EXPLORING STRATEGIES AND DECISION MAKING IN LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN TIME OF THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract

COVID-19 has spurred considerable research interest, many studies have delved into the experiences of local authorities in responding to crisis-induced changes (Kim, 2023; Agostino et al., 2021; Schuster et al., 2020), but few have adopted a managerial perspective, focusing on evolving strategies and decision-making processes. Strategies vary based on the context, and the Moroccan perspective in this regard remains relatively unexplored. This article aims to bridge this gap by shedding light on the case of the 'F' municipality. This exploration employs a qualitative approach through a case study method, involving semi-structured interviews with the municipality's administrators. The findings highlight the municipality's adept response to the crisis, embracing flexible crisis management strategies, digitalization, continuous learning, benchmarking, budgetary restructuring, and cost reassessment. Informed by these strategies, the municipality engages in decision-making. From an academic standpoint, this article makes a distinctive contribution by expanding the existing literature on managing local public services during a specific crisis, within the relatively unexplored context. On a practical note, the study's results provide valuable insights for practitioners, offering opportunities for learning and sharing best practices. It serves as a valuable reference, particularly for municipalities that share similarities with the one investigated.

Keywords: Crisis Management, Strategies, Decision Making, COVID-19, Change, Local Public Services

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1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has questioned the functioning of public organizations and the provision of public services (Agostino et al., 2021; Schuster et al., 2020). Such a reality has sparked the scientific curiosity of numerous researchers who are eager to shed light on the effects of this crisis and contribute to the development of resilience plans. Authors highlighted the need for further research to analyse how public organizations respond to, and mitigate the effects of the crisis (Schuster et al., 2020) in

particular in less developed countries (Ataguba, 2020). Our paper contributes to this debate by studying how Moroccan local authorities faced this crisis. Specifically, by analyzing how the management of public services changed during the crisis. Such a topic has been seldom explored within this context and remains susceptible to the transformative influences triggered by the crisis (Algan et al., 2017).

The existing literature review reveals that a majority of scholars focus on presenting their countries' experiences in managing the COVID-19 crisis (Arhipova et al., 2022; Klementová & Procházková, 2021; Ito et al., 2020). Some studies concentrate on the specific impacts of COVID-19 on particular sectors (Agostino et al., 2021; Moraes et al., 2022; Ravenda et al., 2023) with the majority of case studies emanating from European or American context. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the evolution of the current body of literature by examining the influence of crises from a managerial perspective and to elucidate the ramifications of COVID-19 on local public management, particularly concerning the transformation of public service.

In our pursuit, we sought to elucidate the internal mechanisms of organizational operations within a municipal setting amid the COVID-19 crisis. This endeavour was centred on addressing the following question:

RQ1: How did the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic alter the procedural norms in management within local authorities, subsequently impacting their methods of service provision?

Our approach aims to understand the changes that occurred in managing public services in terms of strategies and decision-making in this crisis period. To do so, the methodology adopted in this paper is a qualitative approach based on a case study (Yin, 2009; Alam, 2021).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 is a literature review on crisis management in the public sector and it provides the strategies adopted by municipalities and the conceptual framework. Section 3 is the methodology that has been adopted to conduct empirical research. Section 4 is discussion and final reflections.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Crisis management: Strategies and decision-making approaches

Crisis scenarios present a real test of the dimensions of organizational behaviour, structures, and cultures. According to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO, 2021), a crisis is defined as "unstable condition involving an impending abrupt or significant change that requires urgent attention and action to protect life, assets, property or the environment". Gundel (2005) has provided a classification for crises, delineating them into four specific groupings: conventional crises, unforeseen crises, insoluble crises, and fundamental crises. The characteristics of crises differentiate crisis management from the handling of oversight of routine situations and incidents within

organizations that have traditionally constituted the purpose of organizational theory (Steen & Morsut, 2019). Smith (2006) underscores that crises are detrimental events that cannot be managed by maintaining the same regular organizational structure and the same strategies. Crisis management is a mechanism that involves understanding the crisis and its origins in order to propose solutions. Crisis management is based on how actors perceive the event in terms of surprise level, a threat to organizational values, and the demand for swift decision-making (Seeger, 2022; Shi et al., 2020).

The stages of crisis management might differ based on the particular situation, typically, there are four primary phases involved: 1) Preparation, 2) Response, 3) Recovery, and 4) Evaluation (Boin et al., 2009). The preparedness phase involves the planning and preparation of resources, procedures, and contingency plans to deal with a potential crisis. It includes also, the training and learning capacities of human resources so that they can be prepared to deal with future crises. The response phase begins when the crisis occurs. This phase involves implementing contingency plans and procedures to deal with the crisis. Communications with stakeholders, including administrators, citizens, and other partner organizations are also essential during this phase. The recovery phase, ensues when the organization perceives that the crisis has been brought under control. This phase involves restoring the organization's normal operations and reducing the damage caused by the crisis. During this phase, the organization can structure plans to help to cope with future crises. The last one is evaluation identify the strengths and weaknesses of the organization's response and allows lessons learned to be identified and improvements to be made to better prepare for the future. The practical application of lessons learned significantly hinges on the management strategy adopted to address the crisis. Consequently, for sustained collective learning, there needs to be a leadership committed to learning and change or at the very least, a sufficient number of influential individuals (Ansell et al., 2020). Based on the crisis typology presented by Gundel (2005) and the distinction between acute rapidly emergent crises and creeping crises explained by Deverell (2010), we notice that this process can concern only this analysis only acute, rapidly emerging crises, which are characterized by their suddenness and immediate impact, whereas creeping crises are not concerned by these systemic phases because they develop gradually over a longer period of time. It is therefore difficult to prepare for the crisis, especially during the second response phase, also known as the incubation phase, which is characterized by information and communication difficulties concerning vaguely defined problems and can last for years before the crisis begins. Furthermore, the absence of a contingency plan rather than surprise seems more likely to be part of the crisis model.

The initial wave of modern research studies concerning crisis management in the public sector primarily focused on examining executive decision-

making processes within the framework of crisis management. The majority of research shed light on the role of top managers and their leadership or from organizational sides by talking about the bureaucratic system in the public sector as a factor influencing decision-making in times of crisis (Askim & Christensen, 2022). According to Hart (1993), decision-making in a crisis situation requires adaptation of the bureaucratic framework and organizational culture. The adaptation becomes evident through the centralization of decision-making, which can take on different modalities: the concentration of power among leaders, the centralization of decision-making authority within the central government in comparison to state, regional, or local bodies, or a proclivity to seek robust leadership and embrace various forms of crisis governance.

Crisis management also involves selecting the strategies that will be adopted before a decision is taken. Khadarahmi (2009) defines a variety of potential strategies for crisis management. Foremost, an adaptable management approach and reliable information are integral to the effective practice of crisis management. Organizations must also foster public trust through transparent communication by cultivating relationships with both the media and the community. Additionally, it is essential for organizations to explicitly define their objectives in relation to all stakeholders because they play an important role in changing strategy. Negotiation can serve as an alternative strategy for resolving conflicts between an organization and external parties. Lastly, organizations must remain vigilant and prepared by anticipating all possible scenarios and identifying and analyzing situations conducive to crises.

Crisis situations often bring in new stakeholders who were previously overlooked or less involved (Li et al., 2021). Boin et al. (2009) highlight that the crisis led to the formation of new alliances and partnerships among stakeholders, requiring a reassessment of the individuals or groups involved. Consequently, it is clear that crises disrupt the usual ways stakeholders are involved, which can challenge established communication strategies. This can catch communication professionals by surprise as they try to effectively manage communication in these complex situations. No matter where it originates, a crisis can become an opportunity for organizational change. It is a moment when an organization can adapt its culture, management practices, values, and daily routines. However, these aspects can also present challenges when trying to make strategic changes prompted by the crisis. To handle this, Choi (2008) suggest using comprehensive emergency management tools. These tools include emergency plans, communication systems, early warnings, information management, and resource systems. They help organizations navigate through crisis situations more effectively.

2.2. Crisis management: Local authorities under the microscope

A study conducted by Nilsson (2010) indicates that municipalities, during crises, encounter challenges related to communication issues, conflicts of values, and coordination problems among the various stakeholders. According to McConnell (2003), crisis management is influenced by a complex interplay of factors. These encompass governmental structures and processes, levels of contingency planning, resource availability, the involvement of various elected and non-elected entities across the nation, political discussions, influential interest groups, media impact, public opinion, and the broader political and economic landscapes. In addition, the political architecture of the state and the electoral system, also play a role in shaping crisis responses.

Crisis management in public administration encompasses a collection of measures and processes aimed at preventing, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from crises. From the internal management side, this involves identifying potential risks, formulating emergency plans, training staff and stakeholders, coordinating crisis management endeavours, and restoring damaged services and infrastructure (Budiman & Kusumasari, 2021), and from the external side, it concerns raising awareness among the population through information campaigns under the auspices of the city district municipality.

In the context of decision-making, Guenoun et al. (2015) summarize the actions to be pursued by local authorities during periods of crisis. In such circumstances, these entities will inevitably need to act through the reduction of activities (decline), streamlining of services (cutbacks), realignment of revenues and expenditures (retrenchment), or the restructuring of operational processes (downsizing).

During the last crisis, like the 2008 economic downturn, Moroccan local authorities acted by adopting solutions that lacked a long-term vision. These solutions can be classified according to the following criteria: 1) the approach adopted by the actors (supervisory ministries such as the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Finance) as a variable of the external environment which allows learning about the flexibility of the decisions taken by the authorities and the extent to which they are ready or not to change traditional policies and strategies, 2) the management system which represents a variable of the internal environment of the local authorities and which offers information about the processes of managing local services, 3) the mode of governance, considered as a hybrid variable because it combines what is external, i.e. laws dictated by the legislator, and what is internal, i.e. the norms indicated in the internal organization manuals, as well as the degree of commitment of the administrators in this respect. In each category, we find actions carried out by the local authorities (Table 1) which show some of the approaches adopted by the local authorities to overcome the slippage of the crisis.

Table 1. Actions frequently taken by local authorities to deal with crises

Actions	Explanations	Author's reference
Reengineering	Reengineering involves the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of processes to achieve significant improvements in performance, efficiency, and responsiveness. This approach entails a departure from traditional incremental adjustments to a more holistic transformation of operational frameworks. By incorporating elements of centralization, decentralization, and cross-functional collaboration, process reengineering facilitates the rapid allocation of resources, streamlining of decision-making, and optimization of service delivery.	Verboncu (2021), Winston and Carter, (2021)
Expenditure control	During crises, such as economic downturns or unforeseen emergencies, local authorities often face budgetary constraints and the need to optimize resource allocation. Expenditure control, as a well-established fiscal strategy, focuses on carefully managing and curtailing expenditures to align with available resources and strategic priorities. This approach empowers local authorities to sustain fundamental services and critical functions, even amid resource scarcity. This strategy concurrently ensures the allocation of resources to pivotal domains, thereby curtailing waste and upholding fiscal equilibrium. The oversight of costs by territorial entities during a crisis may engender an austerity policy, delineated by measures such as curtailed investments and a suspension of recruitment activities.	Guenoun et al. (2015), Padovani and Boys (2021), Narbón-Perpiñá (2019)
Decentralization	Decentralization entails a reversion to centralization as a mode of governance. It implies a reduction in the autonomy of local authorities and an increased concentration of decision-making power at the central level (Stat/Government). The objective is to simplify decision-making by concentrating authority in the hands of a few key individuals or entities. In crisis situations, this streamlines the decision-making process, enabling swift and decisive actions to be taken without delays associated with hierarchical consultations.	Patrucco et al. (2021), Chan et al. (2023)
Digitalization	In times of crises, such as the current global health crisis or unforeseen emergencies, local authorities face challenges related to communication, service delivery, and resource optimization. Digitalization enhances the agility of local authorities by facilitating rapid decision-making and adaptive resource allocation. Digital platforms provide valuable insights through data analytics, allowing authorities to identify trends, allocate resources strategically, and adjust their crisis management strategies dynamically. It involves leveraging digital technologies to streamline processes, enhance communication, and optimize resource allocation. Successful digitalization requires investment in technological infrastructure, capacity-building, and stakeholder engagement.	Gabryelczyk (2020), Gangneux and Joss (2022), Patrucco et al. (2021), Clement et al. (2023)

Source: Authors' calculation.

The majority of these solutions are directed towards the internal dimensions of local authorities, as they represent variables related to the organization. However, effectively managing factors outside the control of local public service administration has always been a significant challenge. The external environment, which is not easily predictable or influenced by financial or structural solutions, has posed persistent difficulties. This became especially evident during the COVID-19 crisis, highlighting the limited effectiveness of universally applicable measures in such circumstances.

2.3. Management of local public services during COVID-19: Response from municipalities

COVID-19 is a complex and unprecedented mega-crisis (Boin et al., 2020) that has disrupted the normal functioning of local authorities and consequently the provision of local public services. The management of this crisis differs completely from previous ones, it has the particularity of being a moving and changing phenomenon to the point that its management is described by Kuhlmann and Franzke (2022) as an oscillating pendulum that changes from one phase to another depending on the evolution of the virus. This implies a change in management mechanisms towards others more adapted to this new situation. The most common adaptive measures in municipal administrations are the following.

