Appendix B
Supplementary Interview Methods

Our study is based on 157 anonymous, semi-structured interviews conducted with members of environmental and social agencies across six countries: Denmark (24), Germany (38), Ireland (28), Italy (40), Portugal (15), and the UK (12). >Appendix C provides a detailed breakdown of interviews by country, sector, and organization. This section of the Appendix A offers additional insights into our data collection process, including our sampling approach, interview methodology, and the coding procedure used to analyze responses (following Bleich and Pekkanen, 2013).

To ensure ethical research standards, we obtained informed and voluntary consent from all interviewees. Their statements have been fully anonymized in accordance with data protection guidelines, as detailed in the following sections. The entire interview process was reviewed and approved by a relevant ethical board, ensuring compliance with best practices in research ethics.

A.1 Sampling Process

Our sampling strategy was purposive and guided by theoretical considerations. In each country, we targeted members of central environmental and social agencies involved in policy implementation. The sample frame included individuals whose contact details were publicly available online.

To recruit interviewees, we initially reached out via email. If no response was received, we followed up with a friendly reminder two weeks later or attempted contact by phone. The interviews were conducted remotely via phone or Zoom between April 21, 2021, and August 1, 2023. The duration of the interviews varied between 25 and 125 minutes, with an average length of approximately 50 minutes.

We conducted anonymous interviews for both research and ethical reasons. First, discussing triage and prioritization practices in the face

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of high implementation burdens is a sensitive topic for implementers. These practices often run counter to their professional ethos and may imply that, to some extent, they have "failed" to fully implement policies as intended. Ensuring anonymity increased the likelihood that interviewees would speak candidly about the difficult decisions they face.

Second, we anticipated that political principals could potentially use interview findings to target and blame specific individuals who admitted to being unable to meet the full expectations of their roles. This concern was validated during the interview process, as several participants sought additional reassurances that their statements would remain anonymous before proceeding. To further protect interviewees, we opted against providing full transcripts, as these could facilitate their identification.

We contacted potential interviewees via email, inviting them to participate in a study on "*Policy Implementation in the European Union*." By framing the study in broad and neutral terms, we aimed to minimize self-selection bias. Had we explicitly stated that our research focused on the impact of increased workloads on policy implementation, it is likely that respondents who were particularly affected by this issue would have been more inclined to participate, skewing our sample.

At the same time, we ensured that our approach remained ethically sound, as our description was not misleading. The relationship between workload and implementation effectiveness is naturally encompassed within the broader theme of policy implementation in the European Union (EU), aligning with how respondents themselves might perceive their roles and challenges. This strategy allowed us to maintain methodological rigor while respecting ethical considerations in participant recruitment.

A.2 Interview Strategy

We conducted the interviews via telephone or video conference and recorded them, with the recordings securely stored on a protected university server. To ensure that interviewees felt comfortable and willing to share candid insights, we assured them of their anonymity before the interview. This approach was intended to foster openness, particularly when discussing potentially sensitive topics.

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At the start of each interview, we introduced the study in broad terms to avoid priming respondents or steering their responses in a particular direction. Our initial questions were deliberately open-ended, allowing interviewees to describe their working conditions and challenges from their own perspective. More sensitive topics – such as coping mechanisms employed to manage excessive workloads – were introduced later in the conversation, after interviewees had become more comfortable. This sequencing helped build rapport and encouraged more forthright discussions on difficult aspects of their roles.

The open-ended questions we asked included the following:

- What are your specific responsibilities within the organization?
- What is your professional background? Is that a common background for your organization?
- How long have you been working in the organization?
- Did or do you face increases in your workload?
- Where is this workload coming from?
- When did you face the steepest increases of workload?
- Can you give concrete examples of such increases?
- How do you (try to) cope with them?
- Do you think that these coping practices influence (your agency's) goal attainment?

A.3 Coding Procedure and Coding Results

Seven researchers independently coded the interviews to ensure reliability and consistency. In cases where notable discrepancies emerged in the coding results, the researchers revisited the relevant interview sections to reassess their interpretations. If disagreements persisted, they engaged in discussions to reach a consensus on the most appropriate coding decisions.

