COPE

Combating Poverty in Europe

Work Package 4
Multilevel "Arenas" for Fighting Poverty and Social Exclusion

THE EUROPE 2020 ANTI-POVERTY ARENA

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SEVENTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME

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Abbreviations

AGS	Annual Growth Survey
AROP	People at risk of poverty (EU 2020 indicator)
AROPE	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (EU 2020 indicator)
BEPGs	Broad Economic Guidelines
BMFSFJ	Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Germany)
CNSP	National Parenting Support Committee (France)
CS	City Strategy (United Kingdom)
CSRs	Country Specific Recommendations
DG	Directorate General (European Commission)
DG Empl.	European Commission- Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
DWP	Department of Work and Pensions (United Kingdom)
EAPN	European Anti-Poverty Network
EaSI	EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation
EC	European Commission
Ecofin	Economic and Financial Affairs Council
EEC	European Economic Community
EEGs	European Employment Guidelines
EES	European Employment Strategy
EPAP	European Platform Against Poverty and social exclusion
EPSCO	Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council
EU	European Union
Eurofound	European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions
IGs	Integrated Guidelines
ISEE	Equivalent economic status indicator (Italy)
LWI	People living in households with very low work intensity (EU 2020 indicator)
MS	EU member states
NAPs	National Action Plans
NAPs/Incl.	National Action Plans against poverty and social exclusion
NAV	Labour and Welfare Administration (Norway)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLRPs	National Lisbon Reform Programs
NRPs	National Reform Programmes
NSRs	National Social Reports
OMC	Open method of coordination
OSE	European Social Observatory
PPMI	Public Policy and Management Institute
PROGRESS	Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity
QuP	Qualification Programme (Norway)
SGP	Stability and Growth Pact
SII	Social Integration Income (Portugal)
SPC	Social Protection Committee
SMD	People severely materially deprived (EU indicator)
SPPM	Social Protection Performance Monitor

Foreword

Reducing poverty and social exclusion is one of the main challenges for ensuring social cohesion in Europe. The research project COPE – Combating Poverty in Europe: Re-organising Active Inclusion through Participatory and Integrated Modes of Multilevel Governance' – analyses trends of poverty and social exclusion in Europe, and examines the dynamics of minimum income protection policies that potentially help alleviate the risk of poverty in Europe. A particular focus is on the situation of single parents, long-term unemployed and the working poor, who face particular risks of poverty and social exclusion. To what extent have minimum income policies functioned as last resort social security for these three groups, and in what sense can 'active inclusion' policies credited with protecting them from poverty and social exclusion?

Co-financed by the European Commission in the 7th Framework Programme, the COPE project unites researchers and stakeholders from six European countries, the UK, Italy, Poland, Sweden, and Norway. Having started in February 2012, COPE runs over a three-year period. COPE's method is comparative – analysing developments in five European countries (Poland, Germany, UK, Sweden and Italy). Its focus is inherently multi-level, looking in turn at developments at European, national and local level.

Introduction[*]

In the midst of the economic, financial and sovereign debt crises, the shift from the "Lisbon agenda" to the "Europe 2020" phase in 2010 - with the launch of the novel European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth - has represented a critical juncture for European coordination strategies in the social policy sector.

Compared to the previous Lisbon-Social OMC period (2001-10), Europe 2020 has actually represented *discontinuity* with respect to the governance tools and mechanisms as well as the main aims and goals. In fact, the new strategy not only introduced its novel governance arm, the "European Semester" for policy coordination, but also provided for (at least formal) deeper *integration* of social policies in the broader European framework for financial and economic governance. Within the changed framework, while two of the main pillars of the social OMC – pensions and health care – were mostly addressed in terms of financial-economic sustainability, the field of anti-poverty & social exclusion policies, in particular, has gained unprecedented prominence, since poverty reduction ranks among the five key goals of the new supranational framework.

More precisely, the vague objective of "eradicating poverty" which characterized the former Lisbon strategy was replaced by a possibly less ambitious, but potentially more incisive, quantified poverty target - lifting at least 20 million people out of poverty or social exclusion by 2020 - which is one of the five targets, as well as the main social innovation, of Europe 2020. Also, among the new seven European Flagship initiatives, the "European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion" was launched with the aim to support the EU and MS to reach the quantified poverty target.

At the same time, however, the main components of the social OMC - such as national reports, joint reports and related indicators, were suspended or eliminated in 2011. Only the PROGRESS "peer review" meetings were maintained. These meetings, aimed at promoting mutual learning among the participating countries, had been organised since 1999 in the framework of the European Employment Strategy, later extended to OMC for the fight against poverty and social exclusion in 2004, and to the three social policy fields (social inclusion, pensions, healthcare and long-term care) after the 2006 'streamlining' of the OMC. Their continuation under the new European policy framework therefore represents a *trait d'union* between the Lisbon phase and Europe 2020.

In line with the COPE-project analytical framework, this reports intends to analyse the novel Europe 2020 anti-poverty arena with the aim to capture likely moves towards - or possible steps back from – a more *integrated* (across policy sectors) and *participatory* arena – along both the horizontal (multi-stakeholder) and the vertical (multilevel) dimensions.

Accordingly, and against the backdrop outlined above, the report presents a dual structure. In Section A, the analytical focus is posed on the Europe 2020 anti-poverty dimension and its implementation over the first four annual cycles (2011-14). The aims is to assess whether, and in case to what extent, the current EU anti-poverty tool-kit is well-suited to tackle the (most severe) social consequences of recent economic developments and austerity measures by promoting *effective governance* of anti-poverty policies through the European Semester in a *multilevel*, *multi-stakeholder* and possibly *integrated* (across policy sectors) *arena.*

The second section (B) is instead devoted to the in-depth analysis and interpretation of five "peer review" meetings on topics strictly related to anti-poverty and social inclusion policies and measures, each involving one of the five COPE countries.

What follows relies on research carried out in COPE-Work Package 4. This included two main strands of research: the first, research at the supranational level, conducted by the team of the University of Milan; the second, the drafting of 5 national reports by the German, the Italian, the Polish, the Swedish and the British teams on their respective countries. In addition to literature review and the analysis of official documents as well as documents produced by the main actors involved in active inclusion and anti-poverty policies both the national and the supranational level, mainly qualitative research techniques have been applied, notably including the conduction, and subsequent analysis, of 13 interviews at the European level and approximately 75 interviews in the five COPE countries (15 interviews each).

SECTION A

THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY IN THE NEW MULTILEVEL, MULTI-STAKEHOLDER AND INTEGRATED GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

At the end of the "Lisbon phase" in 2010, the launch of Union's novel *grand strategy* Europe 2020 was initially welcomed by the literature as a promising step forward in the EU anti-poverty dimension (Marlier et al. 2010) – which represents a major brick of "social Europe" since decades (cf. Armstrong 2010) – for two reasons. First, because of the full integration of the social dimension, especially the fight against poverty and social exclusion, in the novel Europe 2020 governance structure for economic (and social) coordination[1]. Second, because the vague objective of "eradicating poverty" included in the Lisbon strategy was replaced by a less ambitious, but more realistic and potentially incisive, quantitative poverty target: lifting at least 20 million people out of poverty or social exclusion by 2020 is in fact the key quantitative poverty target, as well as the main (social) innovation, of Europe 2020.

However, not only recent contributions have cast doubts on the effectiveness of both the new strategy and more generally the EU in combating poverty and social exclusion (Copeland and Daly 2013; Peña-Casas 2012; Pochet 2010), also poverty is on the rise in Europe and recent austerity measures in several Member States (MS) might kill the "sick patient" (Frazer and Marlier 2012).

Against such backdrop, the Section A of this report aims to assess whether, and in case to what extent, the current EU social policy tool-kit is well-suited to tackle the (most severe) social consequences of recent economic developments and austerity measures by promoting *effective governance* of anti-poverty policies in a *multilevel* and *multi-stakeholder arena*. The underlying idea is actually that, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of *soft coordination* tools - such as European coordination mechanisms in the social policy field - *processes* rather than outcomes should be assessed - though the setting of a quantitative poverty target does not allow to fully disregard the latter. Also, it can plausibly be argued that, in presence of soft non-binding governance mechanisms, the chances to reach the targets (here, the poverty

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[1] Letting education and labor market policies aside, it has to be noted that (anti-)poverty is the only social policy sector fully integrated in the Europe 2020 governance architecture and for which a quantitative target was set. No targets were defined for the two main pillars of European welfare states, i.e. pensions and health care, which are consequently mainly addressed in terms of economic and fiscal sustainability (e.g. in Annual Growth Surveys, Country Specific Recommendations, etc..).

target) depend on the emergence of a European "policy arena" characterized by the following elements: i) actual *multilevel interactions* with effective steering ability by EU institutions; ii) open, recurrent and effective *stakeholder involvement* at various levels of government; iii) not only formal, but actual *integration* between anti-poverty and economic-financial policies in the governance framework. These also represent the main analytical dimensions of this report which is structured as follows.

Section 1 illustrates the main features of the overarching Europe 2020 governance architecture with a special focus on the goals and the governance tools in the field of anti-poverty policies. Section 2 briefly analyses recent poverty and social exclusion trends in Europe. The core of empirical research is included in the subsequent sections, aimed to assess the implementation of the new strategy in the first three cycles (2011-2013) and in accordance with the analytical dimensions outlined above. In sections 3 and 4 we contend that relatively different dynamics in two subsequent periods maybe identified: after the very weak implementation of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty component in 2011-2012, since the end of 2012 a number of measures have been taken in order to reinforce the European strategy against poverty and social exclusion. Section 5 thus provides an interpretation of these developments by proposing a nuanced view on the effectiveness of novel European anti-poverty tools, which actually show both weaknesses and strengths. On the one hand, the Europe 2020 social dimension suffers from ineffective design, especially with respect to its integration with the Social OMC. On the other hand, within a unfinished social governance architecture, a multilevel and highly visible anti-poverty arena is gradually emerging, characterized by open stakeholder mobilization and political pressure at the supranational level as well as EU bodies' innovative policy proposals.

We argue that the emergence of such a novel arena and the gradual reinforcement of the EU2020 social and especially anti-poverty component is the result of three main factors: i) increased problem pressure in many MS, ii) stakeholder mobilization – mostly supranational anti-poverty NGOs; combined with, iii) reaction by more socially sensitive European institutions with the launch of a number of initiatives aimed to achieve the Europe 2020 poverty and social exclusion target.

Building on the main findings of research at the supranational level summarized in section 6, the next paragraphs sets the stage for analyzing the implementation of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty component in the five COPE countries – Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the UK. Sections 8 and 9 then present an assessment of key findings from country reports.

1. New strategy, new governance architecture

The Europe 2020 strategy aims at turning the EU into a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy – the "three overarching priorities" - characterized by high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. In line with the 3 priorities, the European Council adopted 5 "headline targets" and 10 "Integrated Guidelines" (IGs): one of the former concerns poverty, four of the latter regard employment and in fact also social policies (see below). In addition, 7 "Flagship initiatives" were launched to support actions at various levels of government with the aim to achieve the headline targets.

In order to strengthen economic and social governance, the Council also introduced a cyclical and iterative process based on the so called "European Semester" which integrated the processes – of both reporting and monitoring – previously related to the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), the country-reporting system within the Lisbon Strategy and especially the coordination of employment and economic policies (Armstrong 2012). Inaugurated in late Autumn each year with the publication of European Commission's Annual Growth Survey (AGS) which identifies the main challenges and provides policy advices to MS, the Semester is organized in various steps. By mid-April, MS draft their National Reform Programmes (NRPs) to outline/review their medium-term fiscal, economic and social strategies, translate the EU level targets into "national targets", also identifying the main bottlenecks to reach the targets and setting out actions to be undertaken to reach national goals. In June and July the Commission and the Council review the NRPs and provide country specific recommendations (CSRs) to MS (Frazer *et al.* 2010; Vanhercke 2011).

The Europe 2020 anti-poverty dimension (table 1a) is linked to the top priority of ensuring "inclusive growth" – that is the attempt to build a cohesive society. In accordance with this priority, one of the 10 IGs regards "promoting social inclusion and combating poverty": it emphasizes, on the one hand, the need to promote active inclusion and especially labour market partecipation as a strategy to fight poverty; on the other hand, it points at the need to reform national social protection systems in order to ensure both adequacy and fiscal sustainability. This guideline was included in the Employment Guidelines and coupled with a quantitative "headline target" on poverty.

The "headline target" on poverty represents the main innovation of the Europe 2020 (social) strategy: the ambitious goal is actually to lift 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020. The target relates to people "at risk of poverty or social exclusion" (AROPE), a measure composed of three indicators focusing on different poverty dimensions:

a) "at risk of poverty" (AROP), i.e. the classic poverty measure based on disposable income; ii) "severe material deprivation" (SMD; iii) "joblessness", that is people living in households with very low work intensity (LWI).

In order to reach the quantitative poverty target, Europe 2020 has substantially changed the policy tool-kit in the field of poverty and social exclusion. A "flagship" - the *European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion* (EPAP) – was established with the aim to involve member states, EU institutions and stakeholders in the fight against poverty.

The governance architecture for tackling poverty and social inclusion within the Europe 2020 framework is summarized in Table 1a.

Table 1a. Europe 2020 and the fight against poverty: priorities, targets, tools

	Europe 2020	Europa 2020 – Poverty
	3 Overarching priorities	Inclusive growth
	10 Integrated guidelines	IG n°10: Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty
	5 Headline targets	lifting 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020
European tools	7 Flagships Initiatives	European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EPAP)
	European semester	Annual Growth Survey Country Specific Recommendations
National tools	National Reform Programs (NRPs)	Include national targets on poverty

Source: Authors' elaboration

The next two sections provide an assessment of the Europe 2020 strategy against poverty and social exclusion by first focusing on "outcomes" in terms of reduction of overall poverty level and in the various MS (Section 2). Second, we analyses "processes", that is the functioning of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty component, with the aim to detect signs of the emergence of a new policy arena based on effective multilevel and multi-stakeholder governance against poverty (Sections 3 and 4).

2. Poverty in Europe, some figures

Poverty and social exclusion indicators displayed some improvements in the second phase of the Lisbon strategy, but the situation turned to negative since the launch of Europe 2020 in 2010: only a few countries registered some improvements since then. With regard to the objective of lifting at least 20 million of people out of the risk of poverty or social exclusion by 2020, it can thus be said that the Europe 2020 strategy started under very bad auspices.

Table 2a. People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% of total population), 2005-2012

Country	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
EU 27	25,7 [e]	25,3[e]	24,4	23,7	23,2	23,7	24,3	24,8
BE	22,6	21,5	21,6	20,8	20,2	20,8	21,0	21,6
BG	:	61,3	60,7	44,8 [b]	46,2	49,2	49,1	49,3
CZ	19,6	18,0	15,8	15,3	14,0	14,4	15,3	15,4
DK	17,2	16,7	16,8	16,3	17,6	18,3	18,9	19,0
DE	18,4	20,2	20,6	20,1	20,0	19,7	19,9	19,6
EE	25,9	22,0	22,0	21,8	23,4	21,7	23,1	23,4
IE	25,0	23,3	23,1	23,7	25,7	27,3	29,4	30,0
EL	29,4	29,3	28,3	28,1	27,6	27,7	31,0	34,6
ES	24,3	24,0	23,3	24,5	24,5	26,7	27,7	28,2
FR	18,9	18,8	19,0	18,5b	18,5	19,2	19,3	19,1
IT	25,0	25,9	26,0	25,3	24,7	24,5	28,2	29,9
CY	25,3	25,4	25,2	23,3 [b]	23,5	24,6	24,6	27,1
LV	46,3	42,2	35,1	34,2 [b]	37,9	38,2	40,1	36,2
LT	41,0	35,9	28,7	27,6	29,6	34,0	33,1	32,5
LU	17,3	16,5	15,9	15,5	17,8	17,1	16,8	18,4
HU	32,1	31,4	29,4	28,2	29,6	29,9	31,0	32,4
MT	20,5	19,5	19,7	20,1	20,3	21,2	22,1	23,1
NL	16,7	16,0	15,7	14,9	15,1	15,1	15,7	15,0
AT	16,8	17,8	16,7	18,6	17,0	16,6	16,9	18,5[b]
PL	45,3	39,5	34,4	30,5 [b]	27,8	27,8	27,2	26,7
PT	26,1	25,0	25,0	26,0	24,9	25,3	24,4	25,3
RO	:	:	45,9	44,2	43,1	41,4	40,3	41,7
SI	18,5	17,1	17,1	18,5	17,1	18,3	19,3	19,6
SK	32,0	26,7	21,3	20,6	19,6	20,6	20,6	20,5
FI	17,2	17,1	17,4	17,4	16,9	16,9	17,9	17,2
SE	14,4	16,3	13,9	14,9	15,9	15,0	16,1	15,6
UK	24,8	23,7	22,6	23,2	22	23,2	22,7	24,1[b]

: = not available; e = estimated; b = break in time series
Source: Eurostat. Last update: 11.07.2014

Looking at the AROPE indicator, two different trends actually emerge between 2005 and 2012: in 2005-2009, poverty and social exclusion decreased in the EU, from 25,7% (i.e. 124 million people) to 23,2% (114 million); however, since 2010 AROPE has started to increase and 24,9% of the EU population (123 million) was at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2012, not far from the 2005 levels. In 12 EU countries such a negative trend started in 2009 already: Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Table 2a).

The current situation in individual MS is varied. In 2012 the percentage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) ranged between almost 50% of the population in Bulgaria and around 15-16% in the Czech Republic and the Netherlands. In the same year, more than 21% of the Bulgarian, Romanian, Spanish and Greek population was at risk of poverty (AROP), while this situation concerned 9,6% of the Czech population only. As for severely materially deprived people (SMD), in 2012 they ranged between 44,1% of the population in Bulgaria to 1,3% in Luxembourg and Sweden. Finally, 2012 data shows that around 14% of Greeks and Spanish lived in households with very low work intensity (LWI), while the percentage was significantly lower in countries like Cyprus (6,4%) and Luxembourg (6,1%)[2].

3. A weak start for Europe 2020

While section 2 showed that poverty rates are rapidly increasing in Europe, sections 3 and 4 aim at assessing the effectiveness of the European anti-poverty strategy by focusing the implementation of Europe 2020 in accordance with the analytical dimensions outlined above: 1) effective interaction between different levels of government; 2) steering ability of EU bodies – primarily the European Commission and the EPAP; 3) stakeholder involvement at various level of government.

3.1. Multi-level interaction and the steering ability of EU institutions

As mentioned above, in the European Semester, key interactions between European institutions and MS occur with the publication of the AGS and the subsequent elaboration of National Reform Programs by MS in order to outline national strategies in accordance with Europe 2020 policy priorities and headline targets.

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[2] As far as LWI indicator is concerned, data referred to 2011 shows that the higher value was registered in Ireland (22,9% of the population). However, Irish data for 2012 are not available.

Secondary literature highlighted that the social dimension was marginal compared to fiscal consolidation measures in the 2011, 2012 and 2013 NRPs. These often lacked long term vision, failed in effectively balancing economic, social and employment objectives (Frazer and Marlier 2012) as well as in linking targets with proposed measures. Some progress on thematic priorities (such as homelessness, Roma inclusion and child poverty) was visible in the 2013 NRPs, though macroeconomic and financial issues continued to be prioritized and the fight against poverty remained weak (EAPN 2013).

With regard to MS' choices in setting national poverty targets (in accordance with the European headline target), in 2011 the majority of MS set realistic goals – as well as close to EU bodies' ambition. However, beside several MS defining national targets in accordance with the indicators agreed at European level, ten countries (BG, DE, DK, EE, FR, IE, LV, NL, SE, UK) did not comply with EU guidelines and used different indicators in their 2011 NRPs (cf. table 3a). This was also confirmed also in 2012 and 2013.

As emerged from interviews with supranational actors, commitment to reduce poverty was not only constrained by the subsidiarity principle and the respect of MS's sovereignty in the field of social policy (Interview 1 EC), but also from the design of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty component. On the one hand, the possibility for MS to choose among the three indicators – though key to build consensus among member states on the introduction of the quantitative poverty target (Interview 2 NGO, Interview 3 EC) – leads to measurability and comparability problems across countries. On the other hand, MS tend choose the indicators which make it easier for them to reach the poverty target, thus reducing the ambition of the European target (Interview 4 EESC): "we have a headline target at the EU level, but the member states can choose their own target. It makes weak commitment to poverty reduction" (Interview 1 EC).

What presented above has already revealed both the limited multilevel interaction and the relatively weak steering capacity of EU institutions as far as the social dimension of Europe 2020 is concerned. At least for the first two cycles (2011 and 2012) similar evidences also emerged when considering: 1) the scarce attention to poverty-related issues especially in the first Annual Growth Survey (2011); 2) the limited use of Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) on poverty in 2011 and 2012; 3) 2) the features and the role of the European Platform Against Poverty and social exclusion within the Europe 2020 framework; 4) the suspension of the main components of the Social OMC in 2011. What follows includes a brief analysis of these four points.

Table 3a. National targets on poverty and social exclusion in NRPs 2011-2014

	Reduction of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion, in number of persons			
	NRP 2011	*NRP 2012*	*NRP 2013*	*NRP 2014*
AT	235,000	=	=	=
BE	380,000	=	=	=
BG	500, 000*	260,000*	=	=
CY	27,000	=	=	=
CZ	30,000	=	=	=
DE	330,000 long-term unemployment*	320,000 long-term unemployment*	=	=
DK	22,000 persons living in households with very low work intensity*	=	=	=
EE	61,860 at risk of poverty *		=	36,248*
EL	450,000	=	=	=
ES	1,400,000-1,500,000	=	=	=
FI	150,000	=	=	140,000
FR	1,600 000 people in the period 2007-2012*	=	No target for 2013-2020*	1,900,000
HR				152,000
HU	450,000	=	=	=
IE	186,000 by 2016*	200,000*	=	=
IT	2,200,000	=	=	=
LT	170,000	=	=	814,000
LU	No target	6,000	=	=
LV	121,000*	=	=	=
MT	6,560	=	=	=
NL	93,000*	=	=	100,000*
PL	1,500,000	=	=	=
PT	200,000	=	=	=
RO	580,000	=	=	=
SE	Reduce the share of those aged 20-64 not in the labour force, the long-term unemployed or those on long-term sick leave to well under 14% **	=	=	=
SI	40,000	=	=	=
SK	170,000	=	=	=
UK	Existing numerical targets of the 2010 Child Poverty Act*	=	=	=

Notes: = no change in target
* Countries that have expressed their national target in relation to an indicator different than the EU headline target indicator

Source: Authors' elaboration from European Commission (2011a; 2012a; 2013c, 2014a)

In the framework of the European Semester, AGSs set priorities to orient the drafting of NRPs. However, when looking at the content of AGSs for the first cycle of multilevel socio-economic coordination (2011), it has to be noted that priorities did not include the fight

against poverty. The scarce attention to the anti-poverty (and more generally, social) dimension within the European Semester is also confirmed by the few CSRs issued by the Commission and the Council in the field of poverty in the same year: only three countries received CSRs on poverty (BG, CY, EE, cf. table 4a), while in five cases (AT, BE, DE, HU, SK) CSRs pointed at the issue of low and medium income workers, which implicitly falls in the field of poverty (Derruine and Tiedemann 2011). As argued by a representative of the Commission this was due to a deliberate political choice at the European level. Actually, at the beginning of Europe 2020 the social dimension was less a priority and there was strong emphasis on fiscal consolidation, while the widespread belief that the crisis would be short-lived suggested addressing fiscal consolidation problems first and then turning to the social dimension (Interview 5, EC).

Table 4a. Country Specific Recommendations on poverty 2011

Bulgaria
Take steps to address the challenge of combating poverty and promoting social inclusion, especially for vulnerable groups facing multiple barriers. Take measures for modernising public employment services to enhance their capacity to match skills profiles with labour market demand; and focusing support on young people with low skills. Advance the educational reform by adopting a Law on Pre-School and School Education and a new Higher Education Act by mid-2012.
Cyprus
Improve the long-term sustainability of public finances by implementing reform measures to control pension and healthcare expenditure in order to curb the projected increase in age-related expenditure. For pensions, extend years of contribution, link retirement age with life expectancy or adopt other measures with an equivalent budgetary effect, while taking care to address the high at-risk-of-poverty rate for the elderly. For healthcare, take further steps to accelerate implementation of the national health insurance system.
Estonia
Take steps to support labour demand and to reduce the risk of poverty, by reducing the tax and social security burden in a budgetary neutral way, as well as through improving the effectiveness of active labour market policies, including by targeting measures on young people and the long-term unemployed, especially in areas of high unemployment

Source: Authors' elaboration on COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS on the implementation of the broad guidelines for the economic policies of the Member States.

For what concerns the establishment of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion, empirical evidences show that the organizational structure of the EPAP is too weak to effectively involve MS, EU institutions and stakeholders. In fact, first, the EPAP was not endowed with adequate resources and it has limited dedicated staff (Interview 6 EC). Second, the EPAP is not fully integrated with the other instruments of European socio-economic coordination, and especially the European Semester: it does not contribute to the

elaboration of the AGS and CSRs, nor national representatives are not included in its staff (Interview 7 NGO). Consequently, at the national level is often not entirely clear "what the Platform is about and for what" (Interview 8 NGO). The most relevant – as well as visible – activities promoted by the EPAP are the organization of both the "Annual Convention" on Poverty and two/three annual "Stakeholder dialogue meetings" (see below).

Finally, when Europe 2020 was launched, the relationship between the EPAP ad the "social OMC" was not well defined. There were worries- especially among NGOs - that the EPAP would replace (rather than integrate) the Social OMC (Interview 9 NGO). In fact, the main components of the OMC - such as national reports, joint reports and related indicators - were suspended or eliminated in 2011 - exception made for the "peer review" meetings funded by PROGRESS[3]. The MS prepared the last National Strategic Report for the period 2008-2010, whereas the last joint report was published in 2010. The dismantlement of the major elements of the OMC governance architecture has not only dispersed an important legacy in terms of knowledge and consolidated relationships (Interview 7 NGO), but it also diluted social reporting into the broader framework of the Semester and socio-economic coordination. This has come to the detriment of the social and especially anti-poverty dimension also because, as mentioned above, in the first three cycles economic and fiscal coordination has gained momentum within the European Semester, thus implying greater influence of the DG Economy and Financial Affairs as well as ECOFIN than DG Employment and Social Affairs in the crucial junctures of the coordination process. In the words of a member of a European NGO "we no longer have a focus on inclusive growth, now the focus is on growth. Europe 2020 has disappeared" (Interview 7 NGO).

3.2. Stakeholder participation

The European strategy against poverty aims to establish a multi-stakeholder arena by promoting broad social actor participation in multilevel policy arena. At the European level two main formalized institutional *fora* should promote the emergence of a multi-stakeholder arena.

The first is the "Stakeholders dialogue meetings" which involve NGOs, social partners, foundations, international organizations, EU institutions and external bodies. There are two/three meetings per year, attended by about 100 organizations (Interview 6, EC). However meetings "are used by the Commission more to provide information than to create room for

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[3] Cf. Agostini *et al.* (2013).

joint decisions" (Interview 7, NGO). The second forum is the "Annual Convention against Poverty" that according to some stakeholders is "the only visible initiative related to the Platform. This said, however, doubts about the effectiveness of the Annual Convention in supporting actions for achieving the Europe 2020 poverty target are raised: it is not clear what it will actually deliver, what is the concrete outcome of the annual convention" (Interview 7, NGO)

At national level, the Commission called for a strong involvement of stakeholders in the drafting of NRPs but little guidance for such involvement was provided thus far. Though in 2012 participation was higher than in 2011, most interviewees pointed at both limited stakeholder involvement in this process and the fact that stakeholders to be involved in the governance architecture are not clearly identified. Consequently, at the national level, mostly social partners – i.e. trade unions and employer representatives – have been included, much less so NGOs (Interview 7 NGO).

4. Strengthening the Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy

As emerged from the analysis presented so far, the Europe 2020 anti-poverty dimension of had a weak start in the two years after the launch of the new strategy. However, there are evidences that after 2012 several initiatives have been taken with the aim to reinforce the Europe 2020 social and anti-poverty dimension: 1) greater emphasis on the social dimension in the AGSs; 2) broader use of Country Specific Recommendations on poverty; 3) an attempt to revive the Social OMC; 4) the launch of the Social Investment Package coupled with the re-launch of the "Active Inclusion Strategy"; 5) the Commission Communication on the social dimension of the EMU; 6) new guidelines for using European funds.

4.1. The European Semester and the attempt to re-launch the social OMC

The 2012 AGS introduced a new priority, "tackling unemployment and the social consequences of the crisis" which indirectly addressed the issues of poverty and social inclusion. Such priority was confirmed in both the 2013 and the 2014 AGSs also accompanied by claims for further strengthening the social dimension (table 5a)[4]. As emerged

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[4] In addition to top priorities, the 2014 AGS included a number of indications relevant for social policies: i) "A widespread need to strengthen the efficiency and financial sustainability of social protection systems, notably pensions and healthcare systems while enhancing their effectiveness and adequacy in meeting social needs and ensuring essential safety nets. In many countries, pension reforms should be completed by linking statutory retirement age to life expectancy more systematically."; ii) "Shifting tax burden away from labour on to tax

from an interview with a Commission representative "in 2012 it has become clear that crisis was longer [than expected in 2011], and that we needed already to start having policy to protect and to tackle the social consequences of the crises. So there was a shift ….it became clear that a considerable number of European citizens were in hardship, and that in one or two years of crisis this hardship can increase and we need of tackling" (Interview 5 EC).

Table 5a. Priorities in the Annual Growth Surveys, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014

2011	
Fundamental Prerequisites for Growth	1. Implementing a rigorous fiscal consolidation
	2. Correcting macroeconomic imbalances
	3. Ensuring stability of the financial sector
Mobilising Labour Markets, Creating Job Opportunities	4. Making work more attractive
	5. Reforming pensions systems
	6. Getting the unemployed back to work
	7. Balancing security and flexibility
Frontloading Growth – Enhancing measures	8. Tapping the potential of the Single Market
	9. Attracting private capital to finance growth
	10. Creating cost-effective access to energy
2012	
Pursuing differentiated growth-friendly fiscal consolidation	
Restoring normal lending to the economy	
Promoting growth and competitiveness for today and tomorrow	
Tackling unemployment and the social consequences of the crisis	
2013	
Pursuing differentiated, growth-friendly fiscal consolidation	
Restoring normal lending to the economy	
Promoting growth and competitiveness for today and tomorrow	
Tackling unemployment and the social consequences of the crisis	
Modernising public administration	
2014	
Pursuing differentiated, growth-friendly fiscal consolidation	
Restoring normal lending to the economy	
Promoting growth and competitiveness for today and tomorrow	
Tackling unemployment and the social consequences of the crisis	
Modernising public administration	

Source: Authors' elaboration

Parallel to change in AGSs' emphasis, since 2012 the European Commission and the Council made larger use of CSRs on poverty. As summarised in table 6a, in the second Europe 2020 cycle 7 countries received a CSR on poverty (BG, CY, ES, HU, LV, LT, PL, RO, UK), and

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bases linked to consumption, property and pollution; iii) "The need for longer working lives in the context of an ageing workforce and the promotion of lifelong learning, enabling working environments and policies to close the gender pay and pension gap"; iv) "The need to promote ownership of the European Semester at national level by involvements of parliaments, social partners and civil society.

then trend was confirmed in 2013, when the use of CSRs further increased and 9 countries received CSRs on poverty (BE, BG, ES, HU, LT, LV, PL, RO, UK) (European Commission 2013 Annex) – nineteen if recommendations indirectly related to poverty and social exclusion are considered. Finally, according to the most recent CSRs approved by the Council at the end of June 2014[5], 10 countries should take actions against poverty and social exclusion. The content of the 2012, 2013 and 2014 CSRs is reported in table 7a.

Table 6a. Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) on poverty 2011-2014, summary

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014
AT				
BE			■	
BG	■	■	■	■
CY	■	■		*
CZ				
DE				
DK				
EE	■			
EL	*	*	*	*
ES		■	■	■
FI				
FR				
HR	*	*	*	
HU			■	■
IE				■
IT				■
LT		■	■	■
LU				
LV		■	■	■
MT				
NL				
PL		■	■	
PT				■
RO			■	■
SE				
SI				
SK				
UK		■	■	■

* did not apply
Source: Authors' elaboration

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[5] Cf. http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ecofin/143281.pdf.

Table 7a. Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) on poverty 2012, 2013 and 2014.

CSRs 2012

Bulgaria

Accelerate the implementation of the national Youth Employment Initiative. Ensure that the minimum thresholds for social security contributions do not discourage declared work. Step up efforts to improve the Public Employment Service's performance. To alleviate poverty, improve the effectiveness of social transfers and the access to quality social services for children and the elderly and implement the National Roma Integration Strategy.

Latvia

Tackle high rates of poverty and social exclusion by reforming the social assistance system to make it more efficient, while better protecting the poor. Ensure better targeting and increase incentives to work

Lithuania

Increase work incentives and strengthen the links between the social assistance reform and activation measures, in particular for the most vulnerable, to reduce poverty and social exclusion.

Spain

Improve the employability of vulnerable groups, combined with effective child and family support services in order to improve the situation of people at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion, and consequently to achieve the well-being of children.

Cyprus

Further improve the long-term sustainability and adequacy of the pensions system and address the high at-risk-of-poverty rate for the elderly. Ensure an increase in the effective retirement age, including through aligning the statutory retirement age with the increase in life expectancy.

Poland

To reduce youth unemployment, increase the availability of apprenticeships and work-based learning, improve the quality of vocational training and adopt the proposed lifelong learning strategy. Better match education outcomes with the needs of the labour market and improve the quality of teaching. To combat labour market segmentation and in-work poverty, limit excessive use of civil law contracts and extend the probationary period to permanent contracts.

UK

Step up measures to facilitate the labour market integration of people from jobless households. Ensure that planned welfare reforms do not translate into increased child poverty. Fully implement measures aiming to facilitate access to childcare services.

CSRs 2013

Belgium

Further reduce disincentives to work by ensuring effective enforcement of job-search requirements and personalised job search assistance for all unemployed. Take measures to increase interregional labour mobility. Simplify and reinforce coherence between employment incentives, activation policies, labour matching, education, lifelong learning and vocational training policies for older people and youth. Develop comprehensive social-inclusion and labour market strategies for people with a migrant background.

Bulgaria

Accelerate the national Youth Employment Initiative, for example through a Youth Guarantee. Further strengthen the capacity of the Employment Agency with a view to providing effective counselling to jobseekers and develop capacity for identifying and matching skill needs. Enhance active labour-market policies, in particular concerning national employment schemes. Undertake a review of the minimum thresholds for social security contributions to ensure that the system does not price the low-skilled out of the labour market. Ensure concrete delivery of the National Strategies on Poverty and Roma integration. Improve the accessibility and effectiveness of social transfers and services, in particular for children and older people.

Spain

Adopt and implement the necessary measures to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion by reinforcing active labour market policies to improve employability of people further away from the labour market and by improving the targeting and increasing efficiency and effectiveness of support measures including quality family support services.

Hungary

Address youth unemployment, for example through a Youth Guarantee. Strengthen active labour market policy measures and enhance the client profiling system of the Public Employment Service. Reduce the dominance of the public works scheme within employment measures and strengthen its activation elements. Reinforce training programmes to boost participation in lifelong learning. Continue to expand child-care facilities to encourage women's participation. Ensure that the objective of the National Social Inclusion Strategy is mainstreamed in all policy fields in order to reduce poverty, particularly among children and Roma.

Latvia

Tackle high rates of poverty by reforming social assistance for better coverage, by improving benefit adequacy and activation measures for benefit recipients. Reinforce the delivery mechanisms to effectively reduce child poverty.

Lithuania

Implement concrete targeted measures to reduce poverty and social exclusion. Continue strengthening the links between the cash social assistance reform and activation measure

Poland

Strengthen efforts to reduce youth unemployment, for example through a Youth Guarantee, increase the availability of apprenticeships and work-based learning, strengthen cooperation between schools and employers and improve the quality of teaching. Adopt the proposed life- long learning strategy. Combat in-work poverty and labour market segmentation including through better transition from fixed-term to permanent employment and by reducing the excessive use of civil law contracts.

Romania

Improve labour market participation, as well as employability and productivity of the labour force, by reviewing and strengthening active labour market policies, to provide training and individualised services and promoting lifelong learning. Enhance the capacity of the National Employment Agency to increase the quality and coverage of its services. To fight youth unemployment, implement rapidly the National Plan for Youth Employment, including for example through a Youth Guarantee. To alleviate poverty, improve the effectiveness and efficiency of social transfers with a particular focus on children. Complete the social assistance reform by adopting the relevant legislation and strengthening its link with activation measures. Ensure concrete delivery of the National Roma integration strategy.

United Kingdom

Enhance efforts to support low-income households and reduce child poverty by ensuring that the Universal Credit and other welfare reforms deliver a fair tax-benefit system with clearer work incentives and support services. Accelerate the implementation of planned measures to reduce the costs of childcare and improve its quality and availability

CSRs 2014

Bulgaria

In order to alleviate poverty, further improve the accessibility and effectiveness of social services and transfers for children and older people.

Spain

Implement the 2013-2016 National Action Plan on Social Inclusion and assess its effectiveness covering the full range of its objectives. Strengthen administrative capacity and coordination between employment and social services in order to provide integrated pathways to support those at risk, and boost, among the Public Administrations responsible for the minimum income schemes, streamlined procedures to support transitions between minimum income schemes and the labour market. Improve the targeting of family support schemes and quality services favouring low-income households with children, to ensure the progressivity and effectiveness of social transfers.

Hungary

Improve the adequacy and coverage of social assistance while strengthening the link to activation. In order to alleviate poverty, implement streamlined and integrated policy measures to reduce poverty significantly, particularly among children and Roma.

Ireland
Tackle low work intensity of households and address the poverty risk of children through tapered withdrawal of benefits and supplementary payments upon return to employment. Facilitate female labour market participation by improving access to more affordable and full-time childcare, particularly for low income families.

Italy
To address exposure to poverty and social exclusion, scale-up the new pilot social assistance scheme, in compliance with budgetary targets, guaranteeing appropriate targeting, strict conditionality and territorial uniformity, and strengthening the link with activation measures. Improve the effectiveness of family support schemes and quality services favouring low-income households with children.

Latvia
Reform social assistance and its financing further to ensure better coverage, adequacy of benefits, strengthened activation and targeted social services. Increase coverage of active labour market policies. Improve the cost-effectiveness, quality and accessibility of the healthcare system.

Lithuania
Ensure adequate coverage of those most in need and continue to strengthen the links between cash social assistance and activation measures.

Portugal
Ensure adequate coverage of social assistance, including the minimum income scheme, while ensuring effective activation of benefit recipients.

Romania
In order to alleviate poverty, increase the efficiency and effectiveness of social transfers, particularly for children, and continue reform of social assistance, strengthening its links with activation measures. Step up efforts to implement the envisaged measures to favour the integration of Roma in the labour market, increase school attendance and reduce early school leaving, through a partnership approach and a robust monitoring mechanism.

United Kingdom
Continue efforts to reduce child poverty in low-income households, by ensuring that the Universal Credit and other welfare reforms deliver adequate benefits with clear work incentives and support services. Improve the availability of affordable quality childcare.

Source: Authors' elaboration on COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS on the implementation of the broad guidelines for the economic policies of the Member States.

The evolution of the decision-making process around the CSRs represents a good example to illustrate the on-going attempts by "socially oriented" actors - notably the Employment Committee-EMCO and the Social Protection Committee-SPC - aimed at increasing their influence on the governance process. Indeed, according to Vanhercke (2013), after the disappointing results obtained in the first cycle of CSRs, the Social Protection Committee and the Employment Committee have been gradually intensifying their collaboration in order to counterbalance the weight of "economic oriented" committees (the Economic Policy Committee and the Economic and Financial Committee) (*ibidem*: 108)[7]. Interestingly enough, the ability to produce evidence-based analysis supporting their own positions seems to represent an important condition to enhance the possibilities of successfully affecting process. In this respect, it is possible to observe how, in the last few years, the SPC has tried to strengthen its 'analytical toolbox' by contributing to the Europe 2020 'Joint Assessment Framework' (JAF) for monitoring the Employment Guidelines, by developing its own 'Social Protection Performance Monitor' (SPPM), and by intensifying 'mutual surveillance activities', the latter now including in-depth 'thematic reviews' in autumn and 'country reviews' of the NRPs (including the implementation of the CSRs) in spring (Vanhercke 2013).

Beside these developments, in 2012 the EPSCO Council and the SPC officially "reinvigorated" the Social OMC through three main actions: 1) the definition of new - "overarching" and "specific" - objectives referred to three strands of the social OMC (social inclusion, pension, health care and long-term care); 2) the redefinition of the reporting procedure through, first, the introduction of National Social Reports (NSRs) beside the NRPs and, second, SPC annual reports that replicate the main functions of the previous "joint report"; 3) the introduction of the "Social Protection Performance Monitor – SPPM" (SPC 2012) to reinforce monitoring of the social situation, strengthen "multilateral surveillance" by the SPC.

The timing of the national social reporting procedure has then changed at the beginning of 2013: the NSRs are planned to continue as biennial exercise and are therefore scheduled for 2014; by contrast, in the third cycle of the Europe 2020 Strategy (2013) MS were required to

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[7] As Vanhercke (2013:108) points out, "Arguably EMCO realized that excluding the SPC on key decisions (including on pensions) in the end undermined its own position, *vis-à-vis* the EPC/EFC […] it is rather clear that EMCO has safely established itself as the 'hub' of the social committees, which now also includes a newly created Education Committee. All in all it seems fair to say that the networks of decision-makers around social policy are becoming denser (read: involves more of the relevant actors)".

fill a "Complementary Questionnaire" in order to report on enacted reforms in the three OMC social policy fields in the course of 2012.

4.2. The Social Investment Package and the link with Active Inclusion

In 2012, the Commission created a group of independent experts with the aim to identify viable strategies to strengthen the European social and especially anti-poverty dimension. As a result, in February 2013 the "Social Investment Package" was launched (European Commission 2013a). According to the Commission, social investment consists in strengthening people's capabilities in order to prepare them to prevent (or tackle) life's risks thus improving their future prospects. This approach should assure the effectiveness, adequacy and sustainability of social protection systems while enhancing Europe's growth and competitiveness. With the SIP the EC aims at providing guidance for and support to national social policy reforms, by identifying policy areas particularly suitable for pursuing a social investment strategy.

Among the key priorities identified, the implementation of the "Active Inclusion Strategy" is presented as an essential element for achieving the Europe 2020 targets on employment, education, poverty and social exclusion (European Commission 2013b). Indeed, in the auspices of the Commission, the launch of the SIP should help revitalize the 2008 Recommendation on Active Inclusion, whose implementation was weak in most member states, especially as far as the 'adequate income support' and 'access to quality services' pillars are concerned (Frazer and Marlier 2013; European Commission 2013b) .

Compared to the EPAP, the SIP appears more oriented towards the objective of promoting reforms of national social protection systems and more accurate in designing linkages with the European Semester (Sabato and Vanhercke 2014). Member States are requested 'to reflect in their National Reform Programmes the guidance provided in the SIP', while the Commission will 'address social protection reforms and the increased focus on social investment and active inclusion in Country Specific Recommendations and subsequent European Semesters' (European Commission 2013d: 22).

4.3. The 2013 Communication and key decision on European funds

Furthermore, in a Communication published in October 2013, the EC proposed a series of potentially useful initiatives to reinforce the social dimension of the EMU. This Communication highlights "the importance of better monitoring and of taking account of the social and labour market situation in the EMU, notably by using appropriate employment and

social indicators as part of the 'European Semester' process for economic policy coordination" (European Commission 2013e; 1). In this respect, two specific proposals were advanced: 1) to reinforce the current framework for the surveillance of macroeconomic imbalances by complementing existing indicators with others capturing the social implications of those imbalances - among them, the AROPE indicator and its sub-indicators; 2) to develop a 'scoreboard of key employment and social indicators' to be used in the draft Joint Employment reports in order to allow a better and earlier identification of employment and social problems (among them, real gross disposable income of households; at-risk-of-poverty rate of working age population; inequalities (S80/S20 ratio)[8].

Finally, since the launch of Europe 2020, the Commission stressed the need of using the European funds to support the objectives of the strategy (European Commission 2010b). Accordingly, in 2011, the Commission proposed that for the forthcoming budget period at least 20% of the resources of the European Social Fund of each MS should be allocated to the thematic objective of "promoting social inclusion and combating poverty" (European Commission 2011b). This proposal - renewed within the Social Investment Package in 2013 - was eventually approved by the European Parliament in November 2013 within the multiannual financial framework 2014-2020. The new regulation of the ESI Funds – which introduces important innovations such as the establishment of Partnership agreements between the EC and MS and the reinforcement of macro-economic and ex-ante conditionality - lists 'promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination' among the thematic objectives of the Funds. As mentioned above, through the SIP, the European Commission already provided MS with guidance in the use of the funds and, in particular, it indicated the set-up of '[…] national active inclusion strategy […] in accordance with the poverty and social exclusion target of the country concerned, involve[ing] the relevant stakeholders and provid[ing] a sufficient evidence base to monitor developments' as a condition to obtain ESF resources (European Commission 2013b:51). These proposals have been actually incorporated into the Regulation of the ESI Funds and are now among the 'ex-ante conditionality' requirements of the ESF for the thematic objective on poverty and social inclusion.

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[8] Some 'auxiliary social indicators' have already been used in the analysis of the situation of some countries performed in the last 'Alert mechanism report' (November 2013). As for the scoreboard of key employment and social indicators, it has been actually included in the last draft Joint Employment report (November 2013).

5. Towards a more effective arena to combat poverty?

The diachronic analysis of the first three years of implementation of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy has showed that, after a difficult start in 2011-12, more recent developments provide evidence of the gradual emergence of a more vital arena, at least at the supranational level. How can we account for both the weak start and subsequent changes?

We argue that the interaction between structural and more contingent factors affected the implementation of the EU2020 anti-poverty component, among which: the governance architecture of European grand strategy, external challenges (i.e. the economic and fiscal crises), "problem pressure" – i.e. increasing poverty rates - in combination with the balance of power among Commission DGs and, last but not least, actor mobilization at the European level (figure 1).

Figure 1. Evolution of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy (2011-2013)
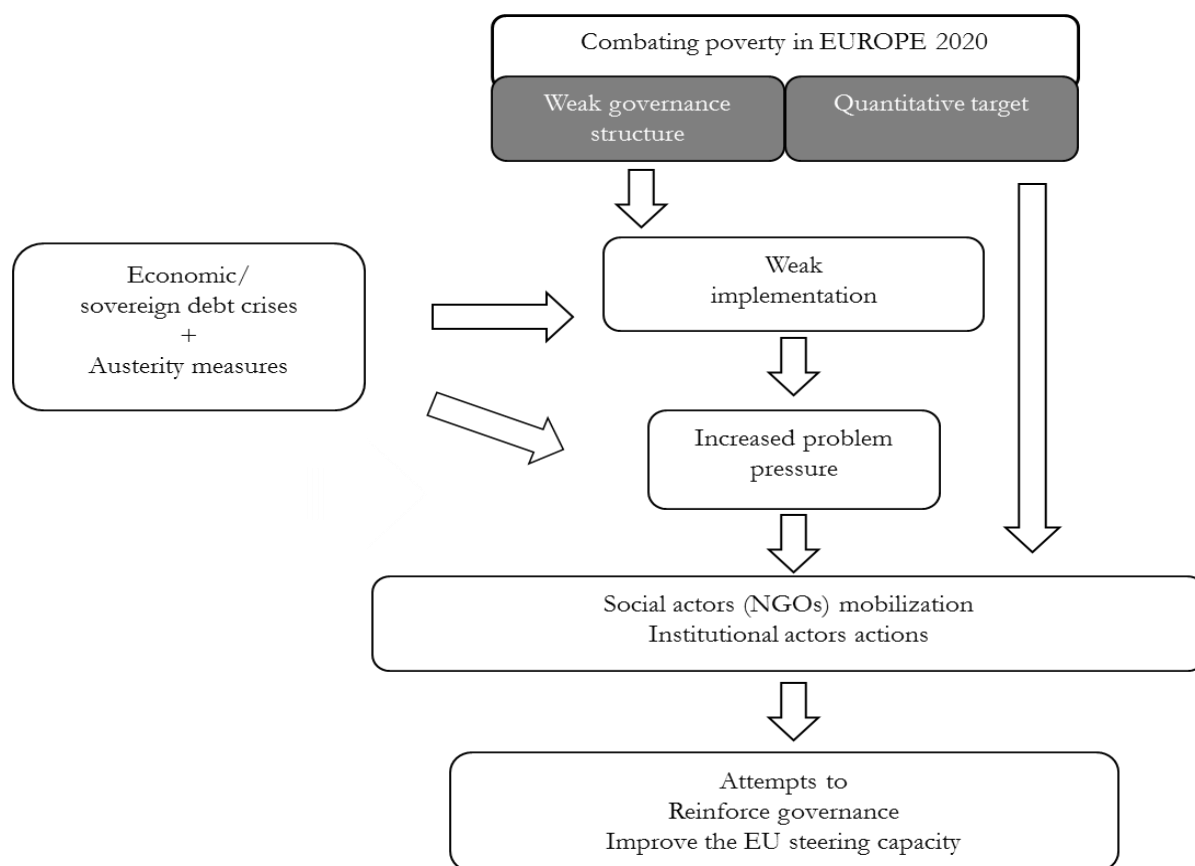
Source: Authors' elaboration

In the first period after the launch of Europe 2020, the economic conjuncture and especially the sovereign debt crisis in a number of MS were not favourable conditions to robust anti-poverty initiatives. Meanwhile the "structural" balance of power among Commission DGs - in favour of DG Ecfin *vis a vis* DG Employment and Social Affairs due to EU's constitutional prerogatives – shifted even more towards the former due to on-going crises, therefore severely limiting the ability of EU bodies to effectively steer and coordinate anti-poverty initiatives in a multi-level and multi-stakeholder arena. Thus, the fight against poverty did not represent a priority in the 2011 AGSs, and only a few countries received CSRs on poverty. Multilevel interaction in the framework of the European Semester mostly focused on economic and financial issues while it has remained formal in the field of poverty and social exclusion – i.e. briefly reporting by MS in their NRPs – and multi-level coordination (if any) lagged behind.

Also some specific features of the Europe 2020 social governance architecture had a negative effect on the possible emergence of an effective multilevel and multi-stakeholder anti-poverty arena. On the one hand, the suspension, or elimination, of the main components of the Social OMC did not only disperse an important legacy in terms of knowledge and consolidated relationships, but it also excessively diluted social reporting activities in the broader framework of the European Semester and (socio-)economic coordination. On the other hand, the EPAP - thought to be the main (Flagship) initiative aimed to support the achievement of the Europe 2020 poverty target - neither was endowed with adequate resources and staff nor (most importantly) was fully integrated in negotiations and decision making at crucial stages of the European Semester. The EPAP actually seems to be more effective in supporting the emergence of a multi-stakeholder arena via two main formalized institutional *fora* - the "Stakeholders dialogue meetings" and the "Annual Convention of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion" – which nonetheless are not the *loci* where decisions are taken. Last but not least, at the national level stakeholder involvement was scarce in 2011 and it has only partly increased in 2012.

Interestingly, however, since 2012 several initiatives have been taken at the European level to reinforce the EU social dimension and to improve the EU steering capacity; it was therefore possible to detect clear signs of the gradual emergence of a more effective multilevel and multi-stakeholder anti-poverty arena around Europe 2020: 1) the reference to the social dimension in the AGS and a broader use of Country Specific Recommendations on poverty; 2) the attempt to revive the Social OMC; 3) the launch of the Social Investment Package; 4)

the Communication to strengthen the social dimension of the EMU; 5) the new guidelines for using the European funds.

We contend that least three elements played a crucial role in this respect by increasing the salience of the anti-poverty component of Europe 2020: i) the existence of the quantitative poverty objective among the Europe 2020 headline targets which made the poverty issue highly visible at the supranational level; ii) the growing "problem pressure" – i.e. increasing poverty rates in most MS - as consequence of both prolonged economic difficulties and austerity measures; in combination with iii) the diffuse perception of weakened European social dimension.

These factors prompted "proactive" actions by the main anti-poverty supranational NGOs (Eapn, SocialPlatform, Eurochild, Feantsa, just to mention a few) which mobilized and voiced for European initiatives aimed to both reinforce the social dimension of Europe 2020 and especially to tackle the most severe social consequences of the crises (Interview 11 NGO)[9]. More recently (April 2014), these NGOs and several civil society organizations have formed the "EU Alliance for a democratic, social and sustainable European Semester" (or, EU Semester Alliance) with the aim to foster a "more democratic, social and sustainable EU Strategy" by improving civil society and social actors' engagement in the European Semester[10]. Importantly, this as well as former actions were "legitimized" and supported by the full (at least formal) integration of the EU social dimension within the overarching strategy and above all the presence of the quantitative headline target on poverty (Interview 12 EP).

Overt stakeholder mobilization was followed by reaction of the more "socially oriented" EU bodies – primarily, Directorate D of the DG. Empl., the EPSCO Council, the Employment Committee and the Social Protection Committee. These launched a number of initiatives in order to further increase the salience of the issue in the European debate and documents - such as the AGS, the SIP and the 2013 Communication – as well as in interactions with MS (CSRs), while also trying to reinforce the governance architecture of the Europe 2020 social dimension – by re-launching the Social OMC – and, last but not least, endowing the

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[9] See above all EAPN's campaign on the allocation of 20% of the European Social Funds to anti-poverty measures.

[10] Cf. the Alliance's website http://semesteralliance.net. The Semester Alliance is coordinated by EAPN and it includes the following organizations: Age-Platform Europe, Caritas Europa, CECODHAS–Housing Europe, Eurochild, Eurodiaconia, European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), European Environmental Bureau (EEB), European Public Service Union (EPSU), European Women's Lobby (EWL), European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), European Federation of Food Banks (FEBA), Green Budget Europe, PICUM. The Social Platform of European NGOs, and the European Trade Union Confederation are not members but supports the Semester Alliance.

European anti-poverty strategy with monetary resources – via the decision on the multiannual budget framework.

6. Main findings at the supranational level: a summary

As illustrated in previous sections, the launch of Europe 2020 has certainly represented discontinuity for the European social and especially anti-poverty strategies. First, EU's social and economic/fiscal dimensions – originally designed to remain on "separate tracks" (Ferrera 2005, 2009), with social policies beyond the scope of direct European actions and firmly in the hand of MS - have become tightly intertwined within the Europe 2020 framework and its governance arm – the European Semester. Second, the setting of the first quantitative (anti-)poverty target might represent a quantum leap in multilevel social governance. By contrast, third, the dismantlement of the main elements of the Social OMC represented a step back compared to the Lisbon phase.

Against this background, our analysis has shown that implementation – crucial, *ça va sans dire*, in case of "soft" processes of policy coordination – of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty component in the first three cycles 2011-2013 differed in two subsequent periods: a difficult start in 2011-12, with (social and) anti-poverty concerns virtually non-existent in the multilevel process of policy coordination, was followed by several initiatives by both European politico-institutional actors and the main supranational stakeholders aimed to reinvigorate the anti-poverty dimension after the mid-2012.

Both contingent and structural factors help understand the weak start as well as the later reinforcement of Europe 2020 in the field of poverty.

In the first period, the crucial factors constraining the emergence of a proper multilevel and multi-stakeholder anti-poverty arena were the economic/sovereign debt crises and the weaknesses of the Europe 2020 social-governance architecture. The former made power relationships within the European Commission even more unbalanced in favor of more "economically sensitive" DGs, such as ECFIN, which actually managed to orient the supranational policy debate towards austerity measures and the need for fiscal consolidation only. Meanwhile, social policy coordination lagged behind because of both the dismantlement of the Social OMC and the weak Europe 2020 governance structure in the field of social policy. These factors severely limited EU bodies' ability to effectively steer and coordinate anti-poverty initiatives in a multi-level and multi-stakeholder arena.

Since 2012, growing "problem pressures" and the evanescence of the European social dimension have prompted a reaction by the most "socially sensitive" supranational actors with the aim support the fight against poverty/social exclusion and to tackle the social consequences of both the crises and austerity measures themselves. Stakeholder mobilization was followed by some European politico-institutional actors acting in order to reinforce the Europe 2020 anti-poverty dimension by increasing the steering, as well as monitoring, capacity of EU institutions while reinforcing multilevel interaction.

Despite progress, figures are unequivocal in telling that the Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy is all but effective as far as *outcomes* are concerned, a weakness also acknowledged by the most recent Communication by the European Commission "Taking stock of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth" released on 5 March 2014 (European Commission 2014b: 14): "The number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the EU […] increased from 114 million in 2009 to 124 million in 2012. The EU has thus drifted further away from its target – equivalent to a number of 96.4 million people by 2020 – and there is no sign of rapid progress to remedy this situation […] The situation is particularly aggravated in certain Member States and has been driven by increases in severe material deprivation and in the share of jobless households. The crisis has demonstrated the need for effective social protection systems" [11].

Nevertheless, if we turn to *processes*, developments outlined above reveal the gradual emergence of a visible and (to a certain extent also) vibrant multilevel and multi-stakeholder arena to fight poverty and social exclusion within the Europe 2020 overarching framework. What seems crucial here is that, if on the one hand the governance architecture is still weak, on the other hand the setting of the quantitative poverty target within the new framework for policy coordination has resulted in increased political salience of the poverty issue at the supranational level. In other words, the introduction of "politico-institutional markers" such as the poverty target among the ten overarching goals of Europe 2020 seems to have made poverty a more relevant issue, thus favoring stakeholder role in putting pressure on European and national institutions (Interview 1 EC). This greatly differs from dynamics which characterized the social inclusion OMC in the Lisbon period and it may potentially affect the unfinished governance architecture of the Europe 2020 social dimension as well as the effectiveness of the current EU anti-poverty tool-kit in tackling poverty and social exclusion

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[11] The Communication is intended to prepare the revision of the Europe 2020 strategy expected by 2015: "The Commission will run a public consultation, based on the analysis in this Communication, inviting all interested parties to contribute their views. Following the consultation, the Commission will make proposals for the pursuit of the strategy early in 2015" (EC 2014b: 14).

by mobilizing all relevant actors and levels of government as well as by favoring coordination across the policy spectrum. It remains to be seen if these developments will suffice to overcome the weaknesses that have so far prevailed. In addition to existing politico-institutional markers, agency factors - primarily the results of the next European elections and MS orientations - will be decisive in this respect.

7. Going national: a framework for analysis

Against the backdrop of research at the supranational level, this section is devoted to present the temporal frame for analysis and the main analytical dimensions which have guided analysis aimed to capture Europe 2020's effects and changes at the national and sub-national level in the five Cope countries.

7.1 Time frame and analytical dimensions

With the aim to understand whether, and in case to what extent, the novel Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy is leading to the emergence of a multilevel & multi-stakeholder as well as integrated (across policy sectors) arena, two different time frames for analysis were considered.

First, it was important to assess and interpret changes by contrasting the Europe 2020 phase with the previous OMC in the Lisbon decade. Here, evidences from empirical research carried out by COPE were read and consequently interpreted against the background of secondary literature on the Social (inclusion) OMC. Second, changes were detected by systematically comparing the first three cycles of Europe 2020. This was crucial because soft coordination mechanisms based on iterated processes may unfold their effects gradually over time. Further, an encompassing interpretation of developments in the two periods (and sub-periods) has obviously to take into account what happened in the "critical juncture" between the end of the Lisbon phase and the launch of the new Europe 2020 strategy – the "genetic moment". It was therefore important to identify countries' positions when the new overarching strategy was framed and then launched.

By adopting the temporal framework mentioned above, the research presented in the national reports and summarized here below is not only interested in finding evidences of the effectiveness of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy along a number of dimensions; rather, by both contrasting the new EU strategy with the OMC and comparing the first three cycles,

it also aims at identifying which factors and bottlenecks constrain Europe 2020's full potential. In other words, since the analysis of the Europe 2020 policy arena is not only aimed to find evidences that coordination mechanisms based on soft law procedures actually "work", in order to capture change and effects produced by the launch of the new strategy at the nation al level the analytical indications from the literature on the social OMC are in fact crucial. Thus, country reports applied a revised version of the most recent analytical framework proposed by Barcevicius et al. (2014), which actually seems to be promising in order to assess if - compared to the OMC as well as in its current development - Europe 2020 is emerging as an arena characterized by more/less *multi-level* and *multi-stakeholder* interactions − i.e. *participation* - and more/less *integration* across policy sectors and programs.

Changes in *participation* and *integration* can in fact be assessed by looking at *procedural effects* - related to governance and policymaking processes - outlined in box 1 below, while *substantive effects* are also relevant to detect with regard to the following: i) *policy change, new legislation and regulation; ii) ideational shifts, in line with EU discourse* vs *national ideational reactions; iii) Issue salience in national debates & agenda shifts.*

| **BOX 1** |
| **Capturing changes: the analytical framework** |

Procedural effects
*in drafting NRPs/NRSs, elaborating national anti-poverty strategies,
and domestic policy making on poverty*

Participation	*Integration*
- Involvement of non-state actors	- Horizontal, cross-sector coordination
- Involvement of sub-national actors	- (e.g. via inter-ministerial working groups)
- Horizontal & diagonal networks for the involvement of national stakeholders and sub-national actors at the supranational level: Resilience/Creation/Dismissal	- Vertical coordination, across levels of governance
	- National steering, monitoring and statistical capacities

Substantive effects
(on national legislation, but also ideas, discourse)

Policy change, new legislation and regulation
Ideational shifts, in line with EU discourse vs national ideational reactions
Issue salience in national debates & agenda shifts (More/Less /No change)

While both procedural and especially substantive effects may be the result of a number of factors and interacting processes, the national accounts have aimed to "isolate" the influence (if any) of the Europe 2020 strategy.

