Guest editorial: Setting the scene for street-level bureaucracy in different Souths: opportunities and challenges in context-based approaches

1. Introduction

The street-level bureaucracy (SLB) theory introduced by Lipsky (2010[1980]) more than 40 years ago has had considerable recognition from the scientific community, especially in Northern Europe and in the USA. These are the contexts in which most of the studies and research about street-level bureaucrats' discretion have been conducted. The adoption of the SLB theory in the Mediterranean countries, Eastern Europe, Asia, South America and Africa is still in its beginning (Lotta *et al.*, 2022). Only in recent times scholars have begun to highlight the potentiality of SLB theory to study the impacts of neoliberalism, economic crisis, population impoverishment, migratory processes, the digitisation of welfare, the transformations in the labour market, supranational development programmes (e.g. NextGenEU, and United Nations' Millennium Development Goals) and the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on frontline workers' work practices in underexplored contexts. This is the case of Brazil (Eiró, 2019; Lotta and Kuhlmann, 2021), Greece (Exadaktylos *et al.*, 2021; Witcher, 2021), Italy (Barberis *et al.*, 2019; Leonardi *et al.*, 2021; Dallara and Lacchei, 2021; Raspanti and Saruis, 2022), Mexico (Ramirez, 2021), Nigeria (Ukeje *et al.*, 2021), Spain (Guidi, 2020) and South Africa (Gaede, 2016).

The Special Issue *Setting the Scene for Street-Level Bureaucracy in the Global South: Opportunities and challenges in context-based approaches* gathers papers that stress the importance of the institutional context to explain street-level bureaucrats' decision to deal with clients. While a context-based approach to study how public administration works is not new, this Special Issue contributes to the SLB literature by shedding light on countries characterised by weak institutions, high levels of social inequalities, clientelism, different levels of trust in institutions and low state policy capacity. These are often contexts in which the relationship between institutions and potential organisational conflicts are dealt with according to configurations that differ from those of the more familiar contexts. Following Parnell and Robinson (2012) – who highlight a tendency to characterise cities in the global north as crucibles of modernity, and cities in the global south as objects in need of development, whose representations emphasise poverty, culture and tradition, whose population as seen as deficient or passive – we reaffirm our distance as an approach developmentalism that posits development as a normative position to which some states, should aspire (Peake and Rieker, 2013). We argue that the study of policy implementation in different and less studied contexts enriches the debate on SLB theory in important ways and can contribute to the advancement of the field.

2. Street-level bureaucracy and different Souths: the contexts for a context-based approach

The uptake of SLB theory in the areas that make up the different Souths of the world is still low. Only in the last three years has a debate about these contexts begun to emerge (Lotta *et al.*, 2022; Lipsky, 2021).
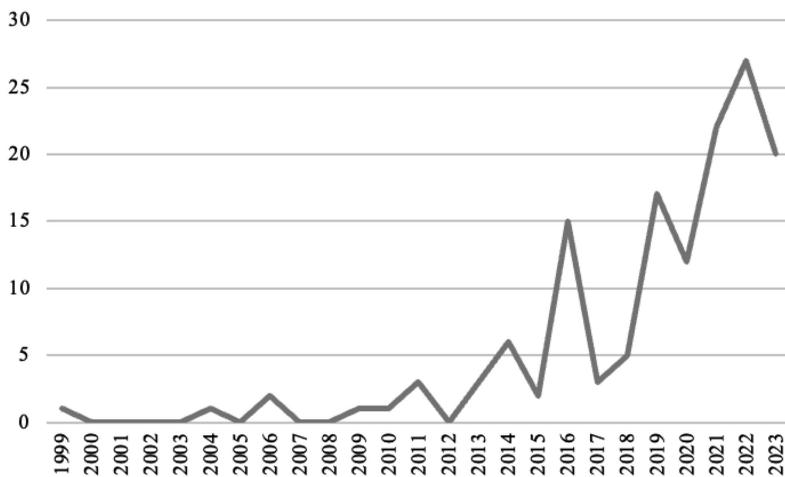
By the term "Different Souths" we refer to the countries of Southern Europe, South America, Africa and Asia, i.e. all those contexts that have been little studied from this perspective and that would be useful for studying the delivery of public services. Indeed, these contexts differ from North American and North European contexts in terms of the nature of welfare (Barberis *et al.*, 2019), the role of the state, citizens' trust in public administration (Lotta *et al.*, 2022), the degree of digitisation (Bellini and Raspanti, 2023) and the functioning of public administration.

This editorial paper explores the implications of the increasing mobilisation of the analytical framework of the SLB approach, presenting the paper collected for the issue. We illustrate how widespread SLB theory is in the various southern countries and the main themes that are considered in these studies. For example, what are the characteristics of SLB discretionary work in contexts characterised by fragmented welfare systems? What are the challenges of applying the street approach in different Souths of the world? The paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of recent progress in the SLB literature, with a focus on Southern countries. To give a picture.

We searched for contributions that contained the following words in the abstract and/or keywords and/or title: "street-level bureaucrat* OR street-level-bureaucracy AND development country* OR Italy OR Africa OR Mexico OR Thailand OR Brazil OR China OR Greece OR Spain OR Argentina OR South America OR India" in the Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science, Researchgate. Several products were selected: articles, book chapters, editorials in Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and English. The search was carried out on 26 January 2024. A total of 145 documents limited to the field of social sciences were identified. From these 145 documents, metadata regarding the year of publication, the geographical origin and the topic studied were meta-analysed. The analysis does not include the four contributions already published in 2024.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of SLB theoretical approach in the different Souths over the last 21 years. It seems significant that, despite an initial increase in contributions in 2019 (19 contributions), 57.4% of the contributions in these areas are from 2020, with 20 contributions in 2023, 27 in 2022, 22 in 2021 and 12 in 2020. As can be seen from the abstracts, the COVID19 emergency seems to have highlighted the importance of street-level decisions for policy

Figure 1.
Selected papers by
year, absolute values
(1999–2023)

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

implementation, all the more so when emergencies such as the pandemic hit places already characterised by resource scarcity. Figure 2 shows the academic provenance of the 141 papers that met our query.

Most of the papers that examine how SLBs implement policies in the different southern countries come from Anglo-Saxon countries. A total of 35 papers come from the USA, nine from the United Kingdom and five from Australia: 35% of the contributions. There is very little street-level research on the territories of the different Global Souths, published by institutions from these territories. The most productive countries in this respect are Brazil (20 papers) and China (19). The Anglo-Saxon contributions on this topic focus mainly on China (12) and India (11). 5 papers deal with the Brazilian case, 4 with the Mexican case and 3 with Africa.

We now turn to the main issues investigated using the SLB in a contextual-based approach. If social inclusion and fairness in service delivery is a debated issue within street-level theory (Lipsky, 1980; Dubois, 2010), this seems to be the common element of street-level research in areas of extreme poverty such as Brazil, Mexico and India. On the other hand, in the street-level contributions on Africa and China, the issue of corruption of SLBs seems to be one of the main problems to be faced when studying the discretion of public actors. Another emerging theme of great interest is that of the low status of SLBs: working in social work, or more generally in the public sector, is not at all a privilege in most of the countries of our analysis. In fact, they are low-paid workers whose work is not considered prestigious (Saruis, 2015; Lotta *et al.*, 2022). This makes it interesting to investigate not only how bureaucratic relations and information asymmetries change, but also what dynamics are created within the organisation, where strong inequalities of treatment between management and street-level workers emerge.