The interviews were coded for the following key aspects:

- Whether interviewees experience a high workload (yes/no)
- Whether workload has been increasing over time (yes/no)
- Whether they can identify periods during which the workload increased considerably (open)
- Why they think workload has increased (open)
- How they try to cope with the increased workload (open)

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- Whether they prioritize tasks (yes/no; open)
- Which logic they use to prioritize different tasks
- Whether increased workload affects policy implementation and, by extension, goal attainment (yes/no; open)
- Which factors helped them to effectively implement a policy (open)
- Additional comments that illuminate the research situation

Table A1 reports additional interview details using the COREQ criteria.

Table A1 ***Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative studies (COREQ[1]).***

No.	Item	Guide questions/ description	Answer/information
Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity			
Personal characteristics			
1.	Interviewer/ facilitator	Which author/s conducted the interview or focus group?	All of them
2.	Credentials	What were the researcher's credentials (e.g., PhD, MD)?	Six doctoral students, four researchers with PhD
3.	Occupation	What was their occupation at the time of the study?	Doctoral student, postdoc, university professors
4.	Gender	Was the researcher male or female?	Male/female
5.	Experience and training	What experience or training did the researcher have?	All interviewers received prior interview training/ had prior experience with interviews.
Relationship with participants			
6.	Relationship established	Was a relationship established prior to study commencement?	No

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Table A1 (***cont.***)

No.	Item	Guide questions/ description	Answer/information
7.	Participant knowledge of the interviewer	What did the participants know about the researcher (e.g., personal goals, reasons for doing the research)?	Participants received basic personal information from interviewer at the start of the interview.
8.	Interviewer characteristics	What characteristics were reported about the interviewer/ facilitator (e.g., bias, assumptions, reasons, and interests in the research topic)?	Professional background, reasons and interest in the research topic, funding information
Domain 2: Study design			
Theoretical framework			
9.	Methodological orientation and theory	What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study (e.g., grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis)?	Content analysis of interview statements
Participant selection			
10.	Sampling	How were participants selected (e.g., purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball)?	Purposive (potential interviewees were identified using the websites of pertinent environmental agencies/entities)
11.	Method of approach	How were participants approached? e.g., face-to-face, telephone, mail, email?	Participants were contacted via email.

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Table A1 (*cont.*)

No.	Item	Guide questions/ description	Answer/information
12.	Sample size	How many participants were in the study?	157
13.	Nonparticipation	How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons?	600 (no explicit reasons were provided; potential interviewees simply did not respond to email)
Setting			
14.	Setting of data collection	Where was the data collected? e.g., home, clinic, workplace	Via Zoom and telephone
15.	Presence of nonparticipants	Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers?	No
16.	Description of sample	What are the important characteristics of the sample (e.g., demographic data, date)?	The interviewees from the six countries were responsible for a large variety of implementation-related activities within the areas of social and environmental policy. Interviews were conducted between April 21, 2021 and August 1, 2023.
Data collection			
17.	Interview guide	Were questions, prompts, guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested?	Interviewees were asked the questions reported above (p. 9). Several pilot interviews (in different countries) were conducted.

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Table A1 (*cont.*)

No.	Item	Guide questions/ description	Answer/information
18.	Repeat interviews	Were repeat interviews carried out? If yes, how many?	No
19.	Audio/visual recording	Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data?	Audio recording was used.
20.	Field notes	Were field notes made during and/or after the interview or focus group?	NA
21.	Duration	What was the duration of the interviews or focus group?	25–125 minutes
22.	Data saturation	Was data saturation discussed?	Yes. Saturation was considered very high for all questions asked.
23.	Transcripts returned	Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction?	No
Domain 3: analysis and findings			
Data analysis			
24.	Number of data coders	How many data coders coded the data?	7
25.	Description of coding tree	Did authors provide a description of the coding tree?	Yes
26.	Derivation of themes	Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data?	In advance (the two themes that structure table B1 above)
27.	Software	What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data?	A custom software solution developed by the research team

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Table A1 (*cont.*)

No.	Item	Guide questions/ description	Answer/information
28.	Participant checking	Did participants provide feedback on the findings?	No
Reporting			
29.	Quotations presented	Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes/findings? Was each quotation identified, e.g., participant number?	Yes
30.	Data and findings consistent	Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings?	Yes
31.	Clarity of major themes	Were major themes clearly presented in the findings?	Yes
32.	Clarity of minor themes	Is there a description of diverse cases or discussion of minor themes?	No

[1] Tong, Allison, Peter Sainsbury, and Jonathan Craig. 2007. "Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups." *International Journal for Quality in Health Care 19*(6), 349–357.

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