

The Politics of Poverty in the European Union:

How States Respond to the Open Method of Coordination on Social Inclusion

“Arguments about poverty,” note Paul Copeland and Mary Daly, “go to the heart of political disagreement in Europe,” because they express profound differences about social policy and models of capitalism (2012: 274). The European commitment to fight poverty has thus moved over the years, from the ambitious decision to make social inclusion an explicit goal governed by the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) with the Lisbon strategy in 2000, to a more circumscribed vision giving priority to economic growth and job creation after 2005, and to an ambiguous but nevertheless explicit quantitative target agreed upon in the summer of 2010, “to lift at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion” by 2020 (Copeland and Daly, 2012: 274). But changing orientations at the European level are not the only manifestation of political disagreement about poverty, the distinct interpretations of the common objectives by the member states also express important differences.

This article on the social inclusion chapter of the Open Method of Coordination assesses these differences, through a survey and analysis of the EU-15 member states’ responses to common poverty reduction objectives between 2001 and 2006. Given the contentious nature of poverty alleviation and the flexible character of the OMC — a voluntary mechanism of information sharing between governments — a strong convergence is not expected. The OMC reporting process nevertheless encouraged some learning and adaptation, along lines determined by national institutions and politics (Frazer and Marlier, 2010: 231).

Indeed, our results indicate significant variations in the orientations of member states, along the three dimensions of social inclusion identified by the EU, namely rights, labour market policies, and participation. These policy differences are meaningful and fashioned by recurrent

features of national politics. First, with respect to the recognition of rights, social policy institutions appear determinant. Countries with social-democratic welfare states or with an institutionalized commitment to reduce poverty are more likely to present the issue as one of human rights. Differences in labour market policies, on the other hand, appear largely determined by partisan politics. All member states share the European focus on activation and “making work pay,” but governments of the right are distinctive in their propensity to pursue this objective by making social benefits less generous and less accessible. Finally, participation policies seem shaped by partisan factors for traditional actors (NGOs and social partners) and by the national poverty agenda for people experiencing poverty.

These findings make a distinct contribution to the literature on the OMC/inclusion which, for the most part, has remained general, theoretical or evaluative, or based on the extended study of specific cases. Few authors have adopted a comparative and systematic approach to look at the distinct paths adopted by the member states, and at the factors that contributed to define these paths (Citi and Rhodes, 2007: 21; Kröger, 2008: 42-49; de la Porte and Pochet, 2012: 345). Studies that have done so have usually focused on the European Employment Strategy (EES) and measured success in terms of policy convergence (Copeland and ter Haar, 2013: 33; de la Porte and Jacobsson, 2012: 142). The few studies that have acknowledged the divergences between national responses to the OMC/inclusion said little about the range and determinants of these divergences (de la Porte and Pochet, 2012: 344-45).

Our results also inform the ongoing debate on the transformation of the European welfare state. Few scholars now disagree that significant policy change occurred in the last fifteen years. Some, however, draw pessimistic conclusions and argue that reforms failed to reduce poverty, and may even have contributed to increase income polarization and dualization (Cantillon, 2011; Emmenegger et al., 2012). Others remain optimistic, and underline the partial and uneven

acceptance and implementation of the new social investment ideas promoted by the EU (Vandenbroucke and Vleminckx, 2011; Bonoli and Natali, 2012: 302-3). This debate about the fate of an unevenly shared vision cannot be settled easily. But it is certainly useful to map more clearly how member states translated common EU orientations into national objectives and priorities, and what institutional and political factors prompted them to do so.

The article is divided in five sections. The first two present a survey of the literature and the methodology, and the following three expose our findings for each dimension of social inclusion.

A country-based analysis of the OMC

The literature on the OMC has been defined by two questions: its effectiveness as a governance procedure, and its substantial policy significance, as a counterweight to market integration (Kröger, 2009: 3-4). In the late 1990s, most scholars and observers were optimistic about the potential of the OMC, and portrayed it as effective and conducive to the development of a social Europe (Büchs, 2007: 2; see also: Ferrera, 2005: 244-50; Zeitlin, 2005; Heidenreich and Bischoff, 2008; Hamel and Vanhercke, 2009). Gradually, however, the majority view grew more skeptical, pointing to the ambiguity of common European objectives, the weakness of soft law procedures, and the almost unchallenged domination of market and neo-liberal principles (Idema and Kelemen, 2006; Daly, 2008; Kröger, 2008: 205-19). Intended to reconcile national social protection with economic integration, the OMC appeared in the end relatively ineffective and, if anything, more favorable to market mechanisms and welfare state retrenchment than to high employment levels and social inclusion (Begg, 2008; Barbier, 2008: 87-96; Büchs, 2009: 4-5; de la Porte and Jacobsson, 2012; Copeland and ter Haar, 2013). Even optimistic observers now concede “the limits of the OMC and the difficulty of implementing the commonly agreed

objectives,” as well as the lack of “political commitment to the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy” (Heidenreich, 2009: 12; Zeitlin, 2008: 441).

The window-dressing, market-enhancing rendition, however, may not tell the full story. Indeed, European social policies have changed significantly in the last decade, and not always or simply in a neo-liberal direction (Ferrera, 2008). The OMC/inclusion was certainly not the only factor at play, but it did provide a common framework and context for national reforms, which expressed different versions of a vision of social protection for the twentieth century (Büchs, 2007: 102; Barbier, 2008: 94-95; Hemerijck, 2013: 328-31).

Focused on the workings of the OMC and on the broad orientations defined at the European level, scholars have not paid sufficient attention to these differentiated evolutions. Indeed, the conventional standpoint is top-down and assesses the effectiveness and the policy significance of coordination. This perspective is in tune with the European Commission’s early understanding of the OMC as a soft governance mechanism meant to produce convergence among member states (Kerber and Eckardt, 2007: 230; Büchs, 2007: 117). So far, however, there is little evidence of such deliberate convergence. In fact, this was not what the OMC was intended to produce. The idea was rather to bring member states to submit their own priorities and policies and explain them in light of the common objectives, for the purpose of public deliberation and peer assessment. Success would then be assessed not by compliance but by the social learning and policy adaptation encouraged by a flexible process of “contingent convergence” (Hemerijck, 2013: 220, 316-18). There is some evidence, for instance, that the EES facilitated the general shift from passive to active labour market policies, even though member states did not use the same policy instruments or identical approaches (van Vliet and Koster, 2011; Van Rie and Marx, 2012).

This article thus proposes a country-based analysis of the OMC/inclusion. Rather than probing the capacity of OMC mechanisms to produce convergence, it looks directly at national policy orientations, as revealed through the OMC. The objective is not to show the influence of member states on EU orientations, as the bottom-up perspective does (Büchs, 2008; Hamel and Vanhercke, 2009), but simply to establish how member states responded to OMC objectives within their own policy frameworks.

Analyzing the OMC through the responses of member states has the important advantage of leaving aside the issue of identifying European influence, by all accounts difficult to tackle (Zeitlin, 2009: 214-15; Heidenreich, 2009: 32). This perspective also allows a more critical stance toward the official discourse on learning and convergence, which tends to downplay the real politics of social reforms. Learning and convergence are often understood as if clear and precise objectives to converge could be defined, best practices identified, and then simply reproduced to work satisfactorily in all jurisdictions (Kerber and Eckardt, 2007). This logic does not fit the OMC/inclusion, which had voluntarily ambiguous and open objectives. In this case, it seems more helpful to understand learning as the national “translation” of common ideas, or even better as the creative, pragmatic and always imperfect adaptation of some, but not all, of the ideas shared with others (Béland, 2009; Carstensen, 2011).

A country-based analysis can also help identify the various ways in which member states responded to the challenges of an era defined by competing neo-liberal and social investment visions, all present within the ambiguously-stated OMC/inclusion objectives (Ferrera, 2008: 88; Bonoli and Natali, 2012: 5-6). Because the main actors navigated between the contradictory imperatives of market and social integration, European politics produced mixed, hybrid and varied outcomes in the different member states (Hemerijck, 2013). Our analysis starts from the observation that the OMC/inclusion became what states made of it, and is guided by two general

hypotheses. First, the OMC/inclusion did not prevent significantly distinct policy orientations on its three main dimensions: rights, labour market policies, and participation. Second, the different member states' responses to the OMC/inclusion remained primarily driven by domestic politics, particularly by national institutions and domestic power resources.

Method

As a small-N qualitative comparison of official discourses and ideas, this study seeks first to establish variations among the cases, and second to account for the observed variations by assessing the causes that are theoretically the most plausible (Mahoney and Goertz, 2006).

