“While Policymakers Teach, they Learn: Assessing the PROGRESS Peer Reviews”

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Study conducted by

• Consortium between the Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI) and the European Social Observatory (OSE)

• Some 15 experts in different research institutes:
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1. THE RESEARCH: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Overall objective of the research
To examine the role played by the Progress Peer Review programme in stimulating innovation in social inclusion and social protection policies across the EU, particularly through mutual learning

[After a Commission tender...
Service Order No. VC/2011/0108 ]
5 specific objectives:

1. To provide an overview and mapping of the Peer Reviews organised in the period 2004-2010 (Task 1);

2. To examine the contribution of the Peer Reviews to ‘consensus framing’ within the Social OMC (Task 2);

3. To follow-up of a selection of ten Peer Reviews on a particular policy or project in the host country and examine the factors of success and failure of the meetings (Task 3);
4. To examine to what extent, under which circumstances, from whom, and by whom, learning has taken place as a result of peer countries’ participation in ten selected Peer Reviews, identifying elements conducive to such a mutual learning (Task 4);

5. To propose a set of recommendations that could help the European Commission and the Member States to further improve the process (Task 5).
Methodology

10 Peer Review meetings were selected for carrying out tasks 3 and 4. Two levels of analysis: a) development of the national policy/project; b) EU/mutual learning dimension.

4 criteria for selecting the case studies:
• To cover a variety of key themes of the Social OMC;
• To include meetings hosted by both ‘new’ and ‘old’ countries, as well as by countries belonging to different ‘welfare regimes’;
• To cover older as well as more recent Peer Review meetings;
• To reflect different degrees of success in terms of mutual learning.
## LIST OF THE SELECTED CASE STUDIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Host country</th>
<th>Peer countries</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>05/06 -05-2004</td>
<td>The Rough Sleepers Unit</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>DK- FI- FR- LU- NO- RO- SE</td>
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<tr>
<td>07/08- 11- 2005</td>
<td>Minimum Income and social integration institutional arrangements</td>
<td>BE</td>
<td>AT- EE- HU- LU- RO- SK- NL- ES</td>
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<tr>
<td>04/05 -06/2006</td>
<td>Sure Start</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>FR- HU- LV- LT- MT- PL</td>
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<tr>
<td>13/14 – 09 2007</td>
<td>Freedom of choice and dignity for the elderly</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>AT- CZ- IE- PT- NL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Project Description</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Partners</td>
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<tr>
<td>25/26 – 10 -2007</td>
<td>Multi-regional operational programme for combating discrimination</td>
<td>ES</td>
<td>BG- CY- FI- DE- EL- MT- SI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06/07 – 11- 2008</td>
<td>Social Impact Assessment</td>
<td>SK</td>
<td>AT- BE- BG- DE- IE- NO- RO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29/30-10- 2009</td>
<td>Developing well-targeted tools for the active inclusion of vulnerable people</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>AT- CY- IE- PL- RO- ES- UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18/19-10-2010</td>
<td>Achieving quality long-term care in residential facilities</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>AT- CY- CZ- EE- FI- FR- LU- ES- SE</td>
</tr>
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For each of the case studies, an **in-depth analysis** has been carried out through a detailed **process tracing** and the **triangulation of several sources of information**:

- **Primary and secondary sources** (documents produced during the peer review process; national documents; documents produced in the framework of the Social OMC; scientific literature);
- **Interviews** (a total of 171 interviews with actors involved in the peer review process as well as with non-participating experts);
  - This is where “reality kicked in”!
- **Additional information** (e.g. press coverage retrieved from the internet).
2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE PEER REVIEW PROGRAMME (2004-2010)

The majority of peer review meetings 2004-2010 concerned issues linked to the ‘Social Inclusion strand’ of the Social OMC (Fig.1).

Tot. : 58 meetings
Social Inclusion: 47
Pensions: 3
Healthcare and Long-term care: 8
Fig. 1 Peer Review meetings per ‘strand’ and programme year (2004-2010)
Among the ‘key themes’ of the Social OMC, the themes of ‘Quality and accessibility of social services’ and ‘Promoting social inclusion’ received most of the attentions in the Peer Review process, while themes like ‘Over- indebtedness’ and ‘Interaction of social, economic and employment policies’ received less attention. Generally, a meeting deals with more than a single key theme (Fig. 2).
Fig. 2  The number of Peer Review seminars by the ‘key themes’ (2004-2010)
An absolute majority of peer review seminars focused on presenting a good practice of the host countries rather than gather expert advice (on policy reforms) or discussing a more general EU policy problem. The latter kind of aims have been more frequent in meetings concerning the key themes ‘Health and LTC’ and ‘Providing adequate and sustainable pensions’ (Fig.3).
Fig. 3 The ‘key themes ‘by aim/issue
The EU 15 countries have been much more active in than EU 12 in organising peer reviews (Fig. 4). However there was no significant difference between EU 15 and EU 12 in terms of participation (Fig. 5).
Fig. 4 Peer Review host countries (2004-2010)
Fig. 5 Countries that took part as peers in the Peer Reviews
Evaluation of the meetings and transferability aspects (feedbacks from the participants)

- The majority of the participants deems the information gained during the meetings useful for policy development, first and foremost because the Peer Review provided positive examples of policies/practices which could be learned from. However, the most substantive impacts of the peer reviews – contribution to domestic policy discussions/debate or bilateral exchanges with the participating countries - were judged to be less significant.
• Every year there were around 10-20 cases in which Member States expressed rather clearly the intention to use/transfer ideas discussed during the meetings and 12-25 cases when Member States indicated that they find those ideas interesting.

• Very frequently, however, the participants also mentioned important constraints which make transferability difficult.
3. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE PEER REVIEWS TO ‘CONSENSUS FRAMING’

Consensus framing is an iterative process. Any consensus evolves over time and in both directions: on the one hand, the needs of Member States and EU actions determine the Peer Review topics, and on the other the Peer Review process feeds back (although to different extents) into EU-level discussions, reports and policy documents.

Consensus framing in the Peer Review process has largely developed around governance processes rather than specific policy issues, and divergence is most evident in specific methods of addressing policy issues.
Consensus among Member States does not necessarily mean agreement on specific solutions to problems, but rather agreement on what issues need to be addressed and potential ways of dealing with them.
Issues about which consistent messages have emerged in the Peer Review process

1) Consensus on key facets of effective policy:
   a. Definition of social issues;
   b. Necessity of common data and information;
   c. Measures, indicators, monitoