undo entrenched coping routines – restoring learning and supervisory capacity, rebuilding internal trust and morale, and credibly signalling to external stakeholders that new resource allocations represent a genuine break from the coping-based status quo (Goodsell, 2010).

In sum, while reversal is possible, the depth of intervention required escalates sharply across stages: early corrosion can often be addressed by direct task–resource realignment, whereas advanced corrosion typically necessitates comprehensive reform aimed at dismantling routinized coping and rebuilding capabilities.

Capturing organizational corrosion empirically

To capture organizational corrosion empirically, the analysis proceeds in two analytical steps that mirror the conceptual separation introduced above. The first step establishes the *causal antecedent* by assessing whether a sustained burden-capacity gap exists. This is approached through the alignment or divergence between an organization's hard resources – staff numbers and

budget – and the implementation demands generated by its assigned mandate. Proportional development of resources and tasks indicates a sustainable workload; persistent divergence indicates a burden-capacity gap of the kind that the framework identifies as necessary for corrosion to unfold. The second step then asks whether, and to what extent, the organization exhibits *corrosion* in response. This requires qualitative verification, because resource-workload data alone cannot reveal whether an organization has absorbed strain through routine adjustment, relied on compensatory coping with intermittent recovery, or slid into the institutionalization of coping that defines advanced corrosion.

The dependent phenomenon – organizational corrosion – is measured along the three dimensions specified in the conceptual definition: (1) *performance*, (2) *internal capabilities*, and (3) *external standing*. Together, these dimensions allow us to diagnose whether overload remains bounded and easily reversible, characteristic of the first stage of corrosion, or becomes systemic and self-reinforcing, characteristic of the second. Crucially, the three dimensions do not measure the burden-capacity gap itself; they measure the organizational response to it. This separation is what allows the framework to ask comparative questions about why organizations facing similar gaps may corrode at different rates or, in some cases, resist corrosion altogether.

Regarding organizational *performance*, the analysis probes practices indicative of overload such as coping strategies and implementation delays. In particular, it relies on the concept of policy triage (Knill *et al.*, 2024). Defined as the systematic prioritization, delay, or abandonment of implementation tasks, triage is a direct indicator of an acute mismatch between workload and organizational capacity (Knill *et al.*, 2026). Persistent triage signals that compensatory coping is no longer exceptional but increasingly necessary to sustain day-to-day functioning. Conversely, the absence – or only rare, short-lived occurrence – of triage indicates that resources and demands remain broadly in equilibrium, even where short-term gaps have appeared.

However, performance deficits alone provide limited insight into whether strain is reversible or whether it has begun to erode the organization's underlying capabilities. The second dimension therefore captures *internal capabilities*: staff morale, turnover rates, the depth of expertise and institutional memory, and the organization's adaptive capacity to monitor, learn, anticipate, and respond to emerging challenges (Ansell *et al.*, 2021). Sustained turnover, declining morale, weakened adaptive capacity, and the loss of accumulated expertise indicate that slack has been depleted and that recovery has become difficult – central markers of the shift from the first to the second stage.

The third dimension captures *external standing*. Because reputation shapes political support, resource allocation, and the organization's ability to attract

and retain qualified staff, it functions as a potential feedback mechanism: when stakeholders lose trust and criticize the organization's competence, rebuilding capacity becomes harder, reinforcing decline (Carpenter, 2010). External standing is thus not only a symptom of corrosion but also a channel through which corrosion becomes self-reinforcing.

This classification follows directly from the conceptual distinction between recovery and non-recovery. *Advanced corrosion* is observable when adverse conditions are present across all three dimensions: chronic implementation deficits and routinized triage; sustained capability loss in the form of turnover, low morale, depleted expertise, and weakened adaptive capacity; and reputational deterioration that constrains political support and recruitment. *Early corrosion* is observable when strain is visible – typically through recurring compensatory effort such as episodic triage – but recovery remains possible: deficits are not fully chronic, capability loss is limited or not yet entrenched, and reputational damage is absent or modest. Agencies *not affected by corrosion* show little reliance on compensatory coping and no systematic deterioration across these dimensions, even where short-lived burden-capacity gaps have appeared and been closed.