Our analysis aims at explaining the ideas and policies adopted by the member states in light of the common European objectives. It is thus focused on the official discourse adopted by governments in response to the OMC and is based largely on official documents. The analysis relies on a thorough review and codification of the documents of the first three rounds of the OMC/inclusion: the national action plans and reports on social inclusion (of 2001, 2003 and 2006), the Joint reports of the European Commission/ Council (from 2002 to 2007), the reports of the Commission's independent national experts (from 2003 to 2007), and the European and national EAPN (European Anti-Poverty Network) reports. It is also informed by interviews with 71 relevant actors and experts.¹

The formal national plans/reports alone would not be the ideal source to assess the actual policies conducted by the different governments since they are bureaucratic and political responses to a European-level demand, often prepared with little inputs from non-governmental actors. Yet, the production of these plans/reports constitutes the most important and interactive mechanism of the OMC. When analyzed together with the other sources described above (which cope with the limitations of the plans/reports), they are probably the best expression of a

country's stance vis-à-vis the common European understanding of social inclusion (Daly, 2006: 466; 2008: 10; Carpentier et al., 2007: 411; interviews, European and national actors).

Regarding the institutional and political determinants of policy orientations, we adopt fairly standard categories. First, we differentiate between types of welfare states along the lines pioneered by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990) and broadly replicated in the social policy literature, where scholars distinguish between social-democratic regimes that privilege tax-financed universal programs (in our study Denmark, Finland, and Sweden), conservative regimes that give more importance to work-related social insurance plans (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands), liberal regimes that emphasize market rules and means-tested assistance (Ireland, UK), and less developed, less generous Mediterranean regimes (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain) (see: de la Porte and Jacobsson, 2012; Hemerijck, 2013: 155-63). Second, we also consider whether a country has or not adopted an institutionalized national commitment to act against poverty, through an explicit law or strategy, before the launch of the OMC/inclusion. Five of our fifteen countries have done so: Belgium, France, Ireland, Portugal, and the UK. Third, we categorize governments as belonging to the left, the centre or the right according to the political composition of the executive, and on the basis of a review of the evaluations made by secondary sources and national experts..

Rights

At the outset, the OMC/inclusion put forward an understanding of poverty anchored in an explicit conception of social rights. Indeed, the 2001 and 2003 national action plans were structured around the recognition and realization of ten fundamental rights. This focus on rights was largely neglected, however, and it did not survive the 2005 revision of the method. In the end, the OMC did not establish “any social rights or binding provisions which could bring the

EU's social and economic objectives into balance" (Büchs, 2008: 33). The language of rights nevertheless appeared important for a number of member states, and this was reflected in their plans/reports. Table 1 summarizes our analysis of the three waves of plans/reports in this respect, and indicates whether a member state recognizes or not key social rights.

[Table 1]

Only seven out of fifteen countries mention the main social rights in their plans/reports: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, Portugal and Sweden. The most plausible explanation is institutional. Indeed, the three social-democratic welfare states (Denmark, Finland and Sweden) recognize practically all the different social rights. These countries have based their welfare institutions on the recognition of universal social rights, and it is not surprising that they understand the fight against poverty as an issue of rights (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

The welfare regime explanation is not sufficient, however, because it fails to account for the importance given to rights by two conservative (Belgium and France), a liberal (Ireland), and a Mediterranean welfare state (Portugal). In these cases, another institutional factor is at play: a formal national commitment to act against poverty, which these four countries have made. In Belgium, the federal government defined poverty as a matter of human rights in 1992, and this understanding was confirmed in the 1994 constitution; in France, a law on poverty and social exclusion was adopted in 1998; in Ireland, a national strategy was launched in 1997; and in Portugal, an explicit rights-based approach was introduced in 1995.

In the remaining countries (Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, and the UK), the non-recognition of social rights is systematic and recurrent from one plan to the next. Germany and Spain, for instance, contend that poverty policies do not

come along with the recognition of rights, and only refer to limitative and incomplete social rights established in their constitution (EU-15 NAPs/incl, 2001; 2003; interviews, Spanish officials). This result is consistent with the absence in these countries of a social-democratic welfare regime and of a national strategy against poverty.

The case of the UK is more intriguing since the New Labour government of Tony Blair elected in 1997 placed poverty on the agenda, created a Social Exclusion Unit to monitor progress, and adopted a series of legislations and measures to improve the situation of low-income households. In 1999, Blair also pledged to end child poverty by 2020. Perhaps reflecting the strong liberal bent of the country and the selective outlook of Blair's "Third Way," more focused on social investment than on entitlements, this commitment concerned primarily children and was not expressed in terms of social rights (de la Porte, 2008: 240).

Despite the low salience of social rights in the OMC/inclusion, some countries recognize them explicitly, in accordance with their welfare regime and poverty reduction trajectory. On this dimension, welfare institutions and past decisions appear determinant.

Labour market policies

The Lisbon strategy built on an already established preoccupation with jobs and the activation of labour market policies, a policy leitmotiv throughout the 1990s (Hemerijck, 2013: 28-29). This emphasis on employment and activation can be found in all national plans/reports, and this is clearly recognized in the Joint reports (EC DG5, 2002: 32-33; 2004: 47 and 52; 2007: 59). By comparison, redistribution is less generally and consistently presented as an avenue toward greater inclusion (EU-15 NAPs/incl, 2001; 2003; EU-15 NRSSPSI, 2006).

A preoccupation with activation cuts across all welfare regimes. In social-democratic Denmark, the activation logic is considered inherent to the country's own policy trajectory. "The

Danish objectives,” notes one Danish official, “have become European” (interview). In conservative Belgium, all recent reforms have been interpreted through the lenses of the “active social state” (EU-15 Independent social inclusion experts, 2004a; 2006a; Carpentier et al., 2007: 408; De la Porte, 2008: 239; interviews, Belgian social actors and officials). Mediterranean Spain and liberal United Kingdom also have stressed employment as the best avenue out of poverty (EU-15 NAPs/incl, 2001; 2003; EU-15 NRSSPSI, 2006; De la Porte, 2008: 240-47; interviews, Spanish and UK social actors and officials).

Using the reporting of initiatives to increase or guarantee the income of low-wage earners as an indicator of a commitment to activate labour market policies, Table 2 demonstrates the ubiquity of the activation perspective, which was adopted by governments of the left, the centre and the right, across all welfare regimes, and regardless of whether the country had or not an anti-poverty strategy. The cells differentiate countries according to changes in government (for instance, ES⁹⁶⁻⁰⁴ refers to the policies of the Spanish centre-right government of José María Aznar López, and ES⁰⁴⁻⁰⁷ to those of socialist José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero).

[Table 2]

Only Denmark between 2001 and 2007, Germany between 2005 and 2007, and Greece between 2004 and 2007 did not report new initiatives. These countries were then governed by the centre-right, but they also could rely on the earlier innovations of previous centre-left governments. The activation perspective was thus consensual, and universally emphasized in inclusion plans/reports, as it was in the common European discourse (Barbier, 2005).

Of the possible measures to enhance the income of low-wage earners, the most common were changes in income taxes, either through lower rates or through tax credits. Between 2001

and 2006, each member state except Luxembourg reported at least once such a change, consistent with the idea of “making work pay.” The aim, however, was not always to reduce poverty. Many governments were preoccupied first and foremost with the provision of the right incentives to facilitate the transition from unemployment or welfare to work (Hemerijck, 2013: 148).

This motivation appears clearly when we look at the other side of the activation coin: measures to make the lack of work costly, which can be stricter conditions to limit access to income security programs or of lowered benefits for the unemployed. The idea of “making work pay” has sometimes been suspected of promoting such restrictive measures (inspired by a neo-liberal agenda), but our analysis shows that these punitive reforms appear much less frequent than positive tax measures. Most of the time, they were introduced by governments of the right.

In Austria, for instance, the centre-right coalition of Wolfgang Schüssel reduced access to unemployment insurance in 2004, and legislated as well to counter social assistance fraud. In France, the centre-right government of Dominique de Villepin imposed stricter conditions on income security beneficiaries, to push them toward the labour market. In Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Portugal, governments of the right also made income security more conditional and less generous. For the Danes, the political underpinnings of these reforms left no doubt, as the conditions and levels of social benefits sharply differentiated the left and the right (EU-15 Independent social inclusion experts, 2006a; interviews, Danish officials and social actors).

This ideological divide suffers two exceptions, Germany and the UK. In Germany, the centre-left coalition government of Gerhard Schröder made income security programs less generous and more conditional with the high profile Hartz I to IV laws adopted between 2003 and 2005. In the UK, the Blair government clearly understood “making work pay” as an invitation to “make sure that welfare did not” (Driver, 2008: 161), and implemented the

restrictive *New Deal* programs and *Welfare Reform Bill*. In both countries, these reforms were components of a determined effort to redefine the social-democratic left. The idea was to borrow from the right a focus on personal responsibility and individual effort that inspired less unconditional forms of social security (Noël and Thérien, 2008: 175-81). The two governments thus sought to make non-work more costly. Across Europe, however, this orientation remained largely that of the right (as it was throughout the OECD: Allan and Scruggs, 2004; Pontusson, 2005: 191-92; Huo, 2009: 318-20).

This divide about the conditions imposed to those who do not work concerns as well the level of benefits offered to persons without employment. These benefits are a sort of litmus test of a country's commitment to reduce poverty, since redistribution is always more divisive than economic growth and job creation (Kenworthy, 2008: 296). Not surprisingly, governments of the left are more favorable to redistribution and tend to be more successful in reducing poverty (Scruggs and Allan, 2006). The measures presented in the OMC plans/reports are consistent with this observation. Table 3 summarizes our findings regarding both conditions and benefits targeted at non-workers, and suggests a strong correlation between left-right orientation and the direction of reforms.

[Table 3]

Whereas most governments concurred to improve the income of low-wage earners to “make work pay,” there was much less agreement around the idea of raising benefits for persons who did not or could not work. Support for such redistributive measures varied from one country to the other, and policies were often reversed with a change of government. In all our interviews,

this issue came out as the most contentious. The right was more likely to reduce benefits, and the left to improve them.

In Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden, centre-right governments made social security conditions stricter and reduced the level of benefits. In Italy, when the conservative government of Silvio Berlusconi came to power in 2001, it cancelled the previous centre-left government's experiments with a minimum income. When the Italian left came back in power in 2006, it reintroduced these same measures.

In all cases where benefits for non-workers were improved, the left was in power. In Belgium, for instance, centre-left coalition governments improved a number of benefits aimed at the unemployed or at those who could not work (EU-15 Independent social inclusion experts, 2006a). In France, the socialist government of Lionel Jospin increased benefits between 1997 and 2003, and the trend was interrupted in the following years. In Greece, the centre-left government of Kostantinos G. Simitis did the same between 1996 and 2004. In Portugal, the socialist government in power between 1995 and 2002 created a new guaranteed minimum income and a host of other benefits, which later were redefined and curtailed by the centre-right government of José Manuel Durão Barroso, only to be reinstated as before when the socialists came back in 2005. In Spain, the election of a socialist government led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in 2004 brought significant increases in social benefits for persons unable to work. As with conditions, the Blair government proved more conservative with benefits, for fear of undermining incentives to work. Benefits aimed at families and children were nevertheless improved significantly.

The odd case was Ireland. Governed by a centre-right coalition for all the period, the country substantially improved social benefits, in line with its strategy against poverty. This strategy, which acknowledged the importance of an adequate income for all, was launched in

1997 by a centre-left coalition formed by *Fine Gael* and the Labour party. A few months after, this coalition was defeated by a *Finna Fail*/ Progressive Democrats centre-right coalition (Costello and Thomson, 2008). Yet, “following a slow start” and with some modifications, the new approach “was adopted by the new government who took ownership of the strategy and has since developed it substantially” (Johnston, 2007; Adshead, 2010). Sustained by the active mobilization of EAPN Ireland and by the work of its own *Combat Poverty Agency*, and favored by strong economic growth, the Irish government announced improved benefits for non-workers in each of its OMC/inclusion plans/reports (Layte et al., 2000: 554-55; O’Donnell and Moss, 2005: 315-16; Johnston, 2007; interviews, European actors).

Behind the broad consensus on activation and on the idea of “making work pay,” there were thus significant variations in national approaches. All governments seemed keen to improve the income of low-wage earners, but some also sought to make non-work more costly. While some governments saw the provision of more generous minimum incomes as a key ingredient to reduce poverty, others remained focused on work incentives and appeared ready to lower the income of non-workers. The partisan orientation of the government appears key to explain these differences.

Participation

The social inclusion objectives defined in Nice included the promotion of participation and mobilization for persons and organizations. This objective appeared relevant both as a mean toward better and more legitimate policies, and as the expression of a right, without which social inclusion could not be achieved (EU-15 Independent social inclusion experts, 2004a; Frazer, 2007). The OMC has been criticized recurrently for not living up to these expectations regarding

participation and mobilization (Friedrich, 2006; Heidenreich and Bischoff, 2008: 501-503; Kröger, 2008: 42-49). National approaches, however, varied significantly.

Consider, first, the participation of people living in situations of poverty. Table 4 presents their levels of participation in the OMC/inclusion process.

[Table 4]

In spite of the EU objective, the participation of people with a direct experience of poverty remained relatively rare. Many countries did not even mention the question in their plans/reports, or referred to consultation in a purely formal manner, without providing any evidence of concrete actions. Participation efforts were mostly present in countries with a national strategy against poverty, namely Belgium, France, Ireland, Portugal and, this time, the UK.

In some of the remaining countries, advances were realized in the third round of the OMC/inclusion, following the elections of new governments and perhaps policy diffusion and learning. In Denmark, for instance, the centre-right government of Anders Fogh Rasmussen created the Council for socially marginalized people in 2003 to provide a forum and a voice to people living in poverty. This council had little impact on the OMC/inclusion process, but it nevertheless represented an opening (interviews, Danish officials and social actors). In Spain, the new socialist government of Zapatero made participation more effective in the preparation of the 2006 report (interviews, Spanish officials and social actors).

Participation possibilities for persons in situation of poverty were thus tied to the existence of a national strategy against poverty and, to some extent, to the political context. Yet,

when it came to the participation of traditional actors (NGOs and social partners), partisan politics reaffirmed itself as the main determinant, as shown in Table 5.

[Table 5]

When the right took power, NGOs participation tended to decrease. This was the case, in different years, in France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and the Netherlands. In the latter case, for instance, consultations for the 2003 NAPs were initiated in May 2002 by the centre-left coalition in power, but they were abandoned after the election of a centre-right coalition (Brandsen, et al., 2005: 15). By contrast, when the left came to power, as in Italy, Portugal, and Spain, the involvement of NGOs increased. In Spain, for example, the 2006 victory of the socialists created a significant opening for NGOs participation (EU-15 NRSSPSI, 2006; interviews, Spanish officials and social actors).

Partisan differences manifested themselves even when governments did not change. When the right stayed in power for more than one term, NGOs participation remained rather stable (Denmark, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Spain). When the left governed for a while, opportunities for participation increased steadily (Belgium, Germany, Greece, Sweden, UK).

Similar conclusions apply to the participation of business and labour, even though the OMC/inclusion never was a priority for these actors (de la Porte and Pochet, 2005: 375). As Table 6 indicates, the left was more likely to increase, and the right more likely to reduce the opportunities for the participation of social partners.

[Table 6]

All in all, the extent of participation in the OMC/inclusion process remained a political issue, driven by partisan ideologies for more traditional actors (NGOs and social partners) and by the place of the poverty issue on the national political agenda.

Conclusion

The OMC/inclusion plans and reports submitted by member states are clear expressions of their national institutions, policy priorities, and political leanings. Countries with a social-democratic welfare state or with a national strategy against poverty refer explicitly to the rights of persons living in poverty, while others do not. All governments accept the activation discourse and seek to make work pay by improving the income of low-wage earners, but only governments of the right, along with the Third Way governments of Blair and Schröder, also try to make non-work more costly. When the left is in power, it tends to increase benefits for non-workers; when the right governs, it lowers them. Participation opportunities for NGOs and social partners are also tied to the partisan orientations of national governments, and the involvement of persons living in poverty depends on the previous adoption of a national strategy against poverty and the political saliency of the issue.

One could see these results as ample evidence of the ineffectiveness of the OMC/inclusion process. Member states, after all, pursue their own trajectory, based on their national institutions, prevailing policies, and current political orientations. Such a conclusion, however, would overlook the fact that the OMC objectives remained open, ambiguous, and unconstraining. In this context, expecting convergence, as was the case in much of the early literature on the OMC, was probably too optimistic.

This being said, the observed process was not a simple matter of window-dressing either. The responses provided by the member states displayed institutional and political coherence, at

least at the national level. These responses were thus genuine, and they expressed meaningful debates within member states: each country defined and announced its own social inclusion trajectory. These results are certainly not indicative of a process simply defined by emulation and convergence, but they point to social learning, understood as a meaningful encounter between ideas defined at the European level and diverse national responses, crafted by the member states. As such, the process may appear more anchored and democratic than is usually suggested by scholars who see mostly a bureaucratic procedure.

The member states' policy responses to the OMC/inclusion were far from uniform, and they did not all share the same vision of the fight against poverty. Some insisted on social rights and redistribution, and others took a more market enhancing or neo-liberal approach. Some countries made little efforts to address poverty and social exclusion, but others took genuine steps to acknowledge social rights, improve low wages and social benefits, and facilitate participation for persons in situation of poverty, NGOs, and social partners.

In this perspective, wholesale criticism of the OMC on social inclusion may be misleading. National responses were far from uniform, but some countries did move poverty and social exclusion up the agenda, sometimes to good effect. At the very least, the OMC/inclusion placed poverty and social exclusion on the agenda and compelled member states to respond (Daly, 2010: 156; Vanhercke, 2010: 126; Frazer and Marlier, 2010: 230). The process had obvious limitations, but it was taken seriously by member states, which responded in ways that reflected the enduring power of their national institutions and ongoing partisan debates, but also emerging policy ideas and strategies at the national and European levels, especially the focus on activation and the participation of people experiencing poverty. Learning took place, but in an active way, embedding the distinctive standpoint of national actors and governments.

Notes

¹ Semi-structured interviews were conducted between May and August 2007 with 20 European-level (European Commission personnel, non-governmental organizations leaders, and independent experts) and 51 national-level persons (officials, social leaders, and experts from four different types of welfare states, namely Belgium, Denmark, Spain, and the UK).

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Table 1: The recognition of social rights in national plans/reports

Recognition of a right to...	AT	BE	DE	DK	ES	FI	FR	GR	IE	IT	LU	NL	PT	SE	UK
Human dignity		1	0,5			1	1		0,5				1	1	
Minimum income		1		0,5	0,5	1	1		1	0,5	1		1	1	
Work		1		1		1	1		1	1			1	1	
Housing		1				1	1	0,5	1	1	0,5		1	1	
Education		1		1	0,5		1	0,5	1			1	1	1	
Health care		1		1	1	1	1	0,5	1	0,5			1	1	
Culture/leisure		1					1						1	1	
Participation		1	1	1			1		0,5				1		
Equality/justice	0,5	1		0,5	1	0,5	1	1	1	0,5	0,5	0,5	1	0,5	0,5

Blank: Not mentioned.

0,5: A right is not recognized as such, but its importance is acknowledged indirectly or for specific groups.

1: A universal right is recognized.

Social-democratic welfare states	Countries with a national strategy against poverty
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Source: EU-15 NAPs/incl 2001; 2003; EU-15 NRSSPSI 2006.

Table 2: Reporting of initiatives to increase or guarantee the income of low-wage earners

Political orientation	National strategy	Welfare state regime	Policy changes to increase or guarantee the income of low-wage earners	No policy changes reported
Left	No	Social-democrat	DK ⁹³⁻⁰¹ , FI ⁹⁵⁻⁰³ , SE ⁹⁶⁻⁰⁶	
		Conservative	DE ⁹⁸⁻⁰⁵ , NL ⁹⁴⁻⁰²	
		Mediterranean	ES ⁰⁴⁻⁰⁷ , GR ⁹⁶⁻⁰⁴ , IT ⁰⁰⁻⁰¹ , IT ⁰⁶⁻⁰⁷	
	Yes	Conservative	BE ⁹⁹⁻⁰³ , FR ⁹⁷⁻⁰²	
		Liberal	UK ⁹⁷⁻⁰⁷	
		Mediterranean	PT ⁹⁵⁻⁰² , PT ⁰⁵⁻⁰⁷	
Centre	No	Social-democrat	FI ⁰³⁻⁰⁷	
	Yes	Conservative	BE ⁰³⁻⁰⁷	
Right	No	Social-democrat	SE ⁰⁶⁻⁰⁷	DK ⁰¹⁻⁰⁷
		Conservative	AT ⁰⁰⁻⁰⁷ , LU ⁹⁹⁻⁰⁴ , LU ⁰⁴⁻⁰⁷ , NL ⁰²⁻⁰⁷	DE ⁰⁵⁻⁰⁷
		Mediterranean	ES ⁹⁶⁻⁰⁴ , IT ⁰¹⁻⁰⁶	GR ⁰⁴⁻⁰⁷
	Yes	Conservative	FR ⁰²⁻⁰⁵ , FR ⁰⁵⁻⁰⁷	
		Liberal	IE ⁹⁷⁻⁰⁷	
		Mediterranean	PT ⁰²⁻⁰⁵	

Source: EU-15 NAPs/incl 2001; 2003; EU-15 NRSSPSI 2006; EC DG5 2002; 2004; 2005; 2007; EU-15 Independent social inclusion experts 2004a; 2006a; 2006b; 2007.

Table 3: Reporting of initiatives to increase or reduce benefits for non-workers

Political orientation	National strategy	Welfare state regime	Generalized increase in benefits	Restriction of access or decrease in benefits
Left	No	Social-democrat	FI ⁹⁵⁻⁰³ , SE ⁹⁶⁻⁰⁶	
		Conservative	ES ⁰⁴⁻⁰⁷ , NL ⁹⁴⁻⁰²	DE ⁹⁸⁻⁰⁵
		Mediterranean	GR ⁹⁶⁻⁰⁴ , IT ⁰⁰⁻⁰¹ , IT ⁰⁶⁻⁰⁷	
	Yes	Conservative	BE ⁹⁹⁻⁰³ , FR ⁹⁷⁻⁰²	(BE ⁹⁹⁻⁰³)
		Liberal	(UK ⁹⁷⁻⁰⁷)	UK ⁹⁷⁻⁰⁷
		Mediterranean	PT ⁹⁵⁻⁰² , PT ⁰⁵⁻⁰⁷	
Centre	No	Social-democrat	(FI ⁰³⁻⁰⁷)	FI ⁰³⁻⁰⁷
	Yes	Conservative	(BE ⁰³⁻⁰⁷)	
Right	No	Social-democrat		DK ⁰¹⁻⁰⁷ , SE ⁰⁶⁻⁰⁷
		Conservative		AT ⁰⁰⁻⁰⁷ , LU ⁹⁹⁻⁰⁴ , NL ⁰²⁻⁰⁷
		Mediterranean		IT ⁰¹⁻⁰⁶
	Yes	Conservative		FR ⁰⁵⁻⁰⁷
		Liberal	IE ⁹⁷⁻⁰⁷	
		Mediterranean		PT ⁰²⁻⁰⁵

Source: *Idem*, Table 2.

Table 4: Reporting of measures to enable the participation of people living in poverty

Plan/report	AT	BE	DE	DK	ES	FI	FR	GR	IE	IT	LU	NL	PT	SE	UK
2001							2+		2-			1	2		
2003		2+		2			2+		3		1			2-	4-
2006		2+		2	3-		3-		3+		2-		2+	2	4

Blank: No mention or simple recognition of the importance of consultation

1: Clear intention to consult in the future

2: Formal/limited consultation or consultation held outside the plan/report process (or after their production)

3: Bilateral exchanges/more intensive participation

4: Reported impact of the discussions/participation

+/-: Used for nuances

Countries with a national strategy against poverty
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Source: EU-15 NAPs/incl 2001; 2003; EU-15 NRSSPSI 2006; EC DG5, 2002; 2004; 2005; 2007; EU-15 Independent social inclusion experts, 2003; 2004a; 2004b; 2006a; 2006b; 2007; EAPN, 2001; 2005; 2006 (and available national EAPN reports); Arriba and Moreno, 2005; Brandsen, et al., 2005; Camarasa i Casals 2005; Ferrera and Sacchi, 2005; Frazer, 2005; Guillén, 2007; Hamel and Vanhercke, 2009; Johansson, 2007; Kröger 2006; 2008; Zeitlin and Pochet, 2005.

Table 5: Reporting of changes in the participation of NGOs

Political orientation	National strategy	Welfare state regime	NGOs participation	
			Significant increase	Significant decrease
Left	No	Social-democrat	(FI ⁹⁵⁻⁰³), SE ⁹⁶⁻⁰⁶	
		Conservative	DE ⁹⁸⁻⁰⁵	
		Mediterranean	ES ⁰⁴⁻⁰⁷ , GR ⁹⁶⁻⁰⁴ , IT ⁰⁶⁻⁰⁷	
	Yes	Conservative	BE ⁹⁹⁻⁰³	
		Liberal	UK ⁹⁷⁻⁰⁷	
		Mediterranean	PT ⁰⁵⁻⁰⁷	
Centre	No	Social-democrat		FI ⁰³⁻⁰⁷
	Yes	Conservative	BE ⁰³⁻⁰⁷	
Right	No	Social-democrat	(DK ⁰¹⁻⁰⁷)	DK ⁰¹⁻⁰⁷
		Conservative	AT ⁰⁰⁻⁰⁷ , (NL ⁰²⁻⁰⁷)	AT ⁰⁰⁻⁰⁷ , DE ⁰⁵⁻⁰⁷ , LU ⁰⁴⁻⁰⁷ , NL ⁰²⁻⁰⁷
		Mediterranean		ES ⁹⁶⁻⁰⁴ , GR ⁰⁴⁻⁰⁷ , IT ⁰¹⁻⁰⁶
	Yes	Conservative		FR ⁰²⁻⁰⁵ , FR ⁰⁵⁻⁰⁷
		Liberal		
		Mediterranean		PT ⁰²⁻⁰⁵

* Ireland: steady participation at an average, fair level.

Source: *Idem*, Table 4.

Table 6: Reporting of changes in the participation of social partners

Political orientation	National strategy	Welfare state regime	Social partners participation		
			Significant increase	Significant decrease	
Left	No	Social-democrat	(FI ⁹⁵⁻⁰³)		
		Conservative	DE ⁹⁸⁻⁰⁵		
		Mediterranean	GR ⁹⁶⁻⁰⁴ , IT ⁰⁶⁻⁰⁷		
	Yes	Conservative	(BE ⁹⁹⁻⁰³)		
		Liberal			
		Mediterranean	(PT ⁰⁵⁻⁰⁷)		
Centre	No	Social-democrat		FI ⁰³⁻⁰⁷	
	Yes	Conservative			
Right	No	Social-democrat			
		Conservative		DE ⁰⁵⁻⁰⁷	
		Mediterranean		IT ⁰¹⁻⁰⁶	
	Yes	Conservative			
		Liberal			
		Mediterranean			

Source: *Idem*, Table 4.