Governance measures: An experience of German local authorities shows that the use of multi-level governance linking state, local and private levels is a prerogative (Kuhlmann, 2015). If public and private actors collaborate on a daily basis governance, they should deploy their efforts more during emergency states when the stakes are high. Thus, the coordination between these actors must change modality towards a coordination organized around problems and not only around functions. In the same vein, French local authorities are committed to collaborative governance modes that require a horizontalization of relations with users insofar as their logic is based on co-construction of the service, both in its governance and in the delivery of the service (Crespy-De Coninck, 2021). Another experience in Swedish local authorities shows that the management of the municipality works better by adopting forms that combine administrative and political logic through the organisation of special, even informal, meetings between politicians and managers. The main thing is to have cooperation between central political management and local administrative management (Sparf et al., 2022).

During this widespread crisis, countries have taken different approaches, making it hard to have universal measures. However, the pandemic led to activity pauses and lockdowns worldwide, with enforced hygiene and safety rules. Despite this, public services managed to carry on by implementing more flexible rules and bureaucratic processes. For instance, some countries extended deadlines for specific projects, like public procurement in Morocco, France, and Portugal. They

also reduced administrative timelines for certain services. Overall, the crisis revealed that governments could adapt and be flexible to support public services during challenging times.

Measures related to strategies: Local authorities have embraced ambitious managerial strategies, aiming not to rigidly adhere to theoretical models found in the literature but to flexibly tailor them to their specific contexts. According to this, the majority of municipalities (French, German, Swedish, Moroccan, Portuguese and others) have embraced common strategies. 1) Structural adjustment strategies that intervene in the structure, the processes and the human resources and whose aim is to implement new working methods such as teleworking or limitation of the number of staff for the services that lack such modality (Kim, 2023). 2) Proactive strategies to fortify resilience and anticipate future challenges. These approaches, encompassing risk management tools like preparedness, prevention, and response (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020), coupled with innovative strategic intelligence methods (Dzigbede et al., 2020), emphasize leveraging new communication channels, such as social networks. This empowers municipalities to heighten awareness, extend outreach, amplify visibility, and expedite citizen engagement, fostering collaborative partnerships for effective response and growth. 3) Digital strategies (Wirtz et al., 2021) by activating digital solutions allowing the dematerialization of procedures and their simplification in order to extend the offer of services and ensure their continuity whatever the conditions. These include the use of video-conferencing techniques for the organisation of meetings, intranets to facilitate internal communication between administrative staff, and integrated systems for financial management.

These strategies have materialized within the administration through an unprecedented transformation towards forward-looking management tools in order to easily integrate future evolutions and an urgent need to insert technological tools in the daily management of the public service in order to align with regulatory, organizational and functional changes.

All these strategies and actions were united under a singular aim: To fortify municipal public services, enhancing their ability to navigate potential crises and ensuring their uninterrupted operation in any circumstance. The various experiences discussed are neither definitive nor comprehensive.

Nevertheless, the intent was to showcase shared measures, illustrating the extent to which local administrations demonstrated adaptability and innovation in responding to the prevailing circumstances.

2.4. Theoretical framework

The theory of change and development proposed by Van de Ven and Poole (1995), known as the "Garbage can model" or the "Arenas model", presents a constructive synthesis of alternative models used to explain change processes for organizations of different character. It provides insights into how organizations make decisions and manage change in complex environments. We rely on this theoretical framework to understand decision-making and change processes during the COVID-19 crisis in Moroccan municipality. The choice of this framework could be justified by the following reasons. First and foremost, this model sheds light on the chaotic and intricate nature inherent in decision-making processes, which is particularly relevant in the context of a crisis where decisions must be made swiftly and often in an opportunistic manner. Secondly, the model underscores the significance of ambiguity and fluidity in participation in decision-making processes. Given the rapidly evolving nature of information and knowledge during the COVID-19 crisis, it is imperative to recognize that actors' preferences may be ambiguous, and decisions can be made by individuals who are not necessarily directly involved in the management of public services. Furthermore, the "Garbage can model" emphasizes the role played by organizational structures in decision-making. It highlights that the attributes of the "garbage can", such as variable decision accessibility, can influence the choices made. Within the context of the COVID-19 crisis, this becomes particularly relevant in comprehending how organizational structures have been adapted or reformed to address the specific challenges associated with managing public services during this period.

Drawing upon the comprehensive review of the existing literature and the underlying theoretical framework, we present the conceptual model (Figure 1). This model provides a visual depiction that effectively portrays the interconnected relationships and pivotal elements within the specific context under investigation.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework
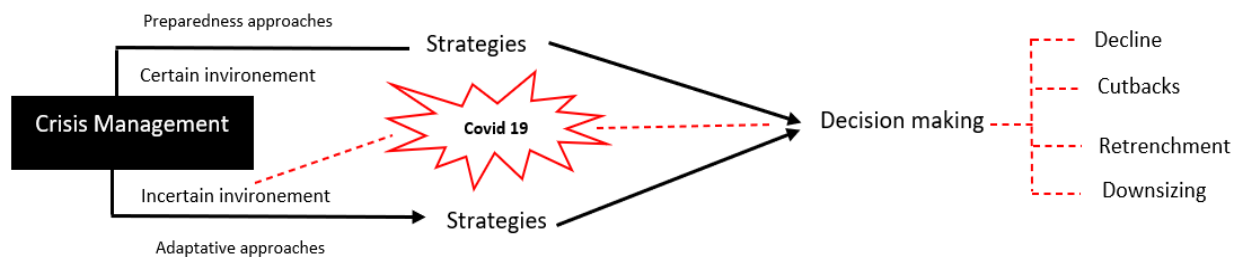
Source: Authors' elaboration.

The process of decision-making involves navigating through a complex scenario that is influenced by various factors and circumstances (Varma, 2019). In a certain environment, characterized by known and predictable risks, decision-making occurs when all the necessary information is available and the outcomes of different actions are known with certainty (Rudolph et al., 2009), decision-makers have access to complete and accurate information about the outcomes and consequences of their choices. They can confidently predict the outcomes of various alternatives and evaluate the risks and benefits associated with each option. In this case, is possible to use models and analytical methods to evaluate the different options and choose the best one (Comfort et al., 2020). In contrast, decision-making within an uncertain and complex environment demands the generation of plausible explanations for ambiguity (Okoli, et al., 2021) owing to the limited, unpredictable nature of information. Therefore, the outcomes of actions cannot be determined with certainty. Decision-makers create meaning through the interpretation of available, they must cope with uncertainty and use heuristics, intuitive judgement and mental models to evaluate options and make decisions (Rudolph et al., 2009). In such cases, decision-making becomes an adaptive process where decision-makers must be able to recognize and understand emerging risks, communicate effectively with stakeholders, coordinate actions between different entities and control the implementation of decisions taken (Comfort et al., 2020). This adaptive approach is essential for dealing with crises situation, such as COVID-19. In this context, the decision-makers in local authorities change the way they manage the services to adapt their organizational structures and procedures to the new circumstances. During this crisis, basic services were continuously offered, and other services were replaced while others were created (Guenoun et al., 2015; Kuhlmann & Franzke, 2022).