3. Setting the scene: the reasons for a special issue
The reason why it seemed necessary to start a dialogue at the street-level, directly involving territories of different Souths, is to adapt and to extend the SLB theory to their different

Figure 2.
Selected papers for the top 10 countries, absolute values (1999–2023)

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

characteristics. Indeed, one limitation of the research analysed is the persistence of a normative view of these worlds and, consequently, an application of street-level theory that takes little account of the particularities of these contexts and their bureaucracies, which fit poorly into the Weberian steel cage. To read these places and their administrations as "developing" or "lagging behind" or in need of improvement to reach the standards of Anglo-Saxon or Northern European contexts seems to us to be the main limitation of street-level research. We do not believe that it is the intention of the street-level perspective to make them feel that they are lagging behind in adapting to a supposed standard model. Therefore, it is important from the perspective of self-reflexivity to focus on this aspect: with our research are we more or less implicitly proposing standards to which some countries should conform?

Rather, the analysis of the different Souths allows us to highlight the asymmetries of power between different territories also pointed out by other authors that choose to refer to Global South with the intention of making a shift from a central focus on development or cultural difference towards an emphasis on geopolitical power relations (Dados and Connell, 2012). At the same time, this Special Issue aims to interrogate dynamics that can be found in both the global North and the global South, such as the privatisation of state responsibility for social infrastructure, including water, schools, health care and waste collection (Miraftab, 2013). This has resulted in much of the responsibility for collective care falling back on women, a process described by Bakker (2003) as a re-privatisation, whereby the responsibility for social care is transferred from public institutions to the private sector and the domestic sphere of the home and family, especially women, especially racialised women.

According to Eiró and Lotta (2024), who identify two key factors from the Global South that are often underestimated: "the high degree of social inequalities that fundamentally affect state–citizen relations, and the ways in which the state itself reflects and reproduces these inequalities", the aim of our special issue, and of us as researchers on the subject, is to focus on the functioning patterns of the bureaucracies of these territories and their particularities, and then to read their discretionary and coercive space. Eiró and Lotta (2024) affirm that their critique represents "a step towards decolonising the field and highlighting the conceptual contributions that studies from and of the Global South can offer". To this point, we would like to add a reflection on the significance of the denaturalisation of Global North as an alleged standard, and as something taken for granted (Zerubavel, 2018).

The papers collected in the special issue of the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* shed light on the main topics that could constitute a frame for the analysis of public administration functioning in Global South countries.

4. Outline of the special issue papers
The purpose of this section is to present the papers collected in this special issue, in order to set the scene of SLB theory in different parts of the world.

The study by Barbara Da Roit and Maurizio Busacca proposes the concept of "street-level netocracy" to focus on the consequences of policy network participation on social workers' practices. The authors analyse a public-private network-based regional family policy in Italy. Social workers engage in network-building practices as part of their mandate by acting as brokers between public and private providers and stakeholders, such as schools, churches and non-profit organisations. In the case study, network construction and maintenance actions significantly reduce social workers' time interacting with clients, thus becoming social workers' primary tasks.

In her paper, Susanna Pagiotti compares social service provision in rural and urban areas in Central Italy. Rural and urban areas differ regarding economic, organisational and relational resources. In the rural area, frontline workers deal with resource inadequacy and

precarious working conditions since they are employees of third-sector organisations. In the urban context, social workers could rely on within-organisation resources, i.e. multidisciplinary teamwork and collaborative relationships with local stakeholders, e.g. third-sector and religious associations, to manage complex cases. Pagiotti also highlights that the absence of peer support structures in rural settings potentially widens discretionary spaces and responsibilities for frontline workers. At the same time, the unavailability of other resources – such as informational ones – risks stifling the autonomy of the social worker by entailing situations of subalternity with other actors who are actually in charge of ensuring the social protection system, such as the political officials or the third sector As a result, social workers' insulation and precarity negatively affect service provision in rural areas.