7.2 The main hypotheses

In order to give account of the effects entailed by the implementation of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy at the national level, the following set of hypotheses was framed. In particular, by reviewing evidence from research at the supranational level, these hypotheses assumes that similar effects - both substantive and procedural – can be expected at the national level since they are strictly related to both the main features of the novel architecture of Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy and its gradual strengthening over time (see above, also cf. Jessoula, Agostini, Sabato, 2014).

HP1. Substantive effects

We expect that compared to the OMC-Lisbon phase, the Europe 2020 strategy is more likely to produce effects in the *political* sphere for two reasons: i) the introduction of the *quantitative poverty target is likely to* make the poverty issue highly *visible at the supranational and national level*; in light of the former, ii) the growing "*problem pressure*" – i.e. increasing poverty rates in most MS as well as at the European level – called for actions aimed at tackling the social consequences of the crisis.

hp1a. Accordingly, we assume that the issue of (the fight against) poverty may have become more salient at the domestic level and/or European target/indicators have been more openly discussed - and then accepted or rejected by the various national actors.

hp1b. Although, as a result of soft processes, we expect a limited direct influence on policy changes at the national level, in some cases agenda shifts and revision of national legislation may also have resulted from national-supranational interactions within the Europe 2020 framework (i.e. through the interplay produced by National Reform Programs and Country Specific Recommendations).

HP2 Procedural effects

hp2a. In line with the new supranational overarching framework for policy coordination that integrated economic and social processes, we expect increased cross-sector and cross-department coordination – i.e. *more integration* across policy sectors. In order to strengthen economic and social governance the "European Semester" actually coupled the processes – of

both reporting and monitoring – previously institutionally fragmented, as relating to the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), the country-reporting system within the Lisbon Strategy (including social OMCs) and especially the coordination of employment and economic policies (Armstrong, 2012). On the contrary,

hp2b. the switch from the Social OMC to Europe 2020 and its implementation should have represented a *step back* with respect to both *multi-level* and *multi-stakeholder* involvement in governance processes. The European Semester is in fact less likely than the previous OMC to promote participation within the process of National Reform Programs due its much weaker – as well as unclear, at least in the initial phase – governance structure (cf. Jessoula et al., 2014).

HP3. Procedural effects

We expect changes over time, particularly from the first to the fourth Europe 2020 annual cycle. At the national level we might observe a *more participatory* – with regard to involvement of both stakeholders and levels of government – as well as *more integrated* process mostly due to the above mentioned effects in the political sphere (i.e. our first hypothesis), on-going supranational actions aimed at reinforcing governance mechanisms, and increased problem pressure in most MS.

In accordance with the analytical framework and the outlined hypotheses, the five country reports have analyzed the implementation of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty component in the national context by:

1. presenting the national model to combat poverty and its recent transformations;

2. assessing the degree of problem pressure – i.e. increasing/decreasing poverty, social exclusion and unemployment rates;

3. reporting on national/supranational relationships in the Lisbon phase based on a review of existing literature on the Social Inclusion OMC. This is crucial in order to set the stage for the subsequent analysis on Europe 2020;

4. providing a in depth analysis of national-supranational interactions in the field of anti-poverty policies with the framework Europe 2020 and its governance arm, the European Semester. Official documents – primarily, National Reform Programmes, Annual Growth Surveys, Country Specific Recommendations and Commission Staff Working Documents - and other documentary sources have been matched with interviews conducted both at the

national and sub-national level in order to give a clear and comprehensive account of the iterative implementation process during the first three annual cycles.

5. detecting and illustrating effects at national level produced by the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy along two main analytical dimensions: actor participation – involving both a horizontal (multi-stakeholder) and a vertical (multilevel) dimension – and cross-policy sector integration.

In the next section 8 and 9, the main findings from research conducted in Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the UK are summarized and interpreted.

8. The findings in the five COPE countries

The first key finding from in-depth research and fine grained analysis carried out in the five COPE countries is that significant cross-country *variation* has characterized the implementation of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty component at the national level in the first three annual cycles. Our assumption of similar effects entailed by Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy on the five national cases was thus not confirmed. Effects varied along almost all analytical dimensions included in country reports: i) substantive effects in terms of political developments in the "genetic moment" – that is, national orientation in the phase between the elaboration and the launch of the new European strategy; ii) procedural effects concerning multilevel and multi-stakeholder participation. By contrast, variation was less visible with regard to the integration dimensions, since the ability of Europe 2020 to prompt more integrated – across policy sectors as well as between ministries – actions and strategies has been very limited, the only partial exception being Poland.

These findings already suggest the important role played by country specific policy contexts, institutional arrangements, as well as political orientations and attitudes in "filtering" supranational inputs, thus affecting the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy at the national level (see below section 9).

8.1. Substantive effects: from the genetic moment to iterative cycles

With regard to HP1 concerning the impact of Europe 2020 strategy in the political sphere, the ability of Europe 2020 to increase the visibility and political salience of the poverty issue and anti-poverty policies at the national level varied among the five countries.

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Actually, in three of the five countries analyzed here – Germany, Sweden and the UK - the launch of Europe 2020 initially produced relevant effects in the political sphere: the political visibility and saliency of the poverty issue remarkably increased in the genetic phase mostly due to the lively reaction by national governments aimed at tackling supranational "intrusion" in domestic policymaking and choices in the social policy field. Such "resistance" and opposition by national governments was particularly strong since the setting of the quantitative poverty target among the five Europe 2020 goals had the potential of both greatly increasing the visibility of the issue at the supranational level and legitimizing stronger European interference in domestic anti-poverty agendas.

In the same three countries, the subsequent substantive and to certain extent also procedural effects on national political debates, policy discourse and agendas, not to mention legislation or reform plans, were very limited.

This should not appear a paradox. While in Poland and Italy, which had broadly supported the introduction of a common EU anti-poverty target, the subsequent implementation did not constitute a problem and was consequently dealt with mostly at the administrative level - with limited (or no) direct involvement of the main politico-institutional actors - in Germany, Sweden and the UK an open, as well as relatively lively, political debate emerged in the early stages of Europe 2020. This debate was both prompted and animated by either national governments or important politico-institutional actors with the aim to "set the stage" for the implementation of Europe 2020 in the field of poverty: emphasis was therefore put on national authority and sovereignty in the field of social policies, and the European objectives in this sector were reframed and re-interpreted nationally in accordance with country specific approaches as well as governments' orientations to combat poverty and social exclusion.

In Sweden, the Prime Minister personally engaged with the European anti-poverty challenge by prioritizing actions aimed at tackling exclusion *from the labor market* – in line with the Centre-Conservative government strategy developed since 2006/07 (Angelin et al. 2014). In the UK, as reported by Clegg and Bennett (2014), the government's position was made clear in Parliament's European Scrutiny committee when the Economic Secretary to the Treasury affirmed that *"We in the UK do not believe that a top-down approach of EU-wide targets, which are then agreed individually at member state level, is the right one"* (House of Commons, 2010, column 5). In the same vein, in the German Bundestag the Conservative-liberal coalition (CDU/CSU, FDP) openly supported the first three headline targets concerning employment, R&D/innovation and climate change/energy, while clearly rejecting the social dimension of the Europe 2020 strategy (i.e. education; poverty/social exclusion),

the anti-poverty target in particular. Even The Chancellor Angela Merkel declared, in March 2010, that "*the EU 2020 Strategy will have an issue today, to which I will not give any support for a quantitative target. I mean the fight against poverty in Europe." (Angela Merkel, CDU, government statement, Bundestag, March 25, 2010* quoted in Petzold et al. 2014*)*. More in details, the Prime Minister stressed the importance of the subsidiarity principle in the field of social policy, thus clearly affirming that the various component of the Europe 2020 strategy relate to different balance of competences between the EU and Members States "*As far as poverty reduction can be achieved by more growth, it belongs to the new European Strategy 2020"* (ibidem).

 Since governments' positions were overtly contested by the main opposition parties both in Sweden and Germany, it may be argued that, in addition to national attitudes *vis a vis* the EU, also government colour and especially the presence of centre-right cabinets mattered in such a reaction against the Europe 2020 quantified anti-poverty target. By contrast, in the United Kingdom the orientation expressed by the Labour government did not change markedly after the new Conservative-Liberal cabinet came to power in 2010, with the latter – especially the Eurosceptic Conservative Party – only becoming "more vigilant with regard to the risk of Europe 2020 being a 'Trojan Horse' for competence creep" (Clegg and Benett 2014).

In sum, in these three countries governments exploited the critical juncture represented by the genetic moment of Europe 2020, and especially the launch of its implementation at the national level, in order to strongly filter supranational "soft" but strengthened pressures aimed at supporting the achievement of the Europe 2020 poverty target.

Not surprisingly, then, in their NRPs Sweden, Germany and the UK did not define the national anti-poverty target in accordance with the indicators agreed at the EU level (cf. table 3a), and opted for quantified target that better matched national priorities and strategies.

While Germany came closer to European intentions by setting the goal of reducing the number of long-term unemployed by 330.000 individuals before 2020 – corresponding to roughly 660,000 persons living in the same households according to national government's estimates (Petzold et al. 2014), Sweden proposed to reduce the share of those aged 20-64 who are not in the labor force, the long-term unemployed and those on long-term sick leave, while the UK simply (re-)proposed the already existing national numerical targets included in the 2010 Child Poverty Act (table 8a).

Table 8a. UK (Child) Poverty Targets

Indicator	Target	Level as of 2011
Relative low income: proportion of children living in households where income is less than 60% median before housing costs in financial year	< 10% by 2020/21	22%
Absolute low income: proportion of children living in households where income is less than 60% median income before housing costs in 2010-11 adjusted for prices	< 5% by 2020/21	Equivalent 12%
Low income and material deprivation: proportion of children who experience material deprivation and live in households where income is less than 70% median before housing costs in financial year	< 5% by 2020/21	17%
Persistent poverty: proportion of children living in households where income is less than 60% median before housing costs in financial year for at least 3 of the last 4 years	To be defined by regulations in 2015	12%

Source: UK National Reform Programme 2011, p. 48

Quite the opposite, Poland and Italy had broadly supported the introduction of a common and quantified EU anti-poverty target. The politicization of the matter during the critical juncture was low and the issue was consequently dealt with mostly at the administrative level - with limited (or no) direct involvement of the main politico-institutional actors.

Differently from the three cases outlined above, the Italian and Polish governments complied with European prescriptions by setting their anti-poverty ambitions in accordance with agreed indicators: lifting 2,2 million people from poverty or social exclusion by 2020 in Italy, 1,5 million in Poland.

These are also the two countries where, despite (or, actually, because of) the low politicization of the issue at the early stage, the Europe 2020 strategy has apparently produced the most relevant substantive effects. In Poland, the existence of the quantitative target has both brought poverty and anti-poverty measures back on government's agenda and induced regular monitoring of the issue: actually, since the "NRP is one of the main strategic documents of the government and issues included in it are subject to regular monitoring. During the meetings of the Team for Europe 2020 [ndr, see below] current progress in realisation of actions and tasks is presented and discussed by its members – including high rank administrative officials, i.e. state secretaries who represent the political level of

administration. This indicates an increased salience of anti-poverty policy in comparison to NAPs prepared in the framework of SI OMC, which were not subject to regular monitoring and political level was hardly interested in their implementation" (Zielenska 2014: 37). Interestingly, these developments have occurred in spite of declining problem pressure due to rapidly improving poverty indicators in Poland.

By contrast, in Italy, the increased salience and political relevance of the poverty issue in the domestic debate since 2011 can be interpreted as the consequence of two interacting developments: on the one hand, the greatly increased problem pressure, with quickly rising absolute and relative poverty rates; on the other hand, the Monti government's initiatives aimed to re-direct the usage of European funds in order to tackle the poverty challenge in accordance with the national goal of reducing the number of poor people by 2,2 million before 2020, as set in the Italian NRPs (Agostini and Sabato 2014). Substantive effects in Italy can thus be detected in the ideational sphere, regarding changes in cognitive and value frameworks, but also with reference to the salience of the fight against poverty issue on the political agenda that percolated into institutional changes.

The missing correspondence between selected national targets in the case of GER, SWE and UK did not translate into considerable criticism by the European Commission in the iterative process of the European Semester. Rather, in the UK case, the Commission "adapted" its policy recommendations to the contours of the British debate (Clegg and Bennett 2014). Nevertheless, from the first to the third cycle, not only "the Commission's style of engagement with UK policy [...] has become increasingly specific and ready to engage critically with named UK policies, and especially the 'big two' [*ndr*, the Universal Credit and the Work Programme]" (*ibidem*), but also the UK received Country Specific Recommendations regarding poverty in 2012, 2013 and 2014. The CSRs were mostly concerned with the potential negative impact of planned welfare reforms and especially the need to adopt measures to facilitate access to childcare services.

Although neither Sweden nor Germany received CRSs on poverty, the European Commission adopted a similar approach when assessing the national strategies outlined in the NRPs. Without openly questioning the choice of indicators, the EC complained that the German target was not ambitious, also arguing that the number of working poor is on the rise and there are bottlenecks preventing the full integration of some groups which are more distant from the labor market. Similarly, in the Swedish case, the European Commission did not make explicit reference to poverty, but issued a CSR on labour market pointing at the need to

"monitor and improve the labour market participation of young people and other vulnerable groups" (Angelin et al. 2014) by "improving the effectiveness of active labour market measures, facilitating the transition from school to work, promoting policies to increase demand for vulnerable groups and improving the functioning of the labour market (*ibidem*).

Interestingly, EC's considerations and recommendations have become increasingly more detailed as well as more challenging for the MS. Evidences of this pattern of EU-MS interaction can be found in the British and the Swedish cases outlined above as well as in Italy, the country which has experienced the worst poverty trends since the burst of the economic crisis. In fact, while in 2011 and 2012 both the NRPs and the assessment by the EC contained only limited reference to the theme of poverty, stronger emphasis was posed on this issue and the measures that need to be adopted to tackle it both at the national and the supranational level in the last two cycles. Telling in this respect is the 2014 CSR, proposed by the European Commission in early June 2014 and later endorsed by the Council, which engages in details with the existing (ineffective) national policy framework, suggesting: "to address exposure to poverty and social exclusion, scale-up the pilot social assistance scheme [ndr: the so called Social Card], in compliance with budgetary targets, guaranteeing appropriate targeting, strict conditionality and territorial uniformity, and strengthening the link with activation measures. Improve the effectiveness of family support schemes and quality services favouring low-income households with children." (EC 2014a: 7).

Differently, in the Polish case, reduced problem pressure and the adoption of measures in compliance with EU's 2012 and 2013 CSRs regarding poverty, particularly the increase of the national minimum wage, has led to no recommendations by the Commission and the Council in this field in 2014.

8.2. Procedural effects: participation and policy integration

The second and the third hypotheses presented above regard procedural effects entailed by the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy at the national level, regarding in particular: *Hp2a*) *integration* and possibly coordination across different policy fields and departmental (mainly, ministerial) structures; *Hp2b*) stakeholder *participation* and involvement of different sub-national levels of governments in the reporting activities related to the European Semester – i.e. primarily, the drafting of National Reforms Programmes – as well as in possible spill-overs such as, for instance, policy initiatives prompted by interaction with EU

institutions; *Hp3*) changes towards a as *more integrated* as well as *more participatory* from the first to the fourth Europe 2020 annual cycle.

Detecting changes that concern the procedural dimension of "soft" processes of policy coordination such as Social-Europe 2020 - since economic and financial policy coordination is backed by incomparably stronger governance mechanisms within the same Europe 2020 framework – is extremely important for two reasons: first, because the literature on the Social (Inclusion) OMC has showed that these procedural effects may be equally relevant as substantive effects; second, because the potential for the emergence of an effective anti-poverty arena around the Europe 2020 strategy depends heavily on the ability to stimulate participation and favor involvement of affected parties as well as on the scope for integrated and coordinated actions across policy sectors – e.g. by considering effects on poverty of fiscal consolidation measures, welfare cuts, labour market reforms, etc.

On the one hand, with regard to *horizontal* (multi-stakeholder) and *vertical* (multilevel) *participation*, research in the five COPE countries has revealed substantial cross-national variation. The shift from the Lisbon-OMC period to the Europe 2020 phase has actually resulted in very limited, and in fact diminished, involvement of stakeholders, especially NGOs and anti-poverty groups, in Sweden and the UK; by contrast, participation has both increased and become more formalized above all in Poland, but also in Germany and to some extent in Italy as well. This (partly) contrasts with our expectation about possible reduced involvement in light of the relatively weak Europe 2020 governance structure compared to the Social OMC.

On the other hand, the third hypothesis envisaging a trend towards a more participatory process from the first to the third annual cycle was apparently confirmed in the three cases where participation has increased (Germany, Italy and Poland).

Interestingly, in fact, the drafting of the first NRPs in 2011 constituted an extremely centralized exercise which involved the ministries and peak bureaucracy only in all selected countries, with limited – better, no – resonance "outside" this inner circle – the only exception here being Italy where the main opposition party (PD) drafted a sort of "shadow" National Reform Programme to contest centre-right government's outlined priorities and strategies (Agostini and Sabato 2014). However, since the second cycle in 2012, things have changed considerably in Germany and especially in Poland. In the former, according to an institutionalized national procedure known as "Social Monitoring" (Sozialmonitoring), in

2012 and 2013 the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Policies "invited several actors involved in the making and implementation of social policy to a hearing in order to discuss the preparation of the 2012 NSR-NRP" (Petzold et al. 2014: 30). Not only Free Welfare Associations and NGOs were invited, rather the audience was quite broad as reported in table 9a below.

Table 9a. Actors invited to the hearing for the preparation of the German NRP

Municipalities:
German Association of Districts
German Association of Cities,
German Association of Towns and Municipalities
Social partners:
Federation of German Trade Unions
Confederation of German Employers' Associations
Welfare organisations:
Federal Association of Non-statutory Welfare,
German Association for Public and Private Welfare
National network of the EAPN (NAK)

These actors were also asked to comment on the draft NRP: the Confederation of German Employers' Associations, the Confederation of German Trade Unions, the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce, the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts, the Federation of German Local Authority Associations, the Federal Association of Non-Statutory Welfare, the National Anti-Poverty Conference, the German Association for Public and Private Welfare and the Joint Science Conference.

Poland stands out as the most innovative case with respect to participation. In fact, same as in Germany, the preparation of the first NRP was a rather "exclusive" exercise in the hands of public administration. This however changed in 2012, when an ad hoc team, the so called "Team for Europe 2020" was created, including several actors among which social partners, local administration organisations, academic organisations and non-governmental organisations (table 10a). The Team meets approximately every three months and it is in charge of reviewing, commenting the draft NRP in order to enhance its internal consistency while promoting cross-policy integration. As argued by Zielenska (2014), the creation of the Team for Europe 2020 represented a step towards more participatory – and possibly more integrated – process of drafting national strategic reports along both the horizontal (multi-

stakeholder) and the vertical (multilevel) axes: actually, the pre-existing Team for the Lisbon Strategy included members of central administration only.