By building on this conceptualization, we aim to provide a more in-depth exploration of how public services change during the COVID-19 crisis in Moroccan municipalities. Specifically, we aim to analyze the specific measures and decisions that are implemented in response to the crisis, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of the changes that take place.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data structuring

We used a qualitative method with case study analysis (Yin, 2009) that analysed the experiences of a Moroccan municipality during COVID-19. The choice of this methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of the local public services changing based on the statement of local government administrators during the period analysed. According to Kvale's (2008) recommendations for qualitative research, an optimal sample size of 10 to 15 interviews is suggested. This suggestion aims to strike a careful balance between the constraints of time and the available resources for conducting the survey, while also taking into consideration the principle of diminishing returns. We conducted semi-structured interviews, between March and April 2022, with 10 local government administrators in the 'F' municipality from different departments (Table 2). During the seventh interview, we reached a point of data saturation, where new information and insights were no longer emerging.

Table 2. Interview detail

| Interview | Interviewer's profile | | | Department | Interview timing |
	Position	Educational level	Years of experience		
Interview 1	Head of a service	Bac + 5 Engineer	24	Technical service	1h
Interview 2	Head of a department	Bac + 5 Engineer	24	Technical service	1h
Interview 3	Head of a service	Bac + 3 Bachelor	21	Budget	45 min
Interview 4	Technician/agent	Bac + 2	20	Financial resources	1h
Interview 5	Administrator	Bac + 3 Bachelor	27	General services department	1h
Interview 6	Head of a service	Bac + 3 Bachelor	21	Partnership and international cooperation	1h 15 min
Interview 7	Head of a service	Bac + 3 Bachelor	28	IT and communications	45 min
Interview 8	Administrator	Bac + 3 Bachelor	26	HR and administrative and legal affaires	1h
Interview 9	Administrator	Bac + 3 Bachelor	28	Urban planning and heritage service	40 min
Interview 10	Technician/agent	Bac + 2	22	Health care, hygiene, and environmental protection	30 min

Source: Authors' calculation.

The interviews were conducted using a common interview guide which covered various aspects: Information concerning the interviewers, information regarding the style of public service management and decision-making, management tools, information relative to the impact of COVID-19 on public services, the most affected services, the communication ways, and the strategies adopted (Appendix B). Each interview lasts around one hour on average. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then analysed utilizing the NVivo 12 software.

3.2. Analysis methods

The content analysis is employed for data processing. This analytical approach is commonly referred to as a method that seeks to uncover the underlying meaning and comprehension of verbatim statements. This analysis involves the systematic coding of textual data (Appendix A), enabling a profound exploration of the participants' perceptions and facilitating a concise interpretation of the discourse. As determined by Craig et al., (2021), the thematic analysis works by dividing the text into units, and then classifying these units into categories according to analogical groupings. The steeps flowed are surmised ad flow (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Research steeps
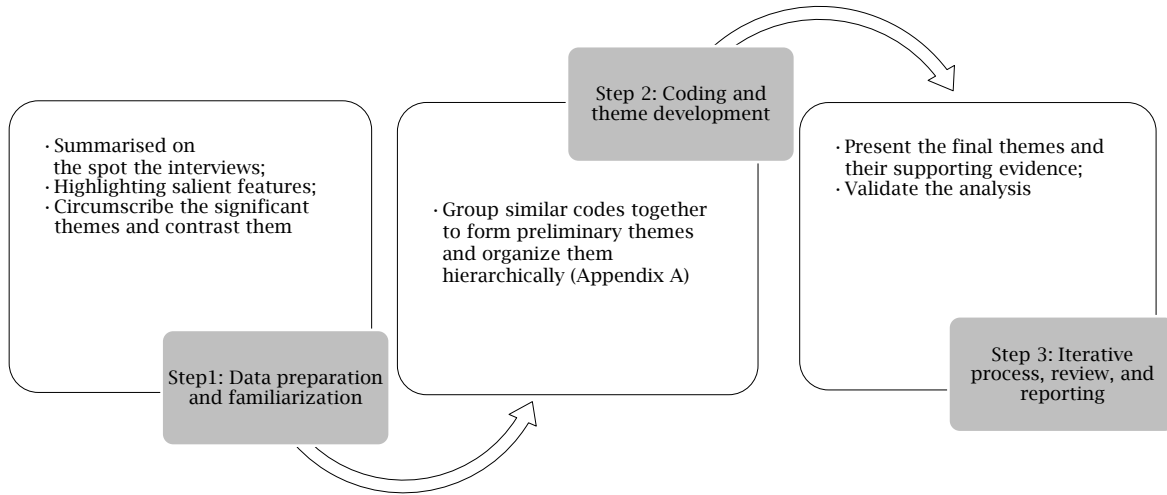
Source: Authors' elaboration.

The research methodology revolves around the identification and organization of significant elements derived from the participant's responses (administrators in the municipality), with the aim of comprehending what is deemed significant or particularly noteworthy. The initial stage involves a meticulous iteration process, wherein the interviews are carefully dissected into pertinent and coherent excerpts. Subsequently, a subsequent iteration is conducted to assign recurrent themes to these extracted segments. The resultant emerging themes stemming from these iterative analyses encompass the realms of decision-making, strategies for managing services, and COVID-19 management crises. Each group combines a couple of sub-themes (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Grid of thematic
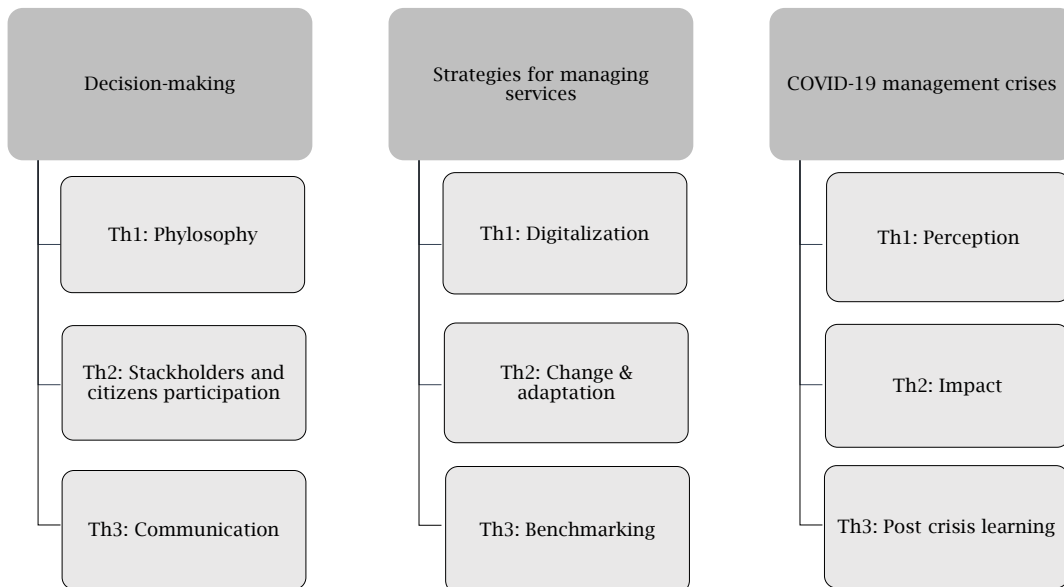
Source: Authors' elaboration.

The textual analysis shows the frequency of the 50 most frequent words (Figure 4), which also justifies the defined themes. The word clouds obtained using NVivo 12 software are used to visually summarise the most salient keywords, based on their frequency of appearance in the interviews.

Figure 4. Word clouds

Source: Authors' elaboration using NVivo 12 software.

To enhance validity, we employed a hybrid verification approach by combining several methods. We used theory validation, as advocated by Morse (2020), which involves assessing the fit between our results and existing theories. In our case, the theoretical framework mobilized was the theory of change, as our study aimed to examine changes in the management of local public services and relate them to the decision-making process during the crisis period. Additionally, we sought external validation by engaging experts to reinforce the dependability and validity of our research. To this end, we shared our results with experts and specialists in local public management, including consultants, elected officials, and administrators from various municipalities. Their feedback demonstrated a consensus regarding the obtained results, thereby affirming their validity.

The implementation of these validation approaches was instrumental in ensuring the credibility and reliability of our study. They served to solidify our findings and enhance confidence in their interpretation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The information collected in the context of this study opens up several avenues for reflection on the dynamics of decision-making in public service management and the strategies implemented to address this crisis. With reference to the objectives of our research, we will analyze the results based on the predefined axes.

4.1. Decision making

During the COVID-19 crisis, the decision-making policy within the 'F' municipality did not undergo a radical change in terms of processes, as indicated by the majority of municipal officials. This process is based on both political and administrative rationality while adhering to principles of local governance based on participatory democracy and transparency. This policy is defined by the state and central authority of the Ministry of the Interior, represented by the General Directorate of Local Authorities (DGCL).

Under normal circumstances, and in accordance with the principle of autonomous administration granted to municipalities under Organic Law 113-14, decision-making falls within the purview of the municipal president. The president is responsible for implementing public policies and managing budgetary and financial matters. Decisions made are reached through consultation with different members of the municipal council during meetings stipulated by law, involving a voting process. It is noteworthy that due to financial challenges and a lack of capabilities in Moroccan municipalities, various types of partnerships with public or private organizations can be sought to address these shortcomings.

"*The decision-making policy adopted by the municipal president is based on engagement with entities such as universities (leveraging the expertise of professors), citizens through NGOs and associations, businesses (such as Al Omrane), and international organizations (GIZ, AFD…)*" (Head of Partnership and International Cooperation).

The president's mindset and receptiveness play a significant role in this decision-making process (Stephens et al., 2020; Joseph & Gaba, 2020). However, it has been demonstrated that during the initial months of the crisis, even the authority of presidents declined and the "Wali" (the state representative) took charge of these decisions.

"*There is a correlation between political and administrative orientations, and it is on this basis that decisions within the municipality are made. Thus, decision-makers (presidents), prior to making a decision, arrange consultative meetings with representatives from civil society. Similarly, they may engage with NGOs, universities, consulting firms, and other entities*" (Technician in the financial department).

Administrators from in urban planning and heritage service; HR, administrative and legal affaires; general services department perceive that decentralization and citizen participation requires acceleration, especially considering that the current crisis situation demands flexibility in action and the delegation of a certain degree of freedom to municipality officials such as service directors and elected representatives. On this basis, a crucial variable comes into play: the level of trust conferred upon the actors. Indeed, as pointed out by Natorski and Pomorska (2017), the effectiveness of decision-making in times of crisis hinges on the level of trust among stakeholders in navigating uncertainty. In the Moroccan context, we have observed the opposite, as the role of municipalities was overshadowed, and it was the central government that made decisions

even in matters falling within their jurisdiction. This situation echoes the observations of Kuhlmann and Franzke (2022), who emphasize the decentralization and resurgence of state authority in managing local public services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Deverell (2010), crisis response entails organized activities undertaken by stakeholders when a community perceives an urgent threat. Actors play a significant role in crisis management. The citizen represents a crucial link in this process, typically embedded within the framework of local democracy. Moroccan municipalities possess means for continuous communication with citizens, notably the "Chikaya" platform for voicing citizens' opinions and concerns. However, the use of this channel has primarily been limited to grievances and disputes. *"…Despite the presence of certain bodies, such as the instance of equity and equal opportunity representing civil society, the citizen's role is lamentably restricted to lodging complaints without proffering solutions"* (Head of IT and Communications). This phenomenon stems from the authorities' perception of citizen contributions as inadequate in proposing viable solutions. From this perspective, a disconnection is evident between legal stipulations and the realities on the ground. By examining the provisions of Organic Law 113-14 pertaining to municipalities, we can deduce the citizen's significance in the local public management process, as they are integral to its inception and outcome. However, based on interviews with municipal officials, consideration is given to the influence of other pertinent dimensions, notably citizens' educational levels, cultural background, attitudes, and behaviours, wherein individuals tend to articulate demands without presenting suggestions or solutions. As the head of the budget department elucidates:

"If we refer to the legal provisions that govern municipal management (112-13), we will encounter the concept of participatory democracy, emphasizing citizen involvement in decision-making. In more democratic countries, this participation extends beyond mere voting or complaints, encompassing a more substantive contribution. Here, the citizen (represented by civil society) plays an active role in meetings and offers solutions to the issues under discussion. In Morocco, this is expressly stipulated, enshrined in black and white within the laws".

In terms of citizen communication, the interviewees unanimously confirmed that various channels were established for this purpose. Remote communication means such as the municipal portal and official social media pages remained operational to address citizen inquiries. Meanwhile, the physical premises of the municipality were closed to avoid face-to-face interactions with citizens.

"From our end, we took the necessary steps to maintain continuous contact with citizens. We provided them with the electronic portal and various social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, for information sharing and, of course, with the ability to engage through messaging or the 'contact us' section. At this stage, the communication cell receives citizens' grievances and forwards them to the relevant department. If the issue or complaint necessitates direct interaction with the citizen, we can call them by phone or exceptionally welcome them in person (because during the lockdown, physical contact with citizens was suspended except in cases of emergency)" (Head of department).

This decision was promptly made by the Moroccan government after declaring a complete lockdown starting on March 25, 2020.

Regarding the thematic analysis of the first axis, decision-making, it is noteworthy that cultural influence holds a pivotal role in decision-making within a crisis context. Decision-making in such a context necessitates the implementation of adaptive and responsive strategies while considering the citizens' needs.

Municipalities had to grapple with challenging decisions encompassing various facets, resource management, municipal services, lockdown measures, citizen communication, and support for affected economic sectors. This scenario underscored the significance of agility and coordination in the decision-making process.

4.2. Strategies for managing services

Various measures were adopted to address the challenges posed by this crisis. In this context, the municipality engaged in different strategies that were meticulously implemented. These strategies reflect the municipality's responses to COVID-19. Some of these strategies existed prior but underwent an evolution in their conception and execution. Others emerged in response to defensive imperatives, while a distinct set of strategies became evident as a consequence of exceptional circumstances.

Navigating beyond the impacts of COVID-19 entails the implementation of bold strategies centred around digital transformation, which serves as the cornerstone for emerging from this turmoil. The digitization strategy is aligned with the strategic vision of the Public Administration Reform (2015–2025). The digitization strategy adopted by municipalities constitutes a proactive and innovative response. It is grounded in the integration of information technology, communication means, and digital tools within various municipal services to enhance the efficiency of administrative operations. Digitalization within the studied municipality predated this crisis. According to the respondents' accounts, this strategy witnessed a surge and acceleration motivated by the risks of the crisis.

"Undoubtedly, the use of ICT in our daily management gained momentum, especially after this COVID-19 health crisis. However, it cannot be denied that even before this crisis, we were accustomed to working with software and computerized tools. For example, in our department, we developed an application called 'Preserve my city.' It's a digital solution that enables citizens to connect with our service to report electrical issues in their neighbourhood through a photo taken and sent via this application; the application operates using geolocation, allowing us to identify the problem and commit to a specific timeline for intervention" (Technical department head).

The majority of administrators found themselves compelled to update their knowledge, be more proactive, and not wait for training programs that were not feasible or accessible due to the lockdown. To navigate this, administrators favoured self-learning in order to keep up with these developments and surpass the crisis circumstances. This aligns with the principles of the repositioning strategy, which encourages innovation and enhancement of the relevance and effectiveness of public services.

Adaptation is a pivotal requirement for resilience and ensuring the continuity of quality services. Adopting an adaptation strategy is a deliberate and organized approach to realign operations and resources in response to the complex and evolving challenges posed by the pandemic. *"In our municipality, we are preparing to keep pace with these changes by embracing management that aligns with technological and environmental advancements"* (Director of services). The adaptation strategy is a retrospective approach that can manifest in various aspects and modalities, all directed towards enhancing agility in service management. *"... Despite the obstacles, we were able to navigate the changes prompted by COVID-19 by adopting suitable solutions. These included postponing certain projects, such as the development of Boulevard Mohamed 5, cancelling festivals like the sacred music and Sufi music festival, while maintaining continuity in other services, and even redoubling efforts in areas like waste collection and disinfection of neighbourhoods and markets. Furthermore, I see that COVID-19 should not be labelled as a crisis in managerial or administrative parlance, but rather as an opportunity since it shed light on elements that were overlooked within the administration"* (Administrator in the General Services Directorate).

The municipality also engages in benchmarking actions, which involve comparing practices, processes, performances, and results. In a crisis context, this strategy is highly recommended as it allows for capitalizing on past experiences and identifying best practices (Timmis & Brüssow, 2020). This notion was highlighted by the head of services, emphasizing the significance of this strategy: *"Hence, decision-makers must have an open mind towards other successful experiences, whether within the Moroccan territory or abroad".*

This strategy also fosters collaboration among municipalities at both national and international levels, contributing to time and cost savings in service management. The head of the Partnership and International Cooperation Service underscores this point, providing examples of this strategy within the municipality:

"Intermunicipal cooperation, such as the case of the renovation and management project of 'Jnan Sbil' garden, where 'F' municipality and the region are partners. Regarding international cooperation, we can mention the example of South-South cooperation with African cities like Burkina Faso, aimed at encouraging the exchange of successful experiences and best practices between municipalities. To achieve this, the DGCT has initiated an African support fund to promote the most interesting and innovative projects. DGCL

contributes 60%, 'F' municipality 30%, and the remaining 10% from other municipalities. In addition to Africa, we have other foreign partnerships, such as the city of Montpellier concerning sustainable food projects".

This range of strategies, as conveyed by the interviewee, indicates that the municipality possesses a culture of benchmarking. This was further confirmed by the administrator in urban planning and heritage service, *"We realized that in other countries, some municipalities were not heavily impacted, while others implemented practices that helped them overcome the aftermath of the crisis. This opens our eyes to many things".* However, no further information was provided on how the municipality leveraged this strategy during the crisis. This might be attributed to a lack of clear awareness of such practices at the time of conducting interviews.

Barbera et al. (2021) defined several public service management strategies to enhance the performance of struggling public organizations. Drawing on the experience of the 'F' municipality, we have observed aspects that align with the reorganization strategy. This strategy is manifested through changes in organizational elements. In our case, this involves the reassignment of presidential responsibilities and the reduction of administrative staff through the adoption of telecommuting (Stephens et al., 2020). Indeed, according to a statement from the head of a budget department,

"The strategies we adopted to confront this crisis are primarily related to digitization, as it combines dematerialization (electronic mailroom), procedure simplification (Rakhas, "Chikaya"), and workforce reduction (telecommuting for administrators who can perform their tasks remotely). From an administrative perspective, this strategy can be deemed effective, but one must also consider the resources available to users. Perhaps the issue is not significant here, given that the territory is urban and the population is equipped with a robust network, internet accessibility, and smartphones".

Telecommuting is a new working modality that was not adopted across all departments and was not ventured into previously. Nonetheless, it did not last long, as administrators returned to their offices after the confinement period. *"In our department, we opted for telecommuting, which proved effective and optimal. We also worked with various modern methods and tools to propel our development efforts forward. The modifications accompanying these strategic changes are procedural in nature, while the structure and management modes remained unchanged"* (Head of Technical Service Department). These remarks by the director of services underscore the unanticipated nature of this crisis and the lack of planning to enable authorities to respond adequately. The municipality lacked crisis management and long-term planning strategies. The regulatory framework was not adequately prepared and remained unchanged, with only a few adjustments made to procedures and timelines (authorization requests, online payments, extended payment deadlines for municipal taxes, and revisiting public procurement deadlines, for example).

The COVID-19 crisis has further burdened the municipality's expenses, giving rise to additional costs. Cost optimization is also a strategy advocated by Barbera et al. (2021). It involves minimizing an organization's expenditures to enhance its profitability and financial sustainability, particularly during times of crisis when the municipality faces worsening resource availability.

"The challenges we faced during this crisis were undoubtedly financial. I won't even mention human resources, as the majority of administrators worked diligently during this crisis, displaying their dynamism and versatility, except for a few members who tried to evade their responsibilities by claiming COVID-19 symptoms every time". (Technician in Financial Resources Service).

The issue of financial resource availability is a burden for the majority of Moroccan municipalities (Amrani et al., 2021). Verbatims also indicate that this crisis has led to reduced expenses in certain areas, such as training, which usually incurs travel and accommodation costs.

"COVID-19 allowed for resource optimization: Less spending on training, as it can be conducted remotely". (Technician in financial resources service).

However, this crisis has given rise to other exceptional expenses, particularly personal protective equipment and health-related supplies (masks and testing materials for staff), as well as increased cleaning and disinfection of public spaces, public transportation, and municipal facilities, all of which have incurred additional costs. As confirmed by a technician in the Health, Hygiene, and Environmental Protection Department, *"With the crisis, expenses increased (purchase of disinfection products, masks…)".*

In the context of public service management, cost reduction can be employed to enhance the efficiency and profitability of public services while maintaining service quality for citizens. Nevertheless, it's important to note that cost reduction can also have negative effects on service quality and citizen satisfaction if not managed properly. *"With the COVID-19 crisis, the profitability of certain services has been affected, especially civil registration and intellectual activities, as they require direct citizen interaction".* Significant margins were lost, necessitating the municipality to adopt an austerity policy that led to decision-making and the cancellation of certain activities to optimize financial resources, which were already a constraint for municipalities even before the crisis.

This second axis, strategies of managing services, reveals a range of strategies that were sought as solutions or alternatives to mitigate the impacts of this crisis on services provided by the municipality (Figure 5). The case study demonstrates that the municipality primarily relies on digitization, repositioning, and adaptation. However, it must be emphasized that, based on the array of actions taken, the municipality, during its crisis management policy, was not adequately prepared and was making attempts, where possible, with various strategies. The municipality has the freedom to determine and choose tactical strategies, but it lacks the capacity to change the managerial and structural levels induced by the new strategy.

Figure 5. Strategies adopted by the municipality of 'F' during COVID-19
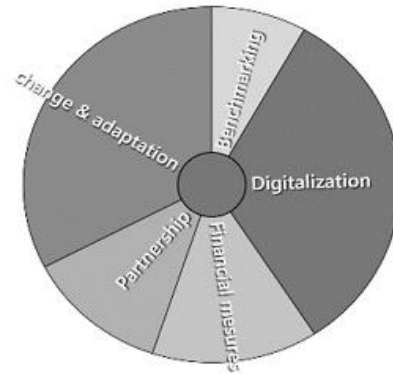
Source: Authors' elaboration using NVivo 12 software.

4.3. Crisis management of COVID-19

Analyzing the verbatim responses of the interviewed administrators, we have observed the effects of the crisis and its aftermath on the municipality's operations. The crisis had adverse effects on the management of certain services, leading to unprecedented disruptions such as service delays and extended timelines. This sentiment was unanimously echoed by the administrators. Nonetheless, the majority of them view the COVID-19 event as an opportunity and a chance to learn and glean insights for public service management. It serves as an occasion to expedite projects that have been underway for years, yet their impact has been intangible, as seen with digitization. This was a governmental project marked by indecision in certain sectors and delayed progress in others. With the circumstances brought about by COVID-19, digitization has become an essential tool across all services. From an administrative standpoint, this crisis is seen as both an opportunity and a constraint, particularly concerning citizens' access to services. Administrators express their contentment with the strategies chosen to manage this crisis.

The services most impacted and affected by COVID-19 are those with direct citizen engagement, such as civil registration, and those requiring gatherings or assemblies, such as recreational, cultural, and sporting activities. Hence, they received special attention. An administrator in the Urban Planning and Heritage Service highlights that the management of certain services and the decisions they entail are contingent upon the nature of the services and the progress of associated projects.

"Regarding the progress of certain projects and services, we were compelled to postpone some, particularly those with scientific and artistic characteristics, and alter working methods, such as in international collaborations. Indeed, in our municipality, we have grown accustomed to hosting experience-sharing sessions annually between cities from different countries, aiming to foster potential collaborations. However, this year, due to COVID-19, we were limited to organizing these exchanges virtually. This shift in working methods and the move towards digitalization is undoubtedly a double-edged sword. While we managed to save in terms of

financial resources, the face-to-face meetings were more effective and also had other dimensions, including the bolstering of economic activity in the city of F".

This administrator's statement also corroborates the interconnectedness and coherence existing between crisis management policies, chosen strategies, and the subsequent decisions made. It underscores that the municipality responded promptly to the crisis and its various circumstances, employing retroactive actions, but lacked comprehensive planning.

Although the crisis brought forth a set of intricate challenges, it can also be perceived as a valuable opportunity for organizational learning. According to Deverell (2010), crises provide occasions for drawing lessons to enhance management and mitigate future risks. The opportunity for organizational learning is founded upon the municipality's capacity to analyze, reflect, and adjust in response to complex events. By leveraging these insights, municipalities can position themselves to be more resilient, adaptable, and prepared to confront future uncertainties. The lessons gleaned from this price point to the necessity of investing in human resources and providing them with relevant training aligned with contemporary management needs, such as mastery of computerized tools and technology usage, as declared by the head of Human Resources: *"Following this crisis, I was able to construct a holistic vision of our municipality's strengths and weaknesses. I understood that it is essential to invest even more in human resources through suitable training tailored to their needs, enabling them to work under appropriate conditions and keep up with this new evolution of electronic administration".* Therefore, what matters is the quality of personnel rather than the headcount, as emphasized by the head of IT and Communications when the municipality attempted telecommuting for the first time: *"We have learned from this crisis that the management of*

a public service can function even with a reduced workforce; competence, efficiency, and perseverance during work are essential". This underscores the necessity of relying on digitization and accelerating it within the municipality: *"We have realized that digitization is the future and that we should not have expected this crisis to reveal it".* Furthermore, the experience of this crisis has redefined the municipality's priorities, emphasizing the need for effective time management, modernizing its management tools, and the necessity of proactive strategies to anticipate potential crises and understand how to adapt to the various situations and changes induced by the environment.

"This crisis was a school that allowed us to learn so much. We were able to conduct a multi-level analysis of our strengths and weaknesses. We learned that planning and projecting into the future are necessary, as we have experienced through this COVID-19 episode that some foreign municipalities did not undergo a significant shock due to their preparedness. We also recognized the importance of digitization and its growth during this period, leading to the digitalization of services that meet the demands of the context and also address funding issues often identified. Thus, this crisis opened our eyes to new methods, practices, and management processes, as well as the municipality's capacity to respond to setbacks even with minimal resources" (Administrator in the General Services Department).

Crisis management encompasses the adopted strategies that lead to decision-making. These elements form a virtuous circle of feedback and adaptation. The relationship among them can be seen as a complex web of continuous interactions and adjustments (Figure 6). These three elements interweave and mutually influence each other, creating an adaptive operational framework that enables a municipality to respond in a coordinated and thoughtful manner to the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Figure 6. Map of the relationship between crisis management, decision-making and strategies
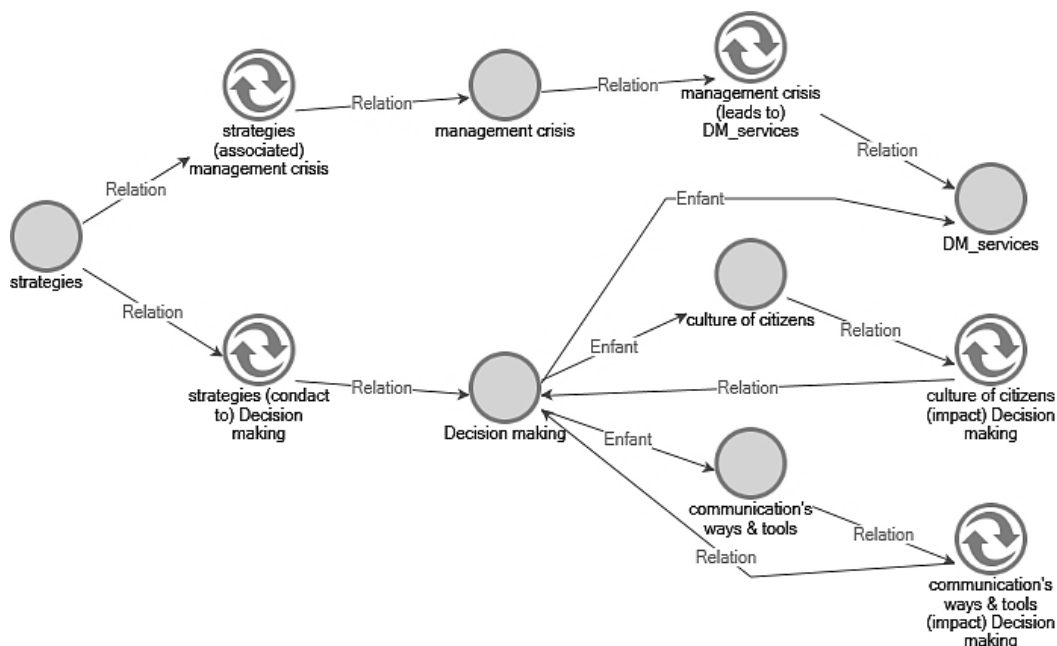
Source: Authors' elaboration using NVivo 12 software.

Strategies guide actions in response to the crisis, while lessons learned, new information, and evolving contexts influence the adjustments made. This constant interconnectedness allows the municipality to navigate the uncertainty of the crisis by making decisions that appear the most informed and appropriate. The overarching context of the crisis has altered traditional decision-making patterns by reshaping decision-making policies and the roles of actors. Decisions are made based on strategies while considering the specific power of the organizational structure and culture, as well as the significance of regulations and the authority of oversight that reemerge during this crisis.

5. CONCLUSION

This article examines the management of local public services in a crisis context, taking the example of COVID-19 as a case study in a specific municipal context. To study the changes induced by this crisis, we focused on two essential concepts in the crisis management process, namely strategies and decision-making.

The choice of context and case study is of strong academic interest, as municipalities are an underexplored research field, and COVID-19 is a recent crisis that has attracted the attention of several management scholars approaching the subject from different perspectives. The main contribution of this work is to highlight the municipality's response in times of crisis, specifying the peculiarities of public service management, the strategies to be pursued, and the decisions to be made.

Based on the identified conceptual framework, Van de Ven & Poole's (1995) theory of change, we aimed to explain the changes that affected the studied municipality through a multiple case study approach involving 10 interviews with the responsible personnel of each service.

The study's findings show that this crisis exceptionally changed the service management system. It represented a catalyst for organizational change, manifested by the adoption of new decision-making approaches and modern digital tools.

Transitioning from a certain environment (the normal situation before COVID-19) to an uncertain environment (crisis situation), we could identify crucial aspects of decision-making characterized by stakeholder engagement and the absence of citizen involvement in the process, with notable efforts made by the municipality to maintain communication with them. The centralization approach marked this stage, due to the lack of experience among local public decision-makers in managing similar situations. With the aim of avoiding potential problems and errors that could further complicate the situation, the government considered intervening again and urgently.

The decision-making philosophy adopted by the municipality results from the implemented strategies, which proved their relevance in this tumultuous period to address crisis challenges. The strategies applied are not far from those employed in other crises, including cost optimization, digitalization, and adaptation, accompanied by learning. This analysis demonstrated the resilience and agility the municipality exhibited during this crisis while emphasizing valuable lessons to be drawn for the future, including learning and prioritizing planning.

The principal methodological constraint inherent in this study pertains to the potential challenges associated with extrapolating the findings to analogous contexts. This challenge is rooted in the notable disparities among municipalities, encompassing their distinct characteristics, administrative structures, and cultural attributes within the territory. To address this limitation, the integration of quantitative methodologies emerges as a viable alternative, offering a means to fortify the scientific rigour and comprehensiveness of the outcomes obtained.

This study opens up further reflections. To address the research limitations and gain a broader and more holistic understanding, a comparative study between different municipalities could be relevant, or opting for longitudinal research to track the evolution of crisis management strategies and decision-making across multiple crises, which would allow identifying long-term trends and changes.
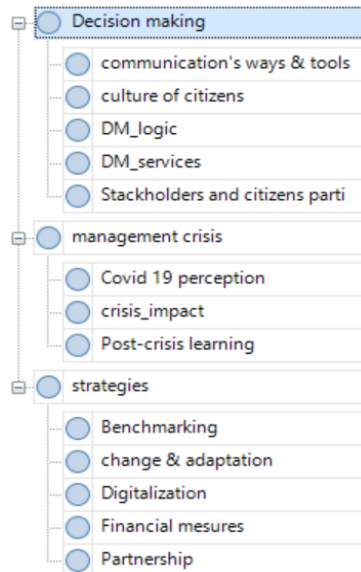
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APPENDIX A. CODES

Source: Authors' elaboration using NVivo 12 software.

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Axes	Questions
Crisis management	• Does your municipality rely on technological tools in its daily management even before COVID-19 crisis? Which department use these technologies the most? • Is your municipality being able to adapt with COVID-19 crisis? • What type of managerial change did the municipality implement during COVID-19 crisis? strategic change, laws change, procedure's change, management methods change, structural change? Others? • What constraints/difficulties have you encountered in managing local public services during COVID-19 crisis? • From a managerial point of view, what are the lessons you have learned from this crisis?
Decisions making	• Could you please explain the decisions making process in your municipality? • Which stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process during a crisis? • Are citizens involved in the decision-making process? If yes, how citizens contribute to the decision making?
Strategies	• What strategies you have adopted to overcome COVID-19 crisis? • Do you think these strategies are enough to deal with the current COVID-19 crisis? • What are the specific and distinguishing measures have you implemented to ensure the continuity of public services delivery?
Impact	• What services are most affected by COVID-19 crisis? • How did this crisis impact local public services delivery? • Citizens' access to local public services are impacted due to COVID-19?

Source: Authors' elaboration.