The paper by Radhika Gore focusses on primary care doctors' strategies to deal with non-communicable diseases (NCDs), mainly hypertension and diabetes, in India. NCDs are not treated in municipal clinics even though they are within doctors' mandates. Contrary to other SLB studies that explain service rationing with excessive workload, doctors under study refuse to treat NCDs to avoid the sociopolitical consequences of clinical uncertainty, which stems from weak support by municipal authorities against patient violence, negative media attention and fragmented healthcare regulation, interviewed doctors say. Primary care doctors are also the target of the paper by Roberto Giosa. In particular, Giosa focusses on the management of patients with mental disorders by general practitioners in Italy and Spain. This comparative paper stresses the role of the organisational context as an intervening factor in mediating high workloads. In Italy, general practitioners are contracted as self-employed; in Spain, they are full-time dependent employees of multidisciplinary health centres. As a result, Italian general practitioners possess greater autonomy and discretion that ease the management of patients. However, in both cases, general practitioners lacked mental health disorders-specific training, which led to suboptimal treatments. Sergio Sánchez-Castiñera focusses on the role of organisational and professional contexts in affecting the meaning of social assistance in primary social service in Catalonia (Spain). Professional ethos interacts with organisational constraints in affecting how frontline workers define and relate with clients and thus service them. Results show the emergence of three approaches to social assistance clients, namely, the compassionate, the instructor and the enforcer. The paper by Lluis Francesc Peris Cancio and Maria Alexandra Monteiro Mustafá addresses the exceptional context represented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has revealed social services' resilience and adaptability to an exceptional situation in five countries: Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Spain and Sweden. The challenges posed by the pandemic have a number of consequences on social workers' activities. Firstly, it increased SLBs' discretionary spaces since professional guidelines do not indicate how to manage caseloads in such extraordinary circumstances. Social workers improvised new ways to deal with clients. Secondly, solidarity amongst professionals and service managers' resilience drove the reorganisation of service provision at the local level to guarantee workers' health and service prosecution. Eventually, interviewees stated that pandemic-related restrictions constituted an opportunity to get close to their clients as all faced a common challenge. The paper by Achakorn Wongpreedee and Tatchalerm Sudhipongpracha builds on a survey conducted amongst health volunteers in Thailand. Health volunteers are citizens recruited by the government to assist public officials. They are trained as social workers and have discretion in dealing with healthcare facilities' clients. The study demonstrates the role of an organisational dimension, namely transformational leadership by hospital directors, in supporting psychological volunteers' commitment to their duties, thus positively affecting public service motivation.

5. Conclusion: Putting different Souths in the spotlight
In conclusion we can affirm that different political traditions and cultures, as well as the organisational environment, affect frontline workers and the ways in which they influence

policies and their publics. It would be impossible to argue that a particular kind of interaction, involving specific coping strategies, legitimation and relational asymmetries identified in the Global North, is general enough to apply to all street-level organisations, beyond the original context of the theory. Context matters. So, taking SLB theory to different Souths requires an effort of recontextualization. "It demands interpreting observed SLB action as embedded into institutional environments that may radically differ from those seen in North America or Europe" (Lotta *et al.*, 2022, p. 5).

According to our contributions we can propose some concluding reflections. First, different (spatial) contexts lead to different dynamics within a system. This is also the case in welfare systems, which are often characterised by great internal heterogeneity. Taking context as a reference is therefore a good way of reflecting on the inhomogeneity of service realities. When done through the conceptual lens of SLB theory, it is also possible to see how frontline workers experience different margins of discretion and responsibility depending on the context in which they work. The comparative method therefore allows us to bring to light differences that we would not otherwise be able to highlight. An important lowest common denominator of this special issue concerns the quality of work. In fact, the way in which street-level work is perceived has an impact on bureaucratic relations and on the quality of public services. Collected contributions show the importance of the contractual classification of SLBs. In countries where the labour market is characterised by low job rotation (Burroni, 2016), having a contract seems to have a positive impact on their work. On the other hand, the isolation and precariousness of SLBs has a negative impact on the provision of services in rural areas. The problem of resources is then obvious. Staffing and infrastructure shortages make this increasingly difficult to achieve. Street workers therefore tend to adopt strategies that often seek to minimise interaction with users. Finally, another common element in the contributions to this special issue concerns the distribution of responsibilities and the use of decision-making autonomy. Indeed, many contributions show a tendency to distribute responsibility horizontally, by comparing colleagues at the same level or in the same team.

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