Case selection

In the remainder of this article, the theoretical and conceptual considerations are illustrated through a comparative analysis of two central environmental implementation agencies: the Irish EPA and the English EA. The research design follows a most-similar design logic to reduce heterogeneity in baseline institutional features that plausibly shape resourcing dynamics and organizational responses to overload (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Both agencies were created in the 1990s as arm's-length regulators (EPA in 1993; EA in 1996) and rank among the most formally autonomous environmental regulators in Europe (Gilardi, 2008).

The unit of analysis is the *individual organization* rather than the country. The comparison is therefore anchored in similarities in agency form, mandate type, and principal-agent arrangements, rather than an assumption of full cross-national equivalence. At the same time, Ireland and the UK provide a reasonably comparable administrative backdrop: both are advanced OECD democracies with similar levels of overall state capacity (Hanson & Sigman, 2019) and a comparable 'polity of implementation' (Sager & Gofen, 2022). They also exhibit broadly similar trajectories of environmental policy growth (see Figure 1), which helps hold constant a key driver of implementation burden. Additionally, scrutinizing environmental policy, Fernández-i-Marín *et al.* (2024) identify a comparable burden-capacity gap on the *sectoral* level.

Importantly, this design does not presume identical political or fiscal environments. Rather, it deliberately pairs two structurally similar regulators

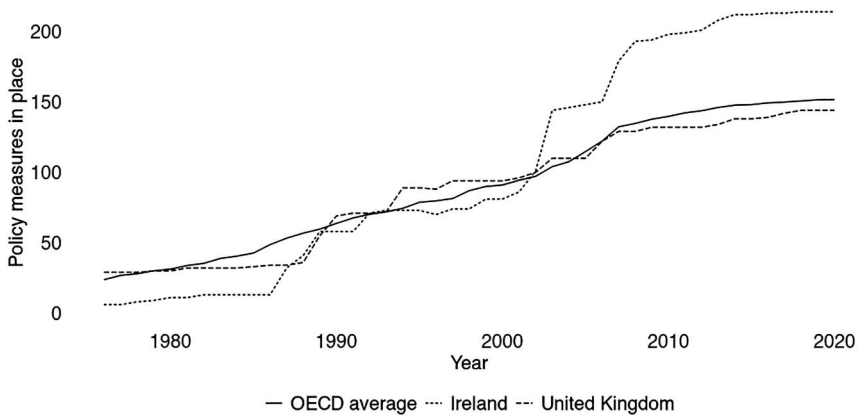


Figure 1. Environmental policy growth in Ireland and the UK since 1976 (compared to OECD average) (Source: Knill *et al.*, 2024).

while allowing contextual pressures – fiscal constraint, shocks such as Brexit, and shifts in political steering – to vary as upstream conditions that may widen or narrow the burden-capacity gap. The comparative leverage thus lies in assessing whether, and how, similar organizational forms confronted with expanding implementation demands diverge in their capacity trajectories and susceptibility to corrosion.

The focus was put on environmental regulation as it is a particularly informative domain, combining high levels of rule growth with technically demanding, monitoring- and inspection-intensive implementation tasks, making workload changes observable and capacity needs comparatively concrete (Adam *et al.*, 2019). For much of the observed period, environmental obligations in both countries were also strongly shaped by EU law, which helps hold constant an important source of mandate expansion (Fernández-i Marín *et al.*, 2025; Knill, 2001). Brexit then constitutes an external shock for the EA: although politically triggered, its analytically relevant feature is the sudden repatriation of implementation responsibilities onto the agency's portfolio without commensurate capacity transfer. While Brexit is context-specific, it serves analytically as a stress test for the theory: it helps trace whether a sudden, externally induced workload surge –when not matched by sustained capacity building – accelerates the institutionalization of coping and triggers the self-reinforcing dynamics of organizational corrosion.

Data collection

To analyze the relationship between implementation load and resource dynamics, the study examines three variables: the annual budget, the size

of the workforce, and the number of policies assigned to the organizational portfolio of each agency. Resource data was sourced from publicly available annual reports and accounts of both the EA and the EPA. To measure workload, the analysis does not assume that either agency implements environmental policy in its entirety. Instead, it quantifies only those policy elements that translate into statutory tasks for the respective regulator – i.e., legislative provisions that designate the EA or EPA (alone or jointly with other bodies) as the competent authority responsible for implementation activities such as permitting, monitoring, inspection, enforcement, reporting, or coordination. Workload data was constructed by coding relevant national legislation and mapping each policy to its designated implementer(s), thereby identifying the subset of environmental policy that loads onto each agency's implementation portfolio (see Appendix A.1 for coding rules and the implementer mapping). This approach documents not only the introduction of new tasks but also rare instances of dismantlement, providing a detailed account of how each agency's assigned responsibilities evolved over time (see [Figure 1](#)).

To further understand the dynamics of resource allocation, a series of 28 interviews were conducted with professionals in the environmental sectors of both countries, details of which are presented in Appendix A.2. To capture the procedural dimension of organizational corrosion, the sample targeted staffers with long tenure at the respective agencies: Irish participants averaged 23 years of service, while English interviewees averaged 20 years, some having been at the agencies since their creation. These interviews not only verified that policy increases led to workload expansions requiring additional resources but were central in determining whether an organization is in fact overloaded by accumulating tasks and whether it has impacted the organization beyond mere implementation outputs. To corroborate the interview findings and enhance the accuracy of the data, secondary sources such as benchmarking documents from national governments and international organizations like the OECD were reviewed, alongside media reports concerning the activities of the agencies studied. This comprehensive approach ensured the factual accuracy of the information and confirmed the adequate reflection of the resourcing practices within these organizations.

Divergent dynamics: contrasting developments between the EA and the EPA

Despite earlier sectoral and organization-specific indicators suggesting a high level of similarity between the environmental agencies of both Ireland and the UK, actual dynamics concerning resource allocation and task increases differ markedly. One might expect a uniform experience given the comparable size of the sectoral burden capacity gap, yet the real situations of the

two agencies deviate significantly from such expectations: The EPA exemplifies an almost ideal case where no burden capacity gap can be observed as increases in the organization's implementation portfolio are effectively compensated continuously. In contrast, the EA exhibits a similar pattern up until 2010 only. Afterwards however, a clearly visible burden capacity gap emerges where resource and workload trends diverge. [Figures 2 and 3](#) provide a standardized view on the development of budget, staff numbers, and policies allocated to the respective organization's portfolio.

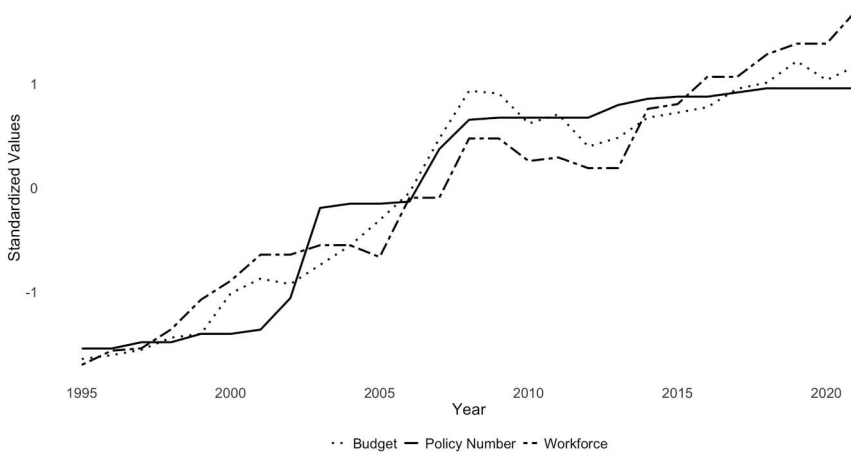


Figure 2. Development of budget, number of tasks, and workforce of the EPA in Ireland since 1995.

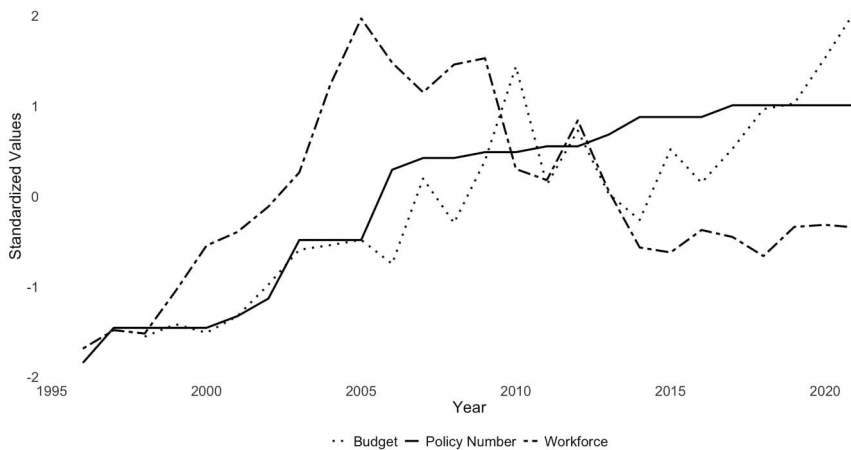


Figure 3. Development of budget, number of tasks, and workforce of the EA in England since 1995.

The EA – an agency affected by high levels of organizational corrosion

The EA provides a particularly instructive case for tracing the stages of organizational corrosion. Analytically, its trajectory can be divided into three periods that map onto the conceptual framework developed above: (i) a non-corrosive stage prior to 2010, in which mandate expansions were broadly matched by resources; (ii) a shift into the first stage of corrosion after 2010, when austerity created a sustained reliance on compensatory measures yet intermittent recovery remained possible; and (iii) a transition into the second stage after Brexit, when new responsibilities were added without a durable restoration of core capacity so that recovery windows effectively disappeared and coping became the status quo.

Prior to 2010, the EA generally demonstrated a robust alignment between workload and organizational resources, with no significant burden–capacity gap observable. Consistent with *Conjecture (A)*, mandate expansions in this period were absorbed largely through routine adjustment and existing slack rather than through sustained compensatory coping: interviewees describe additional demands as being accompanied by commensurate resourcing, leaving little need for persistent overtime, emergency redeployments, deferred work, or policy triage, and without signs of systematic backlog accumulation or enduring capability loss. Interview evidence confirms that major expansions linked to EU directives in the late 1990s and mid-2000s were largely resourced:

There was a big increase of work and requirements, probably the late 90s, when things like the urban wastewater treatment directive, a lot of the environment legislation came [from the European level]. But that was largely resourced. The next increase was probably the time of implementation of the water frame directive, Kind of mid 2000s when it took off and [...] that attracted quite a lot of significant additional resources again (UK04)

From 2010 onwards, the EA's trajectory shifts into the first stage of organizational corrosion. This period aligns closely with *Conjecture (B)*: the change of government and the onset of austerity disrupted the earlier co-movement between tasks and resources and introduced a persistent pressure to 'do more with less', such that compensatory coping became a regular instrument for meeting routine demands, yet recovery remained possible in partial and temporary form. As one interviewee put it, 'We got the Tory government and its austerity policy. For most of the time I've been here, it's been "how on earth are we going to do our job with resources that are diminishing in real-term value"' (UK01). The agency increasingly relied on compensatory measures – overtime, repeated redeployments, and the drawdown of contingencies – to maintain core outputs, while slack resources were progressively depleted. Importantly, however, the period still contained partial recovery

attempts: the initial austerity-driven cuts attracted criticism and were at times followed by temporary funding uplifts. These reversals provided short-lived relief and intermittent stabilization, but they did not re-establish a stable long-run alignment between core tasks and core capacity, leaving the agency vulnerable to further shocks.

The austerity measures imposed across the public sector disproportionately impacted the EA, with deeper cuts exacerbated by the Cameron government's preference for a more business-friendly regulatory approach (O'Brien, 2024). This financial respite following stakeholder criticism was short-lived, and the agency's budget resumed its downward trajectory shortly thereafter. The situation took another turn in 2016, prompted by the UK's decision to exit the European Union. Brexit constituted an external shock that repatriated responsibilities and expanded the EA's task load, thereby marking the transition from the first into the second stage of organizational corrosion as recovery windows effectively disappeared. The EA was charged with new responsibilities that previously fell under EU regulatory frameworks:

We used to be part of the EU emissions trading system. We've had to create the UK emissions scheme and there are several of those. And then the Environment Act, which is also really a consequence of EU exit, introduced various new duties, local nature recovery strategies, biodiversity net gain, waste reforms (UK01)

This new mandate required enhanced budgetary provisions to support the expanded scope of activities. Yet, consistent with *Conjecture (C)*, post-Brexit resourcing did not restore baseline capacity in a way that would enable recovery. While the EA witnessed fluctuations in budget allocations – often tied to specific new duties – these increases did not consistently align with staffing levels or rebuild core functions. Despite intermittent boosts in staff numbers, overall staffing trends did not mirror the expansion of responsibilities, remaining at levels comparable to those five years after the agency's creation. Further compounding the workforce challenge was a qualitative shift in the composition of funding, highlighted during an interview:

We've been given new money for new activities. So overall the amount of money we've got is significantly more. But our historic core functions have not been given new money. [...] Since the austerity that followed the financial crisis in 2008, our core funding has been eroded both in absolute terms but also of course in real terms because of wage and other inflation over that period. [...] Some of our core historic functions, monitoring environments, enforcing regulation are things that have to be funded by grant in aid from government. [...] The squeeze has been on the ongoing core environmental functions (UK01)

This reveals a qualitative disconnect between task allocation and resourcing and, crucially, helps explain why the EA could no longer enter periods

of recovery. While the agency receives periodic funding uplifts for new tasks, these injections do not replenish depleted core capacity or compensate for earlier cuts; as one interviewee notes, ‘when we get additional resources, it doesn’t come to offset a period of cuts. It comes to implement a new policy’ (UK04). A large share of this funding is also allocated via grants-in-aid, which are temporary by design. As a result, resources expand in short-lived bursts tied to new initiatives, while the baseline functions that would enable recovery – routine monitoring, enforcement, and institutional maintenance – continue to erode: ‘You get enough resources to start. But then when the political eye moves on to something else, the grace kind of whistles away, what’s their interest in funding is this shiny new thing that comes along after that’ (UK01). This funding structure therefore prevents the organization from returning to a stable operational baseline: the permanent accumulation of workload is met with temporary and often inadequate budgetary adjustments, so coping cannot be unwound and becomes the default.

Unsurprisingly, the agency’s dire resource situation forced the agency to engage in policy triage extensively to manage its overwhelming workload (Zink *et al.*, 2025). This approach has led to significant trade-off decisions, as detailed by one staff member who described the agency’s modus operandi as ‘a kind of a constant form of triage’ (UK03). The agency’s coping mechanisms include the ‘incident triage project’, an informal initiative aimed at prioritizing high-impact environmental incidents to alleviate the workload of inspectors, thus neglecting lower-impact issues (Salvidge, 2022). This resource-strapped situation is illustrated by alarming statistics: a Freedom of Information request in 2020 revealed that the average farm would only be inspected once every 263 years (McGlone, 2024).

Staff feedback likewise reflects a grim reality where the agency is perceived as ineffective, with one employee noting, resources have ‘been cut back to such an extent that they cannot do their jobs and the regulator is no longer a deterrent to polluters’ (Salvidge, 2022). Another staff member highlighted the ongoing erosion of the agency’s capabilities:

You have to run just to stand still. [It is] harder to sustain the progress that we’ve made, let alone make further progress [...] Resources have eroded over time. So we have had to reduce the amount of the enforcement work that we do, for example, and the long-term consequence of that is that there’s more illegal activity that we aren’t able to address (UK01).

A former staff member even claimed that the agency overlooks the worsening condition of rivers on purpose: ‘The attitude from the higher-ups was really a sense of, “If we did a better job at finding pollution, there would be more of an expectation that we would then have to do something about it”’ (O’Brien, 2024). The consequence of these implementation failures is stark, with a government report indicating that out of 40 legally binding

environmental targets post-Brexit, only four are on track to be met (Office for Environmental Protection, 2024). This scenario highlights a severe erosion of both preventive and reactive environmental protection measures at the EA and is seen as one of the central long-term challenges the organization is confronted with:

‘the biggest risk at the minute is that you’re not able to project five, ten years ahead. You can’t spot trends until they become issues, and you end up not having the right strategies in place. You’re just fighting the consequences’ (UK04).

This lack of forward planning is particularly critical in the context of climate change, where the agency’s ability to move proactively has not only stalled but regressed. ‘Not only are we not prepared’, an employee lamented, ‘but progress has slipped back in the last five years. It’s pretty distressing when that happens on your watch’ (UK03).

The monitoring capacity of the organization has been notably compromised: in the span from 2018 to 2023, inspections of entities licensed to abstract water from rivers and aquifers plummeted from 4539 to just 2303 (Salvidge & Hosea, 2023). This decrease has effectively left the agency blind to the actual volumes being extracted, severely hindering enforcement and regulatory compliance. Even when potential hazards are reported, the EA’s capacity to investigate is so diminished that staff members have noted action would not be taken ‘unless there were dead fish floating everywhere’ (Salvidge, 2022).

The abysmal gap between resources and workload has severely impacted the EA’s organizational structure, particularly affecting its workforce, putting the agency in the second stage of organizational corrosion. A long-serving staff member lamented the current state of morale, describing it as ‘the lowest I’ve ever known it and I’ve been in the firm for 27 years’ (Capurro, 2023). This bleak outlook was further substantiated by a 2021 internal survey, which highlighted a decline in job satisfaction and a rise in workplace stress (O’Brien, 2024). The turnover rate reached a critical point in 2017/2018 when approximately a fifth of the organization’s staff departed, resulting in a net loss of 1,076 positions. This mass exodus has significantly depleted the agency’s reservoir of expertise, as one employee pointed out, ‘deep expertise is definitely thinner on the ground these days’ (UK01).

The profound staff turnover and dire replacement rates have not only decreased the EA’s operational performance but also severely compromised its ability to maintain, let alone build, capacities. As described by a team member, the loss is significant: ‘Just in my team alone we’ve lost almost 100 years worth of experience in the past three years’ (Capurro, 2023). The depletion of institutional knowledge systematically eroded the agency’s collective memory, skills, and expertise, piece by piece. This ‘organizational

dementia' fundamentally undermined not only mechanisms of organizational learning but also its ability to monitor ongoing risks, anticipate new challenges, and respond to emergencies. Moreover, recruiting new talent has become increasingly difficult:

We used to get hundreds of people applying for jobs. Everybody wanted to work for the Environment Agency because they were doing such good work. And now we're lucky if we get three people applying for each job (Capurro, 2023).

The worsening of the public image is also reflected in increasing blame-shifting activities both by policymakers and the general public. A notable instance occurred during flooding in 2014. The government criticized the EA for its delayed response in dredging a river – an action widely recognized by experts as ineffective for flood management. Eric Pickles, the then communities secretary, publicly blamed the agency, questioning its expertise on national television: 'We were dealing with the Environment Agency', he remarked. 'We thought we were dealing with experts' (O'Brien, 2024). Furthermore, the organization's image among the general public has worsened significantly, with staffers having to take steps to protect themselves:

Staff will also get some not very nice personal attacks on them through social media or in public meetings. You get that from the industry, traditionally. But the fact that the public will also... Staff have to take steps to protect themselves, their identity, their safety. (UK03)

The negative public perception has profound implications for the EA as an organization. Externally, diminished trust constrains its ability to secure political backing and justify resource allocations, further limiting opportunities to attract qualified personnel. Internally, persistent negative portrayals significantly erode staff morale, intensifying employees' perception that they are part of a failing institution. This combination of external criticism and internal demoralization deepens the organization's state of corrosion, creating a reinforcing cycle where reputation damage undermines resource advocacy, exacerbates operational difficulties, and accelerates the erosion of institutional effectiveness.

The EPA – avoiding advanced corrosion

The dynamics within the Irish EPA present a clear contrast to cases experiencing organizational corrosion, demonstrating instead remarkable organizational resilience. Read through the lens of the stage framework, the EPA's trajectory aligns predominantly with *Conjecture (A)* –i.e., expanding demands are typically absorbed through routine adjustment and available slack, with little need for sustained compensatory coping and no systematic drift toward chronic backlogs, routinized triage, or enduring capability loss.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the EPA's trends in budget, staffing, and policy portfolio. Until the 2008 financial crisis, the EPA showed a strong alignment between expanding policy mandates and proportionate increases in resources, ensuring sufficient capacity to handle growing workloads. Notably, significant staffing increases occurred in 2006 and 2008, directly responding to new environmental legislation introduced in 2004.

At the same time, interviewees reported that minor delays occasionally occurred between new task allocations and resource provisioning (IRE01; IRE02; IRE06). These short-lived episodes are consistent with *Conjecture (B)*: the organization temporarily relied on compensatory effort to bridge a lag between burdens and resources, but resource adjustments subsequently caught up, allowing slack to be replenished and preventing coping from becoming routinized. Interviewees emphasized that discussions about necessary resources were routine and that such lags caused only limited disruption (IRE01; IRE02; IRE06).

Despite austerity measures introduced following the 2008 financial crisis, the EPA avoided sliding into sustained corrosion, unlike the English regulator. Between 2010 and 2013, a national hiring freeze temporarily stalled resource growth, but crucially, the policy load did not significantly increase during this period, allowing the EPA to remain close to the equilibrium formulated in *Conjecture (A)* without resorting to extensive coping strategies. Even after austerity, despite greater governmental caution in expanding resources, the EPA gradually regained momentum, aligning incremental budget and staffing increases closely with subsequent expansions of its policy responsibilities – again consistent with the notion that short-term strain did not harden into a persistent burden–capacity mismatch.

This sustained equilibrium between workload and resources has effectively shielded the EPA from advanced organizational corrosion. Low levels of implementation deficits and minimal reliance on coping mechanisms such as policy triage underscore this balance (Zink *et al.*, 2025). Implementation delays were primarily attributed to minor lags in resource allocation rather than systemic shortfalls, indicating that resource needs have generally been met effectively (IRE02; IRE04; IRE06). This observation was corroborated by the OECD, highlighting the agency's strong performance and minimal reliance on triage strategies despite significant expansion to its mandate (OECD, 2020, 14).

The EPA's resilience is further reinforced by robust internal practices that emphasizes response capacity, anticipation, and continuous organizational learning. Staff regularly rotate between units to build broad operational knowledge, enhancing responsiveness and adaptability during periods of heightened demand (IRE02). The agency also invests consistently in staff development, dedicating a substantial portion of its budget to continuous professional development. This investment is viewed internally as vital for

maintaining staff morale, motivation, and retention, serving as an alternative to promotions for rewarding high performers and fostering commitment (OECD, 2020). Moreover, the EPA also shows signs of a rally around the flag effect: when additional tasks are added to the organizational workload, 'there's always an excitement and an energy around building new systems to respond [...] and they [the staff] do embrace the challenge' (IRE02).

Consequently, the EPA enjoys a notably stable workforce characterized by very low turnover rates. Many employees remain with the agency long-term, providing sustained institutional memory and deep expertise (OECD, 2020: 74; IR01; IR206). Recruitment processes consistently attract numerous qualified candidates, reflecting the agency's strong external reputation and attractiveness as an employer (OECD, 2020: 21).

The EPA's proactive investment in advanced monitoring and risk anticipation further bolsters its capacity to manage increasing demands. For instance, the agency developed an AI-based monitoring system capable of predicting sewage plant failures, optimizing inspection schedules, and enhancing efficiency (IRE02). The EPA's culture of continuous improvement, underpinned by a commitment to data-driven innovation and organizational efficiency, significantly contributes to its enduring operational robustness.

Externally, the EPA maintains an excellent reputation, characterized by scientific rigor, data reliability, and extensive expertise at both national and European levels (OECD, 2020: 14). Policymakers regularly seek the EPA's input on legislative matters, both formally and informally, underscoring its trusted advisory role.

The EA and the EPA: two contrasting cases

The divergent trajectories of the EA and the EPA demonstrate how differing organizational conditions translate policy accumulation into corrosion or, alternatively, allow agencies to absorb mounting demands without corrosive drift. Both agencies confronted substantial policy growth over the past two decades, yet their experience of the burden-capacity gap – and their organizational response to it – diverged sharply. Austerity and Brexit are not alternative explanations competing with the burden-capacity gap hypothesis; they are macro-political developments that compressed resources and expanded demands, producing the antecedent condition under which corrosion could unfold. Importantly, austerity was not unique to England: Ireland too experienced post-crisis fiscal consolidation and a hiring freeze between 2010 and 2013. The empirical question is therefore not whether politics mattered, but whether political choices translated into a *sustained* mismatch between burdens and capacity, and whether such a mismatch then generated the organizational mechanisms associated with corrosion.

Here, the analytical separation between the burden-capacity gap (antecedent) and organizational corrosion (response) becomes empirically consequential: Both agencies operate in systems where resourcing decisions are made externally – by Defra and the Treasury in England, by the Department of Public Expenditure and the Oireachtas in Ireland – such that neither controls the size of its own budget or the scope of its mandate. Within those parameters, however, agencies retain latitude over how they organize work, develop their workforce, and present themselves to political principals. The contrast between the two cases therefore lies in the interplay of two distinct levels: the external translation of political choices into sustained or short-lived gaps, and the internal organizational response to whatever gap emerges.

In the case of the EA, the onset of austerity after 2010 and the post-2016 repatriation of EU tasks produced a sustained burden-capacity gap that the agency had no power to close on its own. Internally, the response progressively narrowed: as compensatory coping became routine and slack was depleted, the practices that might have buffered the gap – forward planning, monitoring innovation, retention of expertise – themselves came under pressure. Triage hardened from crisis management into routine, and the loss of expertise and institutional memory further reduced the organization's ability to absorb further strain. The EA thus illustrates the full corrosion sequence: an externally produced gap that was neither short-lived nor closed, combined with an internal response that, over time, lost the capacity to absorb it.

The EPA provides the contrasting case the framework's necessity-but-not-sufficiency logic anticipates. The Irish regulator, too, faced sustained policy expansion and was not immune from fiscal pressure: the 2010–2013 hiring freeze briefly destabilized the alignment between resources and tasks, and interviewees report recurring short lags between new mandates and resource provisioning. Two features distinguish the Irish trajectory. First, these gaps were typically short-lived: mandate growth slowed during the freeze, and once austerity eased, incremental resource increases broadly tracked subsequent expansions of the policy portfolio, so a persistent gap did not emerge. Second, where short-term gaps did appear, the EPA's internal practices – cross-unit rotation, sustained staff development, anticipatory monitoring, and a strong reputation that supported continued political backing – buffered the organization from sliding into routinized coping. These practices resonate with scholarship on organizational resilience and mission mystique (Goodsell, 2010) and with recent work on mission-driven bureaucrats (Elston & Zhang, 2025; Honig, 2024). The EPA's experience thus shows that brief gaps do not in themselves produce corrosion: where gaps are closed before they become structural, and where internal practices preserve absorptive capacity, agencies can pass through periods of fiscal restraint without sliding into corrosive routines.

Taken together, the cases support the conceptual claim that a persistent burden-capacity gap is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for organizational corrosion. The English case shows the full sequence at work; the Irish case demonstrates that brief gaps – even under broadly similar macro-political pressures – need not generate corrosion when closed in time and absorbed by capacity-preserving internal practices. The next analytical step, which lies beyond this article but is opened up by the framework, is to systematically investigate the mediators that govern how organizations translate burden-capacity gaps into corrosion, and the conditions under which such translation can be slowed, halted, or reversed.

Conclusion

This article introduced organizational corrosion as a lens for understanding how chronic mismatches between policy burdens and administrative resources can precipitate incremental, self-reinforcing decline in public agencies. Building on insights from organizational theory and public administration, it argued that what begins as temporary compensation – overtime, task shifting, and informal workarounds – can harden into routinized coping practices that erode expertise, weaken institutional memory, and degrade morale, producing implementation shortfalls alongside a gradual loss of adaptive capacity and legitimacy.

The comparative analysis of Ireland's EPA and England's EA illustrates these dynamics in two otherwise similar organizational designs. Despite parallel waves of new environmental mandates, the Irish EPA largely avoided a sustained burden-capacity gap and, where short-term gaps appeared, internal practices such as cross-unit rotation, staff development, and anticipatory monitoring buffered the organization from sliding into corrosive routines. The English EA, by contrast, shifted from a pre-2010 period broadly consistent with *Conjecture (A)* into corrosion after 2010 as austerity intensified reliance on compensatory effort, and then into advanced levels after Brexit when additional responsibilities were layered onto an already strained organization without durable replenishment of core capacity. In this latter period, coping – especially triage – became routinized alongside capability loss and declining stakeholder trust.

Importantly, the conceptual contribution is not limited to environmental policy. The mechanism should travel to other domains that combine strong rule growth with implementation intensity – such as financial regulation, food safety, workplace safety, migration and asylum administration, or data protection – where expanding mandates and high operational demands can generate persistent burden-capacity gaps and comparable coping dynamics.

At the same time, the empirical contribution is bounded, and the framework opens more questions than this article can answer. The cases provide

traction for the progression of corrosion by linking sustained burden-capacity gaps to the institutionalization of coping and its signatures, but they are less informative about *variation* in how organizations translate gaps into corrosion – and even less informative about reversal. Future research should therefore investigate the mediators that govern this translation (workforce practices, leadership, reputational resources, organizational culture), and study ‘turnaround’ episodes in which capacity replenishment is sustained enough to de-institutionalize coping routines.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for engaging with this article in depth and providing excellent and constructive feedback. I also want to express my gratitude to Christoph Knill and Yves Steinebach for their continuous support, as well as to Koen Verhoest and the participants of the PPG seminar at the University of Antwerp for valuable comments on an earlier draft. Finally, I thank Steffen Hurka for timely words of encouragement. Claude Sonnet 4 for was used for language editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the European Research Council under Horizon 2020 Grant 101177315.

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