Table 10a. The Polish Team for Europe 2020 compared to the Team for Lisbon

Inter-ministerial Team for Lisbon Strategy	Team for Europe 2020 Strategy
- Members of all ministries	- Members of all ministries
- Representatives of: Central Statistical Office; Office of Competition and Consumer Protection; Public Procurement Office	- Representatives of: Central Statistical Office; Office of Competition and Consumer Protection; Public Procurement Office; Polish Agency for Enterprise Development
	- Local administration organisations: Association of Polish Voivodships; Association of Polish Poviats; Union of Polish Metropolies; Union of Polish Cities; Association of Rural Gminas
	- Trade Unions: Independent Self-governing Trade Union "Solidarity"; All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions; Trade Unions Forum
	- Employers: Employers of Poland; Confederation of Polish Private Employers – Leviathan; Business Center Club
	- Academic organisations: Polish Academy of Science; Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences; Conference of Rectors of Higher Education Institutions
	- Sectoral organisations: Polish Chamber of Commerce; National Council of Agricultural Chambers;
	- NGOs: Institute for Sustainable Development; Working Community of Associations of Social Organisations (WRZOS); Polish Comity of EAPN; Polish Federation of Non-governmental Organisations; Foundation for Polish Science; Caritas Poland; Foundation Institute for Regional Development

In contrast with Poland, Sweden and the UK are the cases where the shift from the Lisbon to the Europe 2020 phase has brought about a step back in the participation dimension. As reported by Angelin et al. (2014: 33), in Sweden "participation of civil society organizations representing poor and marginalized groups in a national context is not an issue that the government is prioritizing to any large extent. Some minor forms of consultation seek to take place, yet mainly in the forms of information ad hoc meetings, at which the government informs on the reporting process to the EU, rather than inviting and involving civil society organizations to participation in the process". This also contrasts with practices developed in the Social Inclusion OMC framework that had actually opened a window of opportunity for

involvement of civil society organizations. Differently, in accordance with institutionalized practices in the Swedish context, the social partners – i.e. employees' and employers' associations – have been invited to consultation and information meetings related to Europe 2020 as well as to contribute with texts. Nevertheless, the "general message coming out of […] interviews portrays a government (Centre-Conservative government in office from 2007) as having closed the ranks and even less consulting with groups" (Angelin et al. 2014: 27).

A relatively similar process has apparently occurred in the UK, as Clegg and Bennett (2014: 33) unambiguously put it: "the more participatory approach to stakeholder engagement which characterized the later NAPs/incl processes in the UK, and was considered the major *acquis* of European social governance in the UK case, has been lost".

Despite differences, a few further brief considerations summarize commonalities across the five COPE countries.

First, policy integration within the Europe 2020 framework has remained extremely limited not only at the supranational level but also in the strategy implementation at the national level. Only in the Poland, with the establishment of the Team for Europe an (admittedly limited) attempt has been made towards better coordination across policy sector (cf. Zielenska 2014). In Italy, a peculiar cooperation between the Ministry of Territorial Cohesion and the Ministry of Labour has developed in the field of anti-poverty policies especially related to an innovative usage of European funds (cf. Agostini and Sabato 2014). This certainly represents an important development within the Europe 2020 framework; by contrast, the social consequences of recent austerity measures – as well as their impact on poverty and income inequality – have never been addressed in national strategic documents nor in policy measured adopted.

Second, involvement and participation in the preparation of the National Reform Programmes and related activities do not imply actual influence by social actors on the reporting process – and this is true also in the more participatory cases such as Poland and Germany. Actually, most social actor representatives in the five countries expressed dissatisfaction with the reporting process, due to the lack of proper channels to influence the NRPs, the very strict time frame of the European Semester, and the centralization of the process in the hands of Finance and Economy ministries.

Third, the drafting of NRPs is mostly conceived by national politico-institutional and bureaucratic actors as a *pro forma* obligation with the EU, although the recent increased intrusiveness by supranational institutions through the effective usage of CSRs suggest that this element might be subject to change in the near future.

Similarly, the recent decisions taken at the EU level regarding a more direct link between the Europe 2020 target on poverty and the allocation and usage of the European Social Fund (see above) might have the potential of strengthening the local dimension of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy, which the country reports portrayed as barely non-existent during the first three annual cycles. At the local level, Europe seems still to be "where money is", as one of the interviewees said, with basically no relationships with the overarching (Europe 2020) goals, at least so far. Peculiarly, this seems to hold true also in the case of Glasgow, despite the interest raised by the launch of the Europe 2020 strategy in Scotland, which stimulated interesting multi-level dynamics. In fact, as reported by Clegg and Bennett (2014: 24), while in the past the devolved authorities in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales had showed little interest in the OMC-NAPs/incl process "a novel feature of Europe 2020 as compared to the Lisbon era […] is the autonomous engagement with the process of some devolved administrations in the UK. Since the start of Europe 2020 the Scottish government (under majority Nationalist (SNP) control since 2010) has taken the annual initiative to publish its own NRPs to highlight its "commitment to engage positively with EU institutions and fully represent Scottish interests and highlight particular Scottish strengths" (Scottish Government, 2011 quoted in Clegg and Bennett 2014) […] Europe 2020 has thus served as a resource for the Scottish government in their bids to enhance both their international profile and, through the promise of enhanced access to EU funding, their autonomous policy making capacity".

9. Conclusions: making sense of cross-national variation in implementing the Europe 2020 anti-poverty dimension

Finally, how to make sense of national variations in the implementation of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty component?

Two main strands of research, namely the comparative studies on Europeanization, and those on European social governance processes (cf. among the others: Falkner *et al.* 2005; Graziano and Vink, 2007; Heidereich and Zeitlin, 2009) have highlighted some factors which filter supranational pressures and inputs consequently producing different effects at national level. These factors concern i) the general relationship of between the EU and the MS; ii) the features of domestic policy arrangements *vis a vis* the European policy framework. In more details, the literature mostly concerned with MS ' compliance with "hard" EU regulations has suggested that effects at national level in accordance with the policy fit/misfit hypothesis

(Green Cowles et al. 2000). Further developing the analytical and theoretical framework, the recent contribution by Graziano et al. (2011), focusing on the "usages" of European resources by domestic actors, has pointed at two additional factors which likely mediate supranational influence in the field of social policies: the first has to do with relationship between the MS and the EU in terms of membership – the so called "joining the club effect", neatly captured as "the more under scrutiny by the EU the countries are (e.g. accession countries), the more probable it is for EU policies ad institutions to be considered seriously" (Graziano et al. 2011); the second regards the relationship to Europe of national elites and public opinion's attitudes towards Europe – along a continuum between euro-enthusiast and euro-skeptic countries. Others have argued that among domestic factors, also a more specific element such as the color and the pro/against Europe attitude of national governments count (Graziano and Jessoula 2011).

Against this backdrop, the five COPE national reports allow for an interpretation of the findings presented above, thus shedding light on the factors that have filtered supranational pressures in the implementation of the anti-poverty component of the Europe 2020 strategy, which actually represent a peculiar case because the current European strategy combines a relatively weak (though gradually becoming stronger) governance structure with a high salience of the fight against poverty as both a policy and a political goal at supranational level.

Partly confirming the hypotheses outlined above, our analysis shows that *attitudes* towards Europe, *policy arrangements* and *domestic political factors* do actually play a role in mediating supranational pressures; nevertheless, the research conducted in the five COPE countries allows some theoretical advancements as well.

Actually, in accordance with the main features of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty component discussed above – and the definition of a quantified poverty European target in particular – we hypothesized an increased political salience of both the poverty issue and European coordination mechanism in the social sphere at the national level. In line with this interpretation, the research findings revealed the emergence of a *main line of tension* between the member states and the EU, related to *national sovereignty/autonomy* vs *European coordination mechanism/"intrusion"* in the field of social and especially anti-poverty policies.

Also, it appears that *different constellations of factors* have been at work in the five countries and shaped the activation of such a novel "supranational vs. national" line of tension. These

factors have consequently either constrained/limited or fostered the impact of Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy, and they may then allow explaining both substantive and procedural shifts as well as inertia/resistance observed at the national level. Table 11a summarizes the factors that have played an important role in activating the main line of tension in some countries of our sample.

Table 11a. Factors shaping the implementation of the Europe 2020 anti-poverty strategy at the national level

Activation of a new line of tension: national sovereignty/autonomy vs European coordination "intrusion" in the field anti-poverty policies (i.e. MS defense of national sovereignty in the social protection field against EU intrusiveness)
Shaped by:
Policy legacy 1   Presence of a national robust and consolidated anti-poverty tradition
Policy legacy 2   National political commitment to a novel institutional paradigm in the field of anti-poverty policy
Relationship to Europe   Relevance of EU structural funds for the country (i.e. "Europe is where the money is" effect)
Partisan preferences   Color and pro/against Europe attitude of national government (i.e. presence of Centre-right/conservative-led governments with pro-market, rather than pro welfare preferences)

Two factors relate to the policy legacy dimension, namely the national public policy structure in the anti-poverty field, but they differ from the traditional hypothesis on policy fit/misfit. The presence of a national robust and consolidated anti-poverty tradition and/or of a recent political commitment to a novel institutional paradigm in the field of anti-poverty policy - irrespective of their fit-misfit with the European policy paradigm (which is actually hard to detect in the case of Europe 2020, Interview 13) - appear to be conducive to a situation of "institutional pre-emption" which limits the potential impact of supranational *soft* pressures.

The third factor, related to the changing relevance of EU structural funds for the various countries can be conceived as a distinct, as well as more specific, element concerning the relationship between MS and the EU. Finally, although our analysis does not allow to draw definitive conclusions - because in most countries no political turnover occurred in the period under investigation - the color of national governments might play a role in shaping the supranational vs. national sovereignty/autonomy line of tension.

Turning to empirical evidence, in the three countries where the EU2020 effects were more limited (Germany, Sweden and the UK), the defense of national sovereignty in the social protection field, including the fight against poverty, was a prominent factor: since EU2020 was seen as a potential 'Trojan Horse' for competence creep in the social field (Clegg and Bennett 2014), national governments explicitly opposed to it. These countries are not only characterized by robust national policy legacies in the anti-poverty field, but they have also recently implemented far-reaching policy initiatives revealing a novel commitment towards a new policy paradigm. They can therefore be conceived as typical cases of institutional pre-emption. As a consequence, the effects exerted by the EU anti-poverty strategy emerged almost solely in the political sphere with argumentative/ideational clashes along the vertical axis (national/supranational) and the horizontal one (opposition parties against governing coalitions, with the UK exception).

By contrast, Italy and Poland - where the effects were more far reaching and concerned both the procedural and the substantive dimensions - were characterized by a more positive attitude towards European activism in the field of anti-poverty policies and the national-supranational competence clash did not display. On the one hand, this can be linked to the high relevance of EU structural funds for active inclusion policies in the two countries, envisaging a sort of "Europe is where money is" effect as well as inducing national governments to play the "good pupil game" *vis a vis* European procedures and coordination mechanisms. This was particularly true in the Polish case but to a certain extent also in Italya, especially after the passage from center-right cabinets led by Berlusconi to the Monti government. On the other hand, the absence of a robust national anti-poverty policy legacy characterizes both Italy and Poland, and this may explain the lack of institutional pre-emption.

Finally, even though as mentioned above our analysis does not allow to draw definitive conclusions, it seems to suggest that the color of national governments and in particular the pro/against welfare preferences of governing coalitions played a role in shaping the supranational vs. national sovereignty/autonomy line of tension. This can at least be inferred

by considering opposition parties' criticism towards governments' anti-poverty approach and strategies within the Europe 2020 framework in Germany, Sweden and Italy.

SECTION B.

THE PEER REVIEW MEETINGS

1. The peer review meetings in the Social OMC

The peer review methodology is a distinctive feature of EU 'open coordination' processes. Peer review meetings have been organised since 1999 in the framework of the European Employment Strategy and, since 2004, within the Open Method of Coordination for the fight against poverty and social exclusion. In 2006, after the 'streamlining' of the three OMC processes in the social domain (social inclusion, pensions, healthcare and long-term care) and the launch of the Social OMC, the peer review methodology was extended to the sectors of pensions, healthcare and long-term care policies.[12]

The aim of peer reviews is to promote mutual learning among the participating countries through "[...] the identification and dissemination of good practices on the basis of a systematic exchange of experiences and evaluation of policies, actions, programs or institutional arrangements [...]" (ÖSB et al. n.d.:4). More in detail, such meetings should: a) improve understanding of Member States'[13] policies, b) increase the efficiency and effectiveness of policies and strategies in the Member States and at the EU level, c) facilitate the transfer of key components of policies or institutional arrangements which have proved effective in their original context (so-called 'good practices').

Various kinds of practices can be proposed as topics for peer reviews, including:

- policies, strategies, institutional arrangements considered by the host country to be particularly effective with a view to achieving the objectives of the Social OMC;

- practices presented by countries with the best performances on the common indicators of the Social OMC;

- reforms foreseen by the host country (in this case, MS may take advantage of advice and experiences of the other MS before defining or implementing their reforms).

Furthermore, besides specific practices implemented in the Member States, peer reviews can be used to discuss more general EU policy problems.

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[12] In the period between 2004 and 2006, peer review meetings were funded through the "Community action program to combat social exclusion". Between 2007 and 2013 they were funded through the "PROGRESS" program, while from 2014 onwards, they will be funded through the program for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI).

[13] Besides the Member States of the European Union,, peer reviews are open to the other countries participating in the PROGRESS program (Norway and Serbia).

As regards organisation of the meetings, it is important to stress that participation in the peer review process is voluntary: it is up to Member States (through their representatives on the Social Protection Committee) to decide whether to organise or attend those seminars. Member States deciding to host a peer review (host countries) send the DG Employment a short description of the topic that they intend to discuss. The list of proposed meetings is then forwarded to the other Member States, which indicate the meetings that they want to attend as peer countries. The most preferred proposals are included in the peer review schedule for the following year. Besides this 'normal procedure', 'ad-hoc' or 'flexible' peer reviews can be organised. These are meetings not originally foreseen in the annual peer review program but which concern issues that a country deems particularly urgent.

The meetings, which take place in the host countries and last between 1.5 and 2 days, are attended by 7-8 countries on average. Their agendas vary according to the specific topic under review and the choices/expectations of the host country (see OSE and PPMI 2012a). However, a 'typical' peer review generally includes: plenary sessions to present and discuss the EU policy context, the practice under review and its potential for 'transfer' to the participating countries; working-group activities or *tours de table* focusing on specific aspects of the practice under review; site visits illustrating how the policy works 'on the ground' and allowing for discussions with personnel charged with the implementation and/or with the recipients. On average, 30-40 persons attend the meetings, including:

- a 'thematic expert', generally an academic selected by the consultancy which assists the European Commission in the management of the peer review programme and approved by the DG Employment. Before the meeting, the thematic expert drafts a Discussion Paper describing the practice under review and frames it in a wider EU perspective. Moreover, the thematic expert should actively contribute to discussions during the peer review and draft a Synthesis Report summarizing the main findings of the meeting.

- Host country delegates. Host country delegations are composed of 'government representatives' (including civil servants charged with either the design or the management/implementation of the practice under review) and a 'national independent expert' selected by the host country. Government representatives (often in collaboration with the independent experts) draft the host country Comment Paper and present the practice under review during the meeting. Host country official representatives are responsible for the practical organisation of the meeting, and one of them assumes the role of 'chairperson' of the seminar. Besides civil servants, in a few cases politicians attend the meetings (or some sessions).

- The host country's member of the 'Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion'.
- Peer countries' delegates. Peer countries' delegations are generally composed of two persons: a government representative (a civil servant) and a national expert. Before the meeting, they should draft a peer country Comment Paper describing the domestic situation compared to the practice under review, as well as the latter's potential transferability.
- Representatives of European stakeholders. Representatives of two EU level stakeholder organisations are invited by the European Commission to attend each peer review meeting. Those organisations should draft their Comment Papers and actively contribute to the discussions during the meeting. In some cases, host countries invite representatives of national stakeholder organisations.
- European Commission representatives. One or two representatives of the European Commission (generally from the DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) attend the meetings and contribute to discussions.
- Staff from the consultancy assisting the EC in the peer review programme, including a 'peer review manager' and a professional minutes-taker.

Seventy-five peer review meetings were held between 2004 and 2013. Those meetings concerned topics related to one or more of the 'key themes' of the Social OMC (with a prevalence of topics linked to the social inclusion strand): 1) Integration of ethnic minorities and immigrants; 2) Quality and accessibility of social services; 3) Homelessness and housing exclusion; 4) Children and families; 5) Promoting active inclusion; 6) Over-indebtedness and financial exclusion; 7) Ageing and providing adequate and sustainable pensions; 8) Health and long-term care; 9) Interaction of social, economic and employment policies; 10) Governance.

Remarkably, the peer review exercise continued also in 2010 and 2011, a period when, after the launch of the Europe 2020 strategy, the main elements of the Social OMC were *de facto* suspended (Agostini et al. 2013). It thus represented an element of continuity between the Lisbon Strategy and Europe 2020.

2. The analysis of PROGRESS peer reviews: analytical framework, methodology and the design of the research

Given their features, peer reviews appear to be privileged venues for observing how multi-level and multi-stakeholder interactions develop in the context of 'soft processes' like the

Social OMC, and for shedding light on the effects that those interactions can produce. Indeed, the meetings can be framed as policy arenas where actors involved in the domain of social protection and social inclusion interact. More in detail, the analysis of peer review meetings appears particularly interesting for three reasons related to: 1) the nature of the actors involved; 2) the kind of resources exchanged during the meetings; 3) the (expected) outcomes. As for the actors involved, peer reviews promote interactions among various kinds of actors (administrative officials, 'experts', stakeholders) acting at different levels of governance (domestic and European). Cognitive resources are exchanged in these arenas: knowledge and ideas concerning 'practices' (policies, programmes, strategies, institutional arrangements, reforms) implemented by Member States or concerning more general policy problems debated at the EU level. As for the expected outcomes, peer reviews are supposed to exert an influence at both domestic and EU levels. On the one hand, Member States may learn from good practices implemented in other countries and possibly transfer key components to their domestic contexts. On the other hand, the efficiency and effectiveness of EU policies and strategies may be enhanced as a consequence of this exercise.

Considering that what is exchanged in the peer review arena essentially concerns cognitive resources, the mechanism through which these meetings are supposed to exert their influence is the promotion of mutual-learning dynamics. The latter are generally considered to be among the key 'mechanisms of influence' through which EU-level 'soft' processes like the OMC can produce an impact on domestic levels (see Zeitlin 2005, 2009). However, at the same time, mutual learning dynamics and their outcomes are particularly ambiguous and difficult to analyse. As noted by Hartlapp (2009:4), "many studies on the OMC assume implicitly or explicitly that the transfer mechanism in the 'black box' is learning [but] there is still a lack of systematic, in-depth analysis showing that observable policy changes are due to learning by actors or the overall political system". Given the ambiguity of the concept of mutual learning, in the next section – which conducts a brief overview of the main contributions of the literature on policy and organisational learning – we will identify and list the main dimensions to be analysed in order to uncover and understand the mutual learning dynamics possibly arising from peer review meetings and their possible consequences (outcomes).

2.1 Learning in the peer review process: a map for the analysis

In social sciences, 'learning' is a rather elusive notion which has been employed in a variety of ways, by several authors, and in different disciplines. On looking at the main contributions

in the literature, Bennett and Howlett (1992) identify a number of key elements to be considered when studying policy learning processes: the contents of learning, the subjects involved in the process, and its consequences. A further element to be considered concerns the 'sources' of learning: that is, the set-up where the knowledge at the basis of learning processes is created/exchanged.

First, the literature on policy learning obviously states that the 'content of learning' (what it is possible to learn) is the first dimension to be considered when analysing learning phenomena. The knowledge at the basis of learning processes may concern different aspects of public policy – policy problems, contents, goals, instruments and implementation designs – but it can also concern the strategies adopted by actors in pursuing their goals (May 1992). Accordingly, it is possible to distinguish among different kinds of 'learning' (ibid.): 'instrumental policy learning' (i.e. about policy instruments and implementation designs), 'social policy learning' (about policy problems, scope, goals), 'political learning' (concerning political feasibility and the general policy process). In his work on social learning, Peter Hall (1993) distinguishes between two possible contents of policy learning (linked to three levels of policy change): a) learning about policy instruments which entails changes in the level or setting of those instruments (first-order change) or of the instruments themselves (second-order change); b) learning about policy goals which entails changes in their hierarchy (third-order change).

 Consequently, the first step in our analysis of peer review meetings was to identify the possible learning content arising from the meetings by examining the 'practices' presented by the host countries and by (some of) the participating countries, their main features, and the specific aspects on which discussions held during the meetings focused. Furthermore, attention was paid to the policy and political context (both at the EU level and in the selected member states) in which the peer review meetings under scrutiny took place.[14] This analysis enabled us to gain a clear idea about the 'learning' contents possibly arising from each meeting and about the relevance that such knowledge might have at the EU level and in the selected countries. Attention was devoted to identification of the degree of homogeneity among the countries attending the meeting (in terms of policies and contextual situations) , since it may have had important implications for the contents of debates developing during

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[14] The perceived salience of the topic may indeed have important implications regarding the motivations inducing actors to participate in the peer review exercise, as well as their interests and attitudes during the meeting.

the peer review, the characteristics of interactions among the participants and, ultimately, the outcomes of the meeting.[15]

Second, when analysing learning processes, one should focus on the 'subjects' involved ('who' should learn and 'why'). As mentioned above, peer reviews are attended by representatives of a variety of institutions/organisations (European Commission, Member States, stakeholders). Obviously, each of the participating institutions/organisations may learn something during the meetings (and, in particular, Member States are expected to do so). In this regard, it appears important to understand the motivations inducing those organisations to participate in those learning exercises. Of course, learning does not need to be planned (May 1992). Yet some scholars stress the importance of 'intentionality' in learning processes: this is for example the case of Argyris and Schön's (1978) 'organisational inquiry' or Rose's (1991; 2005) 'lesson drawing', where policy-makers look at foreign examples to find solutions to domestic policy problems. Undoubtedly, participating actors' motivations and expectations may have important consequences in relation to the organisation, development, and outcomes of the peer review meetings. Consequently, those aspects (in particular, Member States' motivations and expectations) were carefully explored in the research.

As said above, the expected outcome of the peer review exercise is that the organisations/institutions involved learn from the meetings. Obviously, this can happen through the individuals representing those organisations/institutions during the peer review exercise. Indeed, individuals play a key role in learning processes: they can be considered 'agents of change' (Heclo 2010:3) or 'learning agents' (Argyris and Schön 1978; Shrivastava, 1983) insofar as organisations learn through their members acting on behalf of the organisation (Argyris and Schön 1978). Furthermore, in order to distinguish it from simple 'copying' or 'mimicking' behaviours, some authors link the existence of 'learning' to the capacity of individuals to process the information acquired and recognise its relevance to organisational activities or the policy process (see, in particular, Etheredge and Short, 1983; Huber, 1991; May, 1992; Rose, 1991,2005). Hence a focus on individual participants in the peer review meetings is important in many respects: their competences and their roles in the respective organisations appear crucial for the quality of the meeting, the dissemination of information about the meeting, and the possibility that it may produce some kind of outcome

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[15] Reflecting on the possibility of learning in international contexts, Needergaard (2006) proposes two hypotheses: 1) the 'most similar hypothesis': learning is more likely among clusters of countries than it is among countries with similar political and economic backgrounds or experiencing similar problems; 2) the 'best practice hypothesis': countries experiencing policy failure learn from the most successful countries, irrespectively of the clusters to which they belong.

at both the EU and the domestic levels. Indeed, the success of a peer review meeting depends mainly on the presence of persons with the right competences (and the right role in their organisations) so that they can adequately contribute to the debate, learn from it, and disseminate such knowledge in their institutional contexts. For this reason, information about some key participants (e.g. EC representatives, the thematic experts, representatives of the selected countries) and about the roles that they played during the meeting have been provided in the national case studies.

The third element to be taken into account concerns the institutional set-up in which learning dynamics are expected to develop ('where' and 'how' learning takes place). It is thus necessary to understand how the process of knowledge creation and exchange actually work in each specific meeting. This means looking at both the 'substance' of the interactions (the specific content of the knowledge produced and exchanged) and the 'structure' of interactions (how knowledge has been created and exchanged). In this regard, both the organisational aspects of the meetings and the role actually played by the participants may account for the learning dynamics taking place. In peer reviews, the actors involved are able to 'learn from the others', that is, from the experience of the other participants in the meeting (Member States' representatives, experts, stakeholders, etc.). Furthermore, it is likely that these meetings facilitate the development of 'reflexive knowledge' (Schön and Rein 1994; Vesan 2008) or 'maieutic' or 'heuristic' effects (Zeitlin 2009: 230): that is, knowledge produced through a process whereby a variety of individuals involved in the policy process reflect on their own actions, identifying strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the results of interactions among the actors may be new and innovative solutions not entirely attributable to any of the subjects around the table. The kind of learning dynamics that may develop from peer reviews are obviously strictly linked to the 'direction' of the exchanges between the participants in this learning exercise.[16] Exchanges during peer reviews should be 'multi-directional' (the aim is to develop 'mutual' learning). However, some studies (Needergaard 2006; OSE and PPMI 2012a) suggest considering the possibility of unidirectional exchanges where some countries act as 'tutors' and others as 'learners'.

Consequently, in this study we will carefully consider aspects such as: the specific issues discussed, the main conclusions and proposals emerging from the meeting (including points

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[16] According to Radaelli (2008:248), learning in OMC processes can follow at least three 'directions': 1) 'learning at the top' (EU-level learning within communities of policy makers engaged in EU policy processes); 2) 'learning from the top' (from the EU level to domestic and local levels); 3) 'bottom-up learning' (from social actors, regions, local communities to the EU level).

of disagreement), the agenda of the meeting, the 'tenor' of discussions held during the meeting, the space given to, and the role played by, the various actors attending the meeting.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the 'consequences' or the 'outcomes' of learning processes. In this regard, whilst many authors (for instance, Hall, 1993; Heclo, 2010) more or less explicitly link policy learning with the presence of policy changes, in this study we do not take this approach. Indeed, it is important to distinguish between the cognitive consequences of learning and the (possible) implications in terms of changes in actors' behaviours or the policies implemented. Changes at the cognitive level should be considered the primary outcomes of learning processes. Afterwards, these cognitive changes may (or may not) entail changes in actual behaviours. As Bennett (1991) points out, it is necessary to distinguish between knowledge acquisition and knowledge utilization: learning is primarily linked to cognitive processes – which involve changes in actors' beliefs or confirm possessed beliefs (Levy 1994) – and its first implication is a change in the possible behaviour (e.g. new policy alternatives) of an organization (Huber 1991).[17] Changes in actual behaviours (possibly leading to policy change) do not automatically ensue from learning because they depend also on factors other than the process of knowledge acquisition (Bennett 1991; Rose 1991, 2005).

Accordingly, in regard to the 'outcomes' of peer reviews, given the nature and the objectives of the exercise and also relying on previous studies (OSE and PPMI 2012a, 2012b), we hypothesize three main types of consequences that may derive from participation in the meetings:

a)   *Cognitive changes*. Participation in the meetings may entail changes in the knowledge bases of the participants and of their organisations. For example, as a consequence of discussions held during the peer review, actors may acquire new knowledge about ('an improved understanding' of) policies and practices implemented in foreign contexts; identify policy solutions or models possibly useful for their own domestic context; improve awareness of their own practices by identifying previously unknown strengths and weaknesses.[18] Crucially, cognitive effects may be limited to the individual level (that is, to

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[17] According to Richard Rose (2005:23), "Lesson-drawing expands the scope for choice in the national political agenda, for it adds to proposals generated by domestic experience the stimulus of examples drawn from foreign experience".

[18] For example, practices proposed for peer reviews are generally considered to be 'good practices'. However, discussions held during the meetings may contribute to highlighting weaknesses and shortcomings in those practices. Conversely, if domestic practices are benchmarked with the situations in other countries, unexpected strengths may emerge. In these cases, it is possible to talk of 'mirror' effects (Hamel and Vanhercke 2009; OSE and PPMI 2012a).

individual participants in the peer review) or have a collective dimension. Identifying cognitive effects at the collective level is particularly challenging. One way to assess them is to look at how (and to what extent) information about peer reviews and knowledge acquired during the meetings have been disseminated and used by actors so that they enter domestic and European debates. In other words, discursive diffusion can be used as a proxy with which to assess cognitive effects beyond the individual level.

b)   *Transfer*. With the term 'transfer' we refer to cases in which knowledge gathered during the peer review has been concretely used in processes of policy change, thus effectively contributing (beyond the discursive level) to changes in programs implemented at both the EU and domestic levels.

c)   *Networking*. Peer reviews bring together persons who (in different contexts and with different roles) deal with the same themes. It is thus likely that networks develop among the participants. In some cases, these networks may have been 'activated' and people known during peer review meetings may have been involved in other subsequent activities.

2.2 The research design

The analysis of the PROGRESS peer review meetings carried out within the COPE project relied on five case studies (Table 7). National teams involved in the project were asked to select and analyse a peer review meeting attended by their countries and which they deemed particularly interesting in relation to the aims of COPE.

Table 1b. Main features of the peer review meetings selected

Year	Title	Host country	Peer countries	Eu stakeholders	Site visit
2009	The City Strategy for Tackling Unemployment and Child Poverty	**UK**	AT, BG, CZ, EL, LV, LT, NO, PT , RS	Eurocities; ESN	Yes
2009	Developing well-targeted tools for the active inclusion of vulnerable people	NO	AT, CY, IE, **PL**, RO, ES, UK	EAPN	Yes
2010	Using Reference Budgets for drawing up the requirements of a minimum income scheme and assessing adequacy	BE	AT, CY, FI, FR, IE, IT, LU, **SE**	EAPN; BusinessEurope	No
2011	Building a Coordinated Strategy for Parenting Support	FR	BE, BG, HR, CZ, DK, EE, **DE**, IT, MT	COFACE; Eurochild	No
2011	Improving the efficiency of social protection	PT	BE, **IT**, LV, LT, MT, RO, SI, HR	Caritas Europe; Eurocities	No

Note**:** countries in bold are those selected for a more in-depth analysis.

While the general features of the selected meetings were analysed, for each peer review a single country was selected for more in-depth analysis in order to reconstruct the various stages of participation in the exercise (from the decision to host/attend the meeting to the 'outcomes' of the participation). In one case, the country selected for in-depth analysis was the host country (the UK in the 2009 peer review on the 'City Strategy'). In the other cases, peer countries were selected: Poland in the Norwegian peer review on the Qualification Programme (2009), Sweden in the Belgian peer review on Reference Budgets (2010); Germany in the French peer review on Parenting Support (2011), and Italy in the meeting on 'Improving the efficiency of social protection' hosted by Portugal in 2011.

The five national reports rely on a careful process-tracing based on documentary analysis and on a number of semi-structured interviews. The main documentary sources of information used were the documents produced in the context of the selected peer reviews and by EU institutions and bodies (EC, Council, SPC, etc.), complemented when relevant with analysis of secondary literature and domestic documentary sources. Besides documentary analysis, the research relied on the findings from 23 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2010 and December 2013.[19] Interviewees included people involved in the peer review process such as host and peer country representatives, experts, stakeholders, EC representatives.

Coherently with the framework for the analysis described in Section 2.1, the bulk of the national reports consist of four Sections intended to shed light on the dimensions relevant to uncovering mutual learning dynamics possibly developing from the meetings: 1) description of the practice under review and its links with the EU agenda and with the situation in the other participating countries (with a specific focus on the country selected for in-depth analysis); 2) participants' motivations and expectations; 3) the actual development of the peer review meeting; 4) the outcomes of the meeting at the EU level and in the selected countries.

Importantly, the dimensions listed above largely correspond to those identified in the only comprehensive study on the PROGRESS peer review meetings conducted to date: the assessment carried out by OSE and PPMI (2012a, 2012b), which was a useful source of inspiration for our research. Consequently, the results of the two research studies can be easily accumulated, thereby yielding more advanced understanding of peer review meetings, which remain a relatively 'unexplored' tool of the Social OMC. Compared to the OSE and PPMI assessment, this study goes further in two respects. First, we focus on the transition

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[19] Most of the interviews (18) were conducted in 2013 within the COPE project. One of the interviews used to analyse the Polish participation in the Norwegian meeting was conducted in 2010, and four interviews used to give account of the Italian case study were conducted in 2012 in the framework of two PhD. thesis (respectively, Zieleńska, 2013 and Sabato 2012).

phase from the Lisbon strategy to the Europe 2020 strategy: indeed, two of the selected peer review meetings were held on the eve of the launch of Europe 2020; one of them in the year when the new strategy was launched; and two in the first year of implementation. The analysis of this transition period appears particularly important since peer review meetings were the only element of the Social OMC which continued in the passage from Lisbon to Europe 2020. Second, this study adds new evidence on the peer review process insofar as four of the selected meetings (UK 2009, BE 2010, FR 2011, PT 2011) and four of the countries involved (Italy, Poland, and Sweden as peer countries, France and Portugal as host countries) were not part of the sample of the OSE/PPMI assessment.

3. The findings

3.1 The selected peer reviews: topics and participating countries

The peer reviews selected for this study concerned different kinds of practices relative to the fight against poverty and social exclusion implemented by the host countries. In the case of the meeting hosted by the UK in 2009, the practice under review, the 'City Strategy' (CS), was a specific program aimed at reducing unemployment and poverty, and whose implementation was still at a pilot stage. Similarly, the topic of the Norwegian meeting (2009) was a policy program (the 'Qualification Program'- QuP) introduced in 2007 that, at the time of the peer review, was still at the initial stage: it was not yet nationwide, and a first evaluation was on-going. A methodology with which to develop 'reference budgets' was the practice under review in the Belgian seminar held in 2010. The French peer review (2011) dealt with 'parenting support' policies and was held on the eve of a comprehensive reform of the policy domain which was to be undertaken by the host country. The meeting hosted by Portugal in 2011 was an occasion to review the Portuguese Decree-Law no. 70/2010, which reformed the Portuguese means-testing scheme used to determine entitlement to a number of non-contributory social benefits, among them the national minimum income scheme.

According to the analysis in the national reports, the topics selected for the peer reviews were generally relevant to the EU social inclusion policy agenda insofar as they were linked to EU-level activities and initiatives on-going at the time of the meetings. This is particularly evident in the cases of the meetings hosted by the UK and Norway (both linked to the concept of 'active inclusion'), and in the Portuguese case, which was an occasion to discuss the need to assure both 'effectiveness and efficiency' in the reforms of social protection systems – a top priority for Member States and a precondition for reaching the Europe 2020

target on poverty. As for the Belgian meeting, the development of reference budgets methodologies is certainly linked to the first pillar of the 2008 Recommendation on Active Inclusion (providing adequate income support) and to the EU2020 anti-poverty target, but it cannot be said that the tool was a top EU priority at the time of the peer review. However, a 'revival' of the topic occurred a few years later with the launch of the Social Investment Package in 2013. Finally, the link between the French practice under review (parenting support) and the EU agenda is less obvious. Indeed, it could be only found at a more general level insofar as good parenting support policies may facilitate the achievement of some of the EU 2020 'social' targets.

The following subsections describe in more detail the topics reviewed in each of the selected meetings and the 'mix of countries' which attended them.

3.1.1 'The City Strategy for Tackling Unemployment and Child Poverty' (UK 2009)

The topic selected for the British peer review was the 'City Strategy' (CS), a pilot programme introduced in 15 selected areas across the UK (the so-called 'CS pathfinders'). The CS was related to New Labour's Welfare Reform Green Paper (2006). However, if compared with other measures, it can be considered a very specific and small-scale initiative, with a limited budget and a relatively low political profile. Nevertheless, the CS also contained some innovative elements relative to its emphasis on the 'localisation' of welfare provisions and on the partnership approach that it promoted (sharing of responsibilities for tackling unemployment and poverty between the State and communities).[20] Importantly, besides using resources from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), CS pathfinders were expected to gain access to other sources such as the ESF, and to resources from other government departments. At the time of the peer review, an evaluation of the CS pilots was on-going; however, according to the national report, the future of the initiative appeared to be already compromised. On the one hand, general elections were approaching and the defeat of New Labour seemed highly probable. On the other hand, the economic crisis had been modifying the policy agenda, with a consequent decrease in concern for the 'hardest to help' unemployed who were the main target group of the CS.

The CS can be considered a practice in line with the EC Recommendation on Active Inclusion (2008), especially in regard to its emphasis on 'aligning efforts' across traditionally

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[20] More in detail, the CS promoted the creation of local partnerships that would develop strategies to meet targets to reduce the numbers of individuals in receipt of out of work benefits and to increase employment rates. Furthermore, CS pathfinders were encouraged to identify area-specific targets and to develop partnerships among public, private and voluntary sector organisations.

separate policy fields and on involving the local levels. Indeed, according to some of the interviewees, at that time the European Commission was becoming increasingly convinced that the close involvement of local authorities was a prerequisite for successful implementation of the active inclusion strategy.

Differences among the countries which attended the British peer review have been stressed in the national report. First, most of the peer countries were Central-Eastern European countries with limited experience of local-level partnerships (a topic, though, relatively high on their political agendas) and different policy priorities due to the varied salience and nature of unemployment and poverty issues. Furthermore, institutional and policy differences were regarded as limiting the scope of possible learning from the practice under review also in countries more similar to the UK in terms of national wealth or EU membership, such as Austria, Portugal or Norway (this last already had in place policies pursuing goals similar to those of the CS). Overall, the feeling of some participants was that the 'country mix' was rather unbalanced and that the presence of more West-Central European countries would have been useful.

3.1.2 'Developing well-targeted tools for the active inclusion of vulnerable people' (NO 2009)

The topic of the peer review hosted by Norway in 2009 was the 'Qualification Programme' (QuP), a programme introduced in 2007 within the framework of wider reform of the Norwegian welfare system. The QuP aimed at the labour-market integration of vulnerable groups, and it was targeted on people aged between 19 and 67. The distinctive features of the QuP were: its personalised approach based on 'work-ability assessments' and individual 'activation plans'; its emphasis on improving recipients' employability; service integration, that is, the provision of social and health services supplementing employment-related measures; the creation of 'one-stop-shops' providing income support, employment and social services (the local offices of the newly created Labour and Welfare Administration - NAV); the provision of adequate income support. At the time of the peer review, implementation of the QuP was still at the initial stage (it became nationwide in 2010), and evaluation of its functioning was on-going. As evident from this succinct description, the QuP was particularly in line with the 2008 EC Recommendation on Active Inclusion and with its integrated approach based on sufficient income support, inclusive labour markets, and access to quality services.

In their Comment papers, peer countries attending the Norwegian peer review on the QuP – countries which belonged to the different welfare regimes identified by the literature – stressed differences in administrative models and approaches to social inclusion and labour-market policies if compared with the Norwegian example under review. In some cases, e.g. Austria and Spain, difficulties in establishing one-stop-shops or in coordinating measures at the various levels of government (due to the federal set-up of the state) were highlighted. In other cases, e.g. Ireland and Romania, the main focus was on employment services, while the UK emphasised that measures similar to the QuP were already being implemented at the national level since 1998. The lack of integration between employment and social assistance services was perceived as a constraint on implementation of a comprehensive active inclusion strategy in Poland. Shortly before the peer review, new rules intended to increase cooperation and information exchange between those services, and to foster the 'activation' of minimum income recipients were enacted. However, according to the national report, active inclusion was not the topic of any broader public or political debate, and it was considered a matter for the Department of Social Assistance and Social Inclusion, with limited involvement of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy or other departments. This said, notwithstanding the enormous differences between the Norwegian and Polish policy contexts and economic conditions, the peer review was still assessed as a potential source of learning by the Polish officials who attended the meeting.

3.1.3 'Using Reference Budgets for drawing up the requirements of a minimum income scheme and assessing adequacy' (BE 2010)

The practice under review in the 2010 Belgian meeting was the 'reference budget', a methodology used for different purposes, including assessment of the adequacy of social assistance provisions and minimum income schemes. The Belgian methodology on reference budgets was developed within the framework of the EU PROGRESS project on standard budgets (2008-2010). In the Belgian case, baskets of goods and services deemed necessary for people to 'live a life in dignity' were developed for 21 household types through a participatory method and the involvement of people experiencing poverty through focus groups. The 'Minibudgets' methodology presented at the peer review was developed for the Flemish part of the country, and its possible application to Wallonia was a topic of the debate. Besides presentation of the Belgian example, one of the aims of the Belgian meeting was to explore the possibility of setting EU-wide criteria to determine national reference budgets.

Reference budgets as means to assess the adequacy of minimum income schemes can be certainly linked to the 2008 EC Recommendation on Active Inclusion, which emphasises the need to assure that people live a life in dignity. However, not many initiatives related to reference budgets were undertaken at the EU level in the period before the Belgian peer review, one exception being the PROGRESS project on 'standard budgets' aimed at developing reference budgets methodology in the participating Member States and exchanging information on that issue. In the immediate aftermath of the peer review (and until 2013) reference budgets were rarely mentioned in EU documents, probably as a consequence of the opposition of many MS to any EU intervention in domains related to minimum income provisions (and, notably, the sensitive issue of their adequacy).

The Belgian peer review was attended by countries belonging to the Southern, Continental, Nordic and Anglo-Saxon welfare regimes, while no Central-Eastern European countries participated in the meeting. The peer review brought together countries with different amounts of experience in building reference budgets: while in Finland and Sweden reference budgets were well-established practices, they were not used in countries such as France and Luxembourg. Cyprus and Italy had some experience in this domain, while the Austrian reference budgets methodology had been recently developed within the PROGRESS project on standard budgets. Interestingly, in Ireland the reference budgets methodology was developed by local NGOs and not by public authorities. Sweden was the most experienced among the countries attending the peer review, since reference budgets had been used for the first time by the Swedish Consumer Agency in 1976. In the Swedish case, the basket of goods and services constituting the reference budget is not set at an 'absolute minimum', in that items concerning recreation and social life are included. Similar to the Belgian methodology, also in that of Sweden a variety of stakeholders are involved (through focus groups) in the construction of reference budgets even if, compared to Belgium, people experiencing poverty seems to play a minor role. All in all, at the time of the peer review the reference budgets methodology was consolidated in Sweden, and even if discussions among the Consumer Agency and the Ministry on how to improve it were recurrent, no major changes were on-going or foreseen.

3.1.4 'Building a Coordinated Strategy for Parenting Support' (FR 2011)

The topic of the French peer review held in 2011 was 'parenting support', a relatively new policy area which "refers to a range of information, support, education, training, counselling and other measures or services that focus on influencing how parents understand and carry

out their parenting role." (Daly 2011: 1). In France, those policies (which emerged in the 1990s as local and private initiatives) have a universal and prevention-oriented character. At the time of the peer review, reform of parenting support policies aimed at avoiding overlaps among existing programmes and addressing a certain lack of coordination among the levels of government and the actors involved was to be undertaken by the French administration. As said, parenting support is a relatively new policy area, and EU actions in this domain have been limited. As pointed out during the French peer review, however, such a policy may contribute to achievement of three of the Europe 2020 headline targets: reducing poverty and social exclusion, reducing the rate of early school-leavers, increasing the employment rate. Furthermore, the topic was certainly relevant within the framework of the Recommendation on "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage" (one of the initiatives foreseen in the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion), which the European Commission was preparing at the time of the peer review.

The mix of countries attending the French peer review was rather unbalanced in that countries belonging to the Central-Eastern European welfare regimes were overrepresented (5 out of 10 participants) while there were no Anglo-Saxon states. Furthermore, countries' experiences and approaches in the specific policy domain were rather dissimilar in many respects: for instance, the more or less interventionist character of implemented measures, the adoption of universal vs. targeted approaches, and schemes for evaluating policy outcomes (quantitative vs. qualitative methods). In Germany, parenting support is part of family policies and has a universal and prevention-oriented character. It includes a broad range of measures targeted on children under the age of six, as well as on school-age children, and provided by a variety of organisations often funded by municipalities. The Eighth Social Code on "Child and Youth Services" is the regulatory framework for those policies, which vary to a certain degree because the content and the extent of services are regulated by federal states' laws. At the time of the peer review, no reforms or debates concerning the domain of parenting support were on-going in Germany.

3.1.5 'Improving the efficiency of social protection' (PT 2011)

As for the Portuguese meeting, the topic under review was the Decree-Law no. 70/2010, which reformed the Portuguese means-testing scheme used to determine entitlement to a number of non-contributory social benefits, among them the national minimum income scheme (the 'Social Integration Income' – SII). Against the backdrop of the financial and economic crisis, which had hit Portugal hard, 'cost-containment' and reduction of the public

deficit were among the main objectives of the reform, which, more in detail, aimed at: harmonisation of the means-testing schemes for the various benefits for which it was used; the achievement of more coherence, efficiency and accuracy in the attribution of social benefits; and reinforcement of the fight against frauds. The analysis of the Portuguese example was the starting point for broader discussion on the implications that reforms of social protection systems may have in terms of both efficiency (mainly understood as 'cost-containment') and effectiveness (capacity to reduce poverty). In the context of the financial and economic crisis, this topic was obviously high on the EU agenda at the time of the peer review (and still is today), and it was clearly related to achievement of the Europe 2020 headline target on poverty and social exclusion.

The mix of countries attending the Portuguese peer review appears rather unbalanced insofar as – apart from Portugal, Belgium and Italy – only countries belonging to the Central-Eastern European welfare regime attended the meeting, while Northern and Anglo-Saxon countries were absent. According to the national report, both similarities and differences between participating countries' policies and contextual situations can be detected. Whereas a general increase in the pressure of social assistance expenditure on public budgets, an emphasis on the 'activation' of social assistance beneficiaries, and enhancement of the fight against frauds, were features shared by all countries, their social assistance and means-testing systems differed in many respects. Furthermore, whilst in some cases no major changes were foreseen (e.g. Belgium and Malta), in other cases important reforms concerning social assistance benefits or, more specifically, means-testing procedures had recently been adopted or were under way (e.g. Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia). For example, this was the case of Italy, a country that, at the time of the peer review, was reforming the 'Equivalent economic status indicator' (ISEE), the main means-testing tool used to determine entitlement to a number of non-contributory social benefits and the share of financial co-participation in the cost of some services. Interestingly, both the general purposes of the envisaged Italian reform (cost-containment) and the specific aspects of the ISEE to be reviewed largely corresponded to the topics addressed by the Portuguese reform under review.

3.2 Participants' motivations and expectations

The promotion of mutual learning dynamics should be the aim of peer review meetings. However, the OSE and PPMI (2012a) assessment uncovers other reasons which may induce member states to participate in the peer review exercise, including: the desire to show off domestic practices; the need to respond to EU pressures; attempts to upload domestic

political agendas at the EU level; an endeavour to settle internal differences (e.g. in federal states) by debating them with European partners. These possible drivers behind the choice to host/attend the meetings are not mutually exclusive, and they typically coexist (ibid.). They largely correspond to the motivations and expectations of the countries which attended the meetings in our sample.

3.2.1 Host countries' motivations and expectations

As for the host countries, the British peer review is probably the case where host countries' motivations and expectations consisted more markedly in the desire to 'show off' a domestic 'good practice'. The decision to host the meeting was probably taken as a result of interactions between the EU unit and the 'City Strategy' unit of the DWP. When the former asked for policy examples to be proposed as topics for peer reviews, the latter proposed the City Strategy, without any knowledge about the functioning of the peer review exercise.[21] Consequently, it emerges from the analysis that the expectation of the CS officials attending the peer review was to act as policy experts by illustrating the City Strategy, without any expectation of learning from the other participants. As we will show in the next section, this had important implications for the development of the meeting.

The willingness to promote genuine mutual learning dynamics is more evident in the case of the Norwegian and French meetings. As regards the former, the 'QuP' was considered an example of 'good practices' to show to European partners. However, its implementation was at an initial stage and evaluation of that first experience was on-going. Consequently, the Norwegian administration was keen to discuss some specific elements of the reform with the participants in the peer review, and possibly to learn from their experience.[22] The French case is particularly interesting because, at the time of the peer review, France was in the process of changing its legislation on parenting support in order to improve the coordination and integration of different services implemented by different types of organisations and different levels of government. The peer review was seen as an occasion to compare experiences in the policy domain and to learn from other countries' policies before undertaking the national reform. Significantly, the proposal to host the peer review came from the National Parenting Support Committee (CNSP) – the body tasked with elaboration of the reform – and most of the issues discussed during the meetings of the CNSP corresponded to the main issues

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[21] Some of the interviewees suggested that the European Commission or the SPC may have encouraged the DWP to propose the City Strategy because of its fit with the Commission's Active Inclusion agenda.

[22] Besides the COPE report on the Norwegian peer review, see also (Budginaitė 2012).

discussed during the peer review. The fact that, besides key figures of the CNSP, also the French State Secretary for the Family attended part of the peer review meeting can be considered as evidencing the salience of the topic under review at the domestic level.

A variety of motivations were at the basis of the Belgian decision to host the peer review on reference budgets. On the one hand, that decision was due to a desire to promote mutual learning dynamics: the Belgian administration was keen to show to the participating countries the newly-developed methodology on 'Minibudgets', to discuss its strengths and weaknesses, and possibly to acquire knowledge in order to improve it. Considering that some of the countries which attended the peer review had been involved (together with Belgium) in the PROGRESS project on standard budgets, the meeting was also seen as a useful occasion for continuing a debate begun in that context. On the other hand, however, a more strategic goal emerges from the national report. It is likely that Belgium used the peer review (together with other initiatives organised during its Presidency) as a way to 'upload' the issue of the adequacy of minimum income schemes onto the European agenda. Indeed, because the former is a 'hot topic', difficult to address directly given the opposition of many MS, reference budgets were perceived as a promising method with which to develop a more uniform EU definition of 'adequacy', and the peer review was probably viewed as a venue useful for initiating a debate on that issue. This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the distinctive features of the Belgian meeting, which was an 'ad-hoc', 'flexible' peer review – that is, a meeting on a topic of great interest arranged quickly and without following the usual steps of the peer review process. Indeed, the idea of organising a peer review on reference budgets was proposed by Belgium during a meeting of Ministries concerned with the fight against poverty which took place in October 2010, and the peer review was held in November of the same year. The presence of the Belgian Secretary of State for Social Integration and Combating Poverty, who introduced and attended the meeting, can be considered evidence of the importance accorded by Belgium to the peer review.

In the Portuguese case, some of the interviewees hypothesized that the idea of hosting a peer review meeting on the reform introduced by Decree-Law 70/2010 came directly from the Portuguese Institute for Social Security (the body which hosted the meeting), with an important role being played by an official of the Institute who, at that time, also represented Portugal in the SPC. Portuguese expectations were twofold: on the one hand, the Portuguese administration wanted to illustrate the contents of an important reform recently enacted and considered a good practice; on the other hand, they wanted to discuss the reform with the

participants in the peer review so as to gather feedback and suggestions for possible future changes.

3.2.2 Peer countries' motivations and expectations

In regard to the motivations and expectations of the selected peer countries, the desire to promote mutual learning dynamics by finding out more about other countries' practices and illustrating their own is the most common reason for attending the meetings. However, some nuances emerge from the national reports. For example, in the case of Poland the expectation to learn from the host country (Norway) about active inclusion measures and promising ways to integrate the three strands identified by the 2008 EC Recommendation seems to have prevailed. By contrast, given the long experience accumulated by Sweden in the domain of reference budgets, the main expectation of the national expert who attended the Belgian peer review was to illustrate the Swedish system. Exchanging knowledge about parenting support policies was the main reason behind Germany's participation in the French peer review, which it saw as a useful occasion to continue regular exchanges regarding family policies on-going between the two countries. As for Italy, it emerges clearly from the interviews that the Italian decision to attend the Portuguese meeting was strictly linked to the domestic context and, notably, to the reform of the ISEE already underway when Italy selected the peer review meetings to attend in 2011. Thus, the main expectation was to gather information potentially useful for that reform and, at the same time, to contribute to the debate by presenting and discussing domestic experiences that might prove useful for the other participating countries.

Consideration of the delegations of the selected peer countries shows that most of the countries' representatives (both government representatives and independent experts) came from national public administrations or bodies. This was the case of the Polish, Swedish and Italian delegations. Only in one case – the German delegation in the French peer review on parenting support – was the national expert not a public official but an academic. Overall, it is possible to state that people involved as country representatives had the competences necessary for them to contribute effectively to the debate because they worked for national administrations directly responsible for the management of the practices under review in the respective domestic contexts:

- The Polish delegation at the Norwegian peer review on the Qualification Program consisted of two officials from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, one from the Department of Social Assistance and Social Inclusion, and one from the Department of Labour Market (the

two units responsible for implementation of the various aspects of the active inclusion strategy);

- The Swedish delegation at the Belgian peer review on reference budgets was composed of a representative from the Swedish Consumer Agency, the body responsible for selection of the items composing the basket of goods and services at the basis of the Swedish standard budget[23].

- As well as an academic from the Free University of Berlin, the German delegation to the French peer review on parenting support comprised an official from the German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, the ministry responsible for family policies in Germany.

- The Italian delegation to the Portuguese peer review on 'Improving the efficiency of social protection' consisted of an official from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (from the unit responsible for elaboration of the reform of the ISEE) and an official from the Bank of Italy who was the permanent representative of the Bank of Italy at the Committee of Inquiry on Social Exclusion.

In all cases, no meetings were held to prepare participation in the peer review and involving other officials from the organisations of the country representatives. Indeed, in most cases, preparation for the meeting consisted essentially in contacts between the two country delegates in order to draft the 'peer country comment paper', and in two cases (Poland and Sweden) the opinion of our interviewees was that the importance of participation in the peer review was to some extent underestimated by other officials in the Ministry.

3.2.3 Other participants' expectations: the European Commission

Besides Member States' representatives, a variety of actors attend peer review meetings, including 'experts', stakeholder representatives, and EC officials. While it is not possible here to give an overview of the expectations of those actors (see the national reports for more details), in this subsection we will briefly summarise the expectations of EC representatives (generally DG Employment officials) attending the meetings. As emerges from the national reports, three kinds of expectations generally characterise the participation of EC representatives in the peer review process. First, and rather obviously, in line with the aims of the peer review exercise, the European Commission expects MS to exchange experiences and to learn from each other. Second, the European Commission generally uses these meetings to

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[23] He was the only Swedish participant in the Belgian peer review because the participation of a representative from the Swedish Ministry of Labour was cancelled due to other commitments.

gather information on current developments in the MS. Finally, peer review meetings are often occasions when EC representatives can inform MS officials about EU-level developments, actions, and opportunities.

3.3 The meetings

3.3.1 Agenda and main issues discussed

Overall, the peer reviews in our sample were structured around various sessions allowing illustration of the practice under review (by host countries' delegations), the presentation of thematic experts' discussion papers, peer countries' and stakeholders' interventions, and a final session summarising the main lessons learned. In two cases, the British and the Norwegian meetings, 'site visits' were organised. However, a closer look at the agendas of the meetings reveals some differences in their structure, probably linked to the different motivations and expectations behind host countries' decisions to organise the seminars. Thus, for example, relatively more time was devoted to the analysis and discussion of host countries' practices during the British meeting. As we showed in Section 3.2, in that case the main purpose of the host country was to illustrate the 'City Strategy' to the other participants, with little expectation of learning from them. By contrast, much more attention and time was devoted to peer countries' experiences during the Belgian and Portuguese meetings. In the former case, consistently with the intent to compare the various experiences in the domain of reference budgets and to launch a EU wide discussion on the topic, the core of the peer review was structured around four sessions (based on four specific questions to be answered) chaired in turn by one of the peer countries' representatives, who first presented the situation in their countries and then gave the floor to the other country representatives. Similarly, the main session of the Portuguese peer review consisted of *tours di table* aimed at answering specific questions related to social protection reforms and means-testing tools. Those *tours de table*, facilitated by the thematic expert and the peer review manager, allowed for a balanced participation because each country representative had occasion to illustrate domestic policies and practices relative to the topic under review. Indeed, as mentioned in Section 3.2, besides presentation of the Portuguese reform under review, the main objective of the meeting was to provide an overview of the reforms of social protection systems on-going in the Member States and of their implications in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. A specific session devoted to peer countries' presentations was held during the French peer review. In this case, consistently with the aim of using the results of the meeting within the framework of the

forthcoming reform of parenting support policies, the main issues dealt with during the meeting largely corresponded to the key issues to be addressed by the French reform.

While it is impossible here to give a thorough account of the issues discussed during each of the selected meetings, it is possible to state that the discussions were in general far-reaching and enabled comprehensive analysis to be made of the main features of the practices under review.[24] Indeed, even when the topic under review was a specific program (e.g. UK and NO) or methodology (e.g. BE), the issues discussed included not only the specific features of the program/methodology but also the policy approaches on which they relied and normative aspects.[25] Similarly, during the French peer review, discussions included the definition of parenting support, the different approaches followed in the participating countries (universal vs. focused), normative issues related to the definition of 'good parenting', concrete programs implemented, and evaluation techniques. The same applies to the analysis of social protection and means-testing schemes undertaken during the Portuguese peer review, where the topics debated ranged from the policy approaches on which reforms relied to very technical aspects related to means-testing tools.

The EU framework for the practice under review was a common topic debated during the meetings. Furthermore, the Portuguese meeting was an occasion to present to Member States EU opportunities to foster social innovation and experimentation, an important element of the Europe 2020 Strategy. A specific session of the Belgian, French and Portuguese peer reviews concerned the contributions that the meeting might make to the Europe 2020 strategy and, in some cases, specific recommendations for EU level initiatives were put forward.

3.3.2 'Tenor' of discussions and the roles played by the participants

In most cases, it is not possible to detect a clear 'direction' in the exchanges that took place during the selected peer reviews by looking at the minutes of the meetings and relying on the interviews with the participants. In other words, those meetings were not characterised by a clear distinction between 'tutors' and 'learners' (see also OSE and PPMI 2012a). With particular regard to the behaviour of the representatives of the peer countries selected for this study, it is possible to say that they acted as both tutors and learners, often according to the specific issues discussed during the different phases of the meetings. This holds true also in

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[24] In some cases however, participants stated that more time would have been needed (this was particularly the case of the Belgian peer review, which lasted only one day).
[25] Discussions on organisational arrangements and evaluation processes predominated during the British peer review. According to the national report, this was probably due to the wide variety of experiences amongst the participating countries.

those cases where, before the meetings, it was possible to expect more defined tutor/learner roles. For example, given the significant differences in the domain of active inclusion policies, it seemed more likely that the Polish participation in the Norwegian peer review would be characterised by a more marked 'learner' attitude. Yet analysis of the peer review reveals that the Polish representatives were among the most active participants. Conversely, while the expectation of the British delegation during the meeting on the 'City Strategy' was to act as 'tutors', for a variety of reasons (see below), things actually turned out differently. In some cases, the attention paid by peer country delegations to the various topics debated during the meetings varied according to peculiarities of the domestic context: for instance, it is quite obvious that the interest of the Italian delegation during the Portuguese peer review was higher when the debate touched on topics more directly linked to the ongoing reform of the ISEE than in other moments of the meetings.

'Experts' (and, notably, the thematic experts) often performed a key role in assuring the quality of the debate and the smooth progress of the meetings, and their contributions were generally highly appreciated by the other participants (see, in particular, the French peer review). Stakeholder representatives were often described as the 'most vocal' among the participants, while the degree of activism of DG Employment representatives varied according to the meeting.

The atmosphere during the selected peer review meetings was often described as 'open', 'lively' and 'positive'. The 'tenor' of discussions generally followed a sort of logic of appropriateness, and participants, especially country representatives, tended to avoid harsh and direct criticisms of the other states' policies. However, interventions during the meetings were not purely descriptive. On the contrary, differences and disagreements often emerged during the debates, sometimes being raised by experts or stakeholders. By way of example, disagreements between the (Belgian) thematic expert and the UK delegation during the British peer review on issues such as employment quality, in-work poverty, and the need for integrated active inclusion approaches seemed to reflect some of the tensions at the heart of the Active Inclusion strategy, and to illustrate the diverse interpretations of the concept among EU Member States. Similarly, during the Norwegian peer review, disagreements on the need to stipulate contracts between social assistance recipients and service providers touched on the issue of the relation between state and citizen, which proved to be very different in Poland and the UK compared to Norway. While those divergences were generally considered to enrich the debate, in a few cases (e.g. the British peer review), some criticisms

of the host country's practice provoked tensions and a defensive reaction by the host country delegation.

Overall, the country representatives interviewed gave positive assessments of the peer review meetings that they attended. In their opinion, those meetings fulfilled their expectations in that they were useful occasions to promote mutual learning and exchanges of knowledge among the participants. The only exception was the British meeting, where learning opportunities for the host country were described as almost null by some of the members of the host country delegation – also because of the behaviour of some of the participants, which did not appear interested in the debate. Indeed, it seems that were various reasons for the somewhat disappointing result of that meeting. Firstly, as already mentioned, some misunderstandings by DWP officials of the functioning and aims of the peer review exercise certainly impacted on the actual development of the meeting. Secondly, the formulation of the topic under review – 'The City Strategy for Tackling Unemployment and Child Poverty' – was misleading and provoked some confusion among the participants because 'child poverty' was not a core topic of the City Strategy, and the time devoted to that issue during the meeting was limited. However, 'child poverty' was the main topic of interest for many of the participants in the peer review. Hence the limited attention paid to that issue during the meeting may have provoked a decrease in attendees' attention. Furthermore, those misunderstandings may have been exacerbated by logistical inconveniences, especially during the site visits.

3.4 The outcomes of the meetings

3.4.1 Outcomes at the EU level

The main tool for disseminating information about peer reviews is the DG Employment website, which contains a section on the peer review meetings where documents produced in those contexts are published. Besides the website, the national reports provide evidence of further dissemination and usages of the findings of peer review meetings at the EU level.

The 'City Strategy' was to a certain extent 'included' in the dossier on Active Inclusion insofar as the European Commission representative invited the Hackney City Strategy Pathfinder representative[26] to Brussels to present the CS to a high-level audience at a conference on active inclusion the year after the peer review. The Norwegian meeting on the 'Qualification Program' was frequently mentioned in subsequent peer reviews on similar

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[26] Hackney was one of the sites visited during the peer review.

topics, and the program was further discussed during a meeting of the Social Protection Committee. Besides being quoted in one of the Annual Reports of the SPC, the Belgian peer review on reference budgets was cited as a source of reference in a call for tenders launched by DG Employment in 2013 to develop a common methodology on reference budgets. Furthermore, the peer review was briefly mentioned during a workshop on reference budgets at the 3rd Annual Convention of the EPAP in order to stress the need for a common methodological and theoretical framework at the EU level. According to the interviewees, the results of the French peer review reached the members of the working group that was preparing the EC Recommendation on child poverty (some of them attended the meeting), and the seminar was mentioned in the final report of the SPC ad-hoc group that assisted the European Commission in elaboration of this Recommendation. Furthermore, some of the papers presented during the meeting have been quoted in a recent policy brief of the European Platform for investing in children, and in a report drafted by Eurofound (whose author attended the peer review). According to the EC representative, documents produced during the Portuguese meeting were widely disseminated and used by DG Employment and some other international organisations. Notably, they were forwarded to the DG Employment 'country desk' dealing with Portugal and used for one of the reviews of the Memorandum of Understanding with Portugal.

Besides the European Commission, experts and stakeholders have an important role in disseminating information about the meetings. Indeed, the results of peer reviews are frequently quoted and used by the experts attending the meetings in their publications and activities (for example, this was the case of some of the experts attending the Norwegian, Belgian, French and Portuguese meetings). Interestingly, one of the stakeholder organisations which attended the French peer review (Eurochild) later organised an event whose format replicated the peer review methodology. Since the topic of the Eurochild event was similar to that of the French peer review, and since some of the participants overlapped, this can be considered a follow-up on the French seminar.

Some networking seems to have developed from the peer reviews that we analysed. Given the number of participants in those meetings, it is impossible to determine the scope of networking; however, it especially concerned the experts attending the meetings, who, in some cases (e.g. UK, NO, FR) were contacted or invited to other events by EC or countries' officials met during the peer reviews. There is no evidence of further contacts among the countries' representatives attending the meetings.

3.4.2 Outcomes in the selected countries

As regards the outcomes of the meetings in the selected countries, the analysis reveals that, while learning from the peer reviews took place at the individual level (that is, it mainly concerned countries' representatives, see Section 3.3), those cognitive effects rarely spill over into the organisations to which those individuals belong, and they never reach nationwide policy debates.[27] However, in two cases (France and Italy) some consequences of the peer reviews extending beyond purely cognitive effects, and closer to a sort of 'transfer' of the knowledge acquired during the meeting to domestic policies, have been found. The analysis of the outcomes of the meetings in the selected countries confirms the finding that 'experts' are generally at the centre of the networking that sometimes develops from a meeting (see, in particular, the Swedish and German cases).

As for the British peer review, although some recommendations for improving the 'City Strategy' were put forward during the meeting, no tangible outcomes at the domestic level have been identified. According to the national report, a mix of organisational and contextual factors accounted for this result. Firstly, as mentioned in Section 3.3, the DWP never viewed its involvement in the peer review as an opportunity to gain knowledge that could impact on its policy-making activities or the ongoing CS model. Furthermore, the unclear focus of the meeting affected its quality (and, consequently, learning possibilities), and practices implemented in the participating countries were deemed too dissimilar to produce any transfer. Secondly, a new government was elected in the period after the peer review. The policy approach of the 'City Strategy' was not in line with the one followed by the new government: indeed, the strategy was discontinued in 2010.

Knowledge acquired during the Norwegian peer review on the 'Qualification program' was deemed potentially useful for addressing some of the limits of the implementation of active inclusion strategies in Poland (in particular, the lack of integration between labour market and social assistance services). For this reason, the Polish delegates drafted a report on the peer review which summarised the main topics discussed during the meeting and the general conclusions. They sent the report to their direct superiors and proposed forwarding it to social partners and third-sector organisations. Furthermore, they proposed increasing knowledge about the Norwegian experience through bilateral cooperation or further exchanges in EU fora. However, none of these proposals was followed up and, in particular, the report was not disseminated further either within or outside the Ministry. According to the analysis in the

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[27] These findings are consistent with the results of the OSE and PPMI (2012a; 2012b) assessment.

national report, two factors accounted for this outcome. On the one hand, the topic was not considered sufficiently important for officials to spend more time on it. On the other hand, the rigid departmental division within the Polish Ministry of Labour (with the Department of Social Assistance and Social Inclusion dealing with social assistance matters and the Department of Labour Market dealing with employment and labour market issues) may have impeded the inter-departmental diffusion of information about the meeting.

In Sweden, the diffusion of information about the Belgian peer review on reference budgets consisted essentially in an exchange of telephone calls between the Swedish expert who attended the meeting and an official of the Ministry, and in informal discussions within the Consumer Agency. According to the national report, the limited dissemination of information about the meeting was mainly due to the fact that the reference budgets methodology was well established in Sweden, and no changes were either undertaken or foreseen after the peer review. Some contacts between the Swedish expert and some of the other participants in the peer review continued in the period after the meeting.

According to the national report, in Germany, information about the French peer review on parenting support was disseminated only within the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). Dissemination outside the Ministry was deemed not necessary because the meeting was conceived as an occasion for knowledge exchange among policy-makers (and therefore with limited interest for a broader audience). In the period immediately after the peer review, German officials remained in contact with some of the participants in order to exchange more detailed information on the German policy. Among them was the thematic expert, who was invited to present the main developments and trends of parenting support policies in Europe at a congress organised by the German ministry. Overall, the influence of the peer review on German parenting support policies has been judged very modest. By contrast, the peer review seems to have been extensively used by the French administration in the subsequent reform of parenting support policies. In particular, the issues of how to define and evaluate parenting support policies debated during the peer review were further discussed in subsequent meetings of the National Parenting Support Committee. The Thematic expert's discussion paper proved useful in arriving at a definition of 'parenting support' shared among the members of the CNSP (and it was indeed quoted in the 'Opinion of the CNSP concerning the definition of parenting support' of 20 December 2012). As for the issue of evaluation, the 2011 'Opinion of the CNSP on the evaluation of parenting support measures' briefly mentioned discussions on this topic held during the peer review, and the main results of the meeting were summarised and

taken into account by the evaluation of parenting support measures undertaken by the French Inspectorate General for Social Affairs (the results were published in February 2013). Finally, the usefulness of the peer review meeting was explicitly mentioned in the 'Inter-ministerial circular no. 2012-63 of 07 February 2012' which reorganised the policy domain in France. The fact that the peer review has been so frequently cited in official documents is as unusual as it is significant because it probably demonstrates the importance of the meeting in the domestic reform process.

Similarly to France, outcomes extending beyond the purely cognitive level also emerge from the Italian case study. In Italy, the findings of the Portuguese peer review have been disseminated by the Italian delegates during the meetings of the ministerial working group tasked with reform of the ISEE. According to the interviewees, a variety of concrete examples drawn from the experiences of the countries which attended the Portuguese peer review were discussed during the meetings of the working group, and the feasibility of introducing them into the national legislation was assessed. In this regard, the Italian participation in the peer review has been an occasion to enrich the domestic debate. However, besides the cognitive level, it seems that some of those examples (notably tapers on work income, the treatment of donations made by applicants for certain services subject to means-testing (residential facilities for the elderly), cross-checking tools to prevent frauds) were to some extent transposed into the draft reform of the ISEE, after being appropriately adapted to the Italian context. According to the national report, three factors appear particularly important in explaining this outcome. First, the domestic policy context at the time of the peer review meeting was particularly receptive because a reform process concerning exactly the same topics discussed during the Portuguese peer review meeting was in progress. Second, the quality and the organizational features of the peer review meeting were important: in particular, the good balance between more theoretical discussions (about policy approaches and objectives) and more practical ones (concerning specific measures implemented in the participating countries) enabled the Italian participants to acquire the information that they deemed useful for the national context. Finally, the composition of the Italian delegation played a key role. Indeed, it can be said that the Italian delegates had the right motivations for attending the meeting and the right competencies to recognize information potentially useful for the domestic context. Moreover, their role in the national administration enabled them to disseminate knowledge acquired during the peer review in the decision-making venues that, at that time, were central for reform of the ISEE. It was thus

possible to make direct use of knowledge acquired during the peer review in the on-going reform process.

4. Conclusions

The purposes of the analysis of the peer review meetings carried out within the framework of the COPE project were to uncover how multi-level and multi-stakeholder interactions develop in the context of 'soft processes' like the Social OMC, and to shed light on the effects that those interactions may produce. Through the study of five seminars held between 2009 and 2011 (in the period of the passage from the Lisbon strategy to Europe 2020), we sought to answer four questions: 1) What is it possible to learn during peer reviews?; 2) Who should learn and why?; 3) How do learning dynamics actually develop during the meetings?; 4) What are the outcomes of the meetings at both the EU and national levels?

The peer reviews selected for this study concerned different kinds of practices related to the fight against poverty and social exclusion implemented by the host countries (including specific policy programs, methodologies, or more comprehensive reforms of specific policy domains) or the discussion of more general policy problems common to EU Member States. In general, the practices selected for the meetings were in line with (and relevant to) EU actions, discourses and priorities in the domain of the fight against poverty and social exclusion, while their degree of salience in the countries selected for more in-depth analysis (host and peer countries) was more diverse. On looking at the variety of practices reviewed, and at the issues actually discussed during the selected meetings (which generally covered policy problems, goals and approaches, specific programs and instruments, implementation designs, and evaluation procedures), it can be said that peer reviews have the potential to generate both 'instrumental' and 'social' policy learning dynamics (May 1992), thus possibly contributing to changes in the setting of policy instruments, the instruments themselves, and policy goals (respectively, the first-, second- and third-order changes described by Peter Hall (1993).

Peer reviews are attended by a variety of actors, including national and EU officials, 'experts', and stakeholders. MS are the main 'targets' of the exercise because they should exploit the meetings in order to learn from others' experiences as well as from the contributions of the other participants. Indeed, according to our analysis, the willingness to promote 'mutual learning' dynamics – i.e., finding out more about other countries' practices and illustrating their own – is the key motivation inducing the countries under scrutiny to

organise or attend the peer reviews. However, in line with the findings of other research (see OSE and PPMI 2012a; 2012b), the promotion of mutual-learning dynamics is not always the main (or the sole) objective of Member States: in some cases, peer reviews are simply seen as occasions for 'showing-off' a domestic policy (e.g. the UK meeting in our sample) while in other cases more strategic objectives – the attempt to upload a domestic political agenda to the EU level – are apparent (see the Belgian seminar on Reference budgets). Furthermore, even when mutual learning can be considered the main driver behind participation in the meetings, some nuances can be detected. Indeed, while in most cases it is possible to talk of a 'generic' willingness to learn from the other countries, for two of the countries that we analysed (France in the peer review on parenting support, and Italy in the meeting on 'Improving the efficiency of social protection'), participation in the peer review had a more specific objective: that of gathering knowledge potentially useful for on-going domestic reform processes. In this sense, especially in the Italian case, the features of participation in the seminar matched what Richard Rose (1991; 2005) would term an 'instrumental', 'problem-oriented' search. Obviously, Member States' delegates are supposed to be among the main contributors to debate during the meetings, thus allowing for the development of mutual learning dynamics. On looking at the national delegates of the countries selected for more in-depth analysis, it is possible to state that people involved as country representatives generally had the competences necessary for them to contribute effectively to (and take advantage of) the exchanges during the seminars because they worked for national administrations directly responsible for the management of the practices under review in the respective domestic contexts. However, since this study relies on the analysis of a limited number of country delegations (five), this finding cannot be generalised to all the national delegations attending the meetings selected.

As for the actual development of the meetings, their agendas depended on host countries' motivations and expectations, but, even if the duration of the seminars was rather short (1.5 days), the amount of time devoted to the interventions of the various participants was in general judged satisfactory. As mentioned above, discussions were far-reaching: they ranged from policy goals and approaches to specific details of the practices under review and the illustration of the 'EU framework' in the policy domain. This may also be due to the 'mix of countries' which attended the meetings: peer reviews generally bring together countries belonging to different welfare regimes, with different policies and institutional set-ups compared with the practices under review. While in a few cases, such diversity was judged a constraint on the learning (and, especially, transfer) possibilities that might arise from the

meetings, most of our interviewees argued that it was an enrichment of the debate and an occasion for learning from differences. Remarkably, considering the behaviour of the selected countries' delegates, no clear distinction between 'tutors' and 'learners' countries emerged from the analysis. On the contrary, exchanges during the meetings were generally bi-directional and (albeit to different extents) all the actors involved in the meetings had the opportunity to contribute. In this regard, a key role was often played by stakeholder representatives and, especially, by 'experts'. A closer look at the 'tenor' of discussions held during the selected meetings shows that the debates were generally 'fairly open': although harsh criticisms of the practices under review were avoided, divergences and disagreements often emerged. In a few cases, such disagreements provoked 'tensions' entailing 'defensive reactions' by the host countries' delegates. According to the interviewees, the selected meetings met the participants' prior expectations, the only exception being the peer review on the 'City Strategy' organised by the UK in 2009, where learning opportunities for the host country were described as almost null by some of the members of the host country delegation. The British case well illustrates that the organisational phase preceding the peer review is of key importance for having a high-quality meeting: in this regard, awareness about the aims of the peer review exercise and clarity about the topic to be reviewed are key elements which were somewhat lacking in the case of the British seminar.

As regards the outcomes of the meetings, the DG Employment website (where all documents produced for the meetings are published) is the main tool for disseminating information. Evidence of EU-level usage of the findings of the peer reviews also emerged from the research. References to specific meetings, in fact, were found in EC and SPC documents and activities (such as conferences, calls for tenders, EC Recommendations, SPC meetings, analysis of national situations performed by EC services). However, dissemination of the findings of the peer review exercise at the EU level is not yet systematic[28] and could be further improved – for example, by taking the 'Mutual Learning Programme' of the European Employment Strategy as a model. In that context, peer reviews are part of a wider framework of learning activities whose results over the year are debated and disseminated through yearly 'Dissemination seminars' and 'Thematic Synthesis reports'[29]. The creation of a 'knowledge bank' announced by the European Commission may be an occasion to address this shortcoming. Besides institutional actors, stakeholders and experts involved in the meetings

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[28] Only to provide one example, boxes entitled 'Learning from peer reviews' summarising the main results of the meetings held in the previous year were part of the 2011 and 2012 annual reports of the Social Protection Committee (respectively, SPC 2011; 2013). However, this was not the case of the last annual report (SPC 2014).
[29] See http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1074&langId=en.

are in general particularly active in disseminating and using the findings of the peer review that they attended. Finally, the findings of this research show that a certain amount of networking developed from peer reviews. However, it mainly concerned the experts attending the meeting, while further contacts among governments' representatives after the meetings are rare.

As regards the outcomes of the meetings at the domestic level, evidence from four of the countries under scrutiny (United Kingdom, Poland, Sweden, and Germany) reveals that learning from the peer reviews takes place at the individual level: that is, it concerns countries' representatives who generally acquire the 'improved understanding of policies and practices implemented in the other Member States' which is one of the aims of the peer review exercise. However, those cognitive effects rarely spill over into the organisations to which those individuals belong, and they never reach nationwide policy debates. Indeed, the dissemination of information about the meetings generally consists in written or oral reports circulated by government representatives in their own departments, or in informal discussions. Furthermore, in the above-mentioned cases, there is no evidence of further use being made of knowledge acquired during the meetings in domestic policy processes. A variety of factors can explain these outcomes. Both organisational factors (host country's misunderstanding of the aims of the peer review exercise, an unclear focus of the meeting, and organisational shortcomings) and political factors (general elections and the discontinuation of the policy program under review) seem to have constrained learning opportunities from the seminar on the 'City Strategy' in the United Kingdom. Reasons related to the policy under review (the relatively low salience of active inclusion policies in the domestic context) and administrative factors (the strong departmental division within the national Ministry of Labour) prevented the dissemination of information about the Norwegian peer review and possible follow-ups in Poland. Interestingly, the fact that domestic policies were perceived as rather 'satisficing' (Simon 1979) by the Swedish and German national representatives which attended respectively the Belgian peer review on reference budgets and the French meeting on parenting support may have limited the need to disseminate information about those meetings in the domestic contexts. This said, however, in two cases (France and Italy) some consequences of the peer reviews extending beyond cognitive effects – and closer to a sort of 'transfer' of the knowledge acquired during the meeting to domestic policies – have been found. As for France, the results of the meeting hosted in 2011 were further discussed by the 'National Parenting Support Committee' and used in the subsequent reform of parenting support policies. In this case, as emerges from

analysis of the official documents produced by the French committee, the peer review (and, in particular, the thematic expert's Discussion Paper) has been especially useful in more clearly defining and delimiting the scope of the parenting support policies. As for the Italian case, insights from the Portuguese peer review on 'Improving the efficiency of social protection' were further discussed during the meetings of the ministerial working group tasked with reform of the 'Equivalent economic status indicator' (ISEE); and, according to the interviewees, some specific policy examples which emerged during the peer review were to some extent transposed into the draft reform of the ISEE after being appropriately adapted to the Italian context. According to the Italian participants in the peer review, those examples emerged from the debate held during the Portuguese seminar, and they were part of programs implemented in some of the countries which attended the meeting.[30] On looking at the features of the French and Italian cases, it is possible to identify three factors which probably accounted for those outcomes. First, the timing of the meetings and the domestic policy contexts. In both cases, national reform processes were on-going at the time of the peer reviews, which probably made domestic contexts more receptive to stimuli from the meetings. It should be stressed that those reform processes – as well as their overall goals[31] – were already planned before the meetings. In other words, those meetings did not initiate domestic reform processes; rather, they accompanied them by enriching the domestic debate and broadening the range of examples on which to draw. The second factor concerns the contents and the organisational features of the French and Portuguese peer reviews. Indeed, in both cases the topics dealt with during the meetings largely corresponded to the issues to be addressed in the domestic reforms of the French parenting support policies and of the Italian ISEE.[32] Furthermore, the good balance between more theoretical discussions (about policy approaches and objectives) and more practical ones (concerning specific measures implemented in the participating countries) and the time allocated to the participants to

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[30] In other words, in this case, it is not possible to identify a single country which served as a 'model' for the Italian delegation. On the contrary, the process was more similar to what Rose calls 'selective imitation': that is, a case when there are multiple sources of inspiration and "[…] a lesson concentrates on those parts of a foreign programme that are congenial to policymakers [who] 'cherry-pick' a few features of a programme that are appealing and incorporate these in a programme that is designed independently of foreign examples" (Rose 2005:84).

[31] Indeed, as in the Italian case, the objectives to be pursued and the approaches to be followed in reforming the ISEE were already decided at the domestic level. Hence, even if the peer review was also an occasion to learn about other countries' policy goals and approaches, what was 'used' for the Italian reform basically concerned specific features related to policy instruments. Consequently, also in line with the findings of other research (see OSE and PPMI 2012b), it is possible to argue that peer reviews can contribute especially to 'first-order' policy changes (Hall 1993).

[32] Which is not surprising in the French case since the motivation pushing the French administration to host the meeting was to gather other countries and experts' advice before undertaking the reform.

present their policy examples multiplied learning possibilities during the two meetings. Finally, the profile of the country delegates was a key factor. Indeed, it can be said that both the French and the Italian delegates had the right motives for attending the meetings and the competencies necessary to recognise information potentially useful for the domestic reform process. Moreover, their roles in national administrations enabled them to disseminate knowledge acquired during the peer reviews in the decision-making venues that, at that time, were central for reform of French parenting support policies and of the Italian ISEE (respectively, the National Parenting Support Committee and the Ministerial working group on the reform of the ISEE). Hence, even without broad dissemination of information acquired during the peer reviews, it was possible to make direct use of the knowledge acquired in the on-going reform process.

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List of interviews

Interview 1 EC   Brussels, 28 November 2013 representative of the European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affair and Inclusion.

Interview 2 NGO   Brussels, 4 July 2013, representative of NGO.

Interview 3, EC   Brussels, 17 December 2013, representative of the European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affair and Inclusion.

Interview 4 EESC   Brussels, 16 July 2013, representative of the European Economic and Social Committee.

Interview 5 EC   Brussels, 27 November 2013, representative of the European Commission, Secretariat General.

Interview 6 EC   Brussels, 15 January 2013, representative of the European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affair and Inclusion.

Interview 7 NGO   Brussels, 15 January 2013, representative of NGO.

Interview 8 NGO   Brussels, 5 July 2013, representative of NGO.

Interview 9 NGO   Brussels, 3 July 2013, representative of NGO.

Interview 10 EC   Brussels, 6 December 2013, representative of the European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affair and Inclusion.

Interview 11 NGO   Brussels, 7 December 2012, representative of NGO.

Interview 12 EP   Brussels, 6 December 2012, member of the European Parliament (the Greens)

Interview 13 EXP   Brussels, 5 December 2012, member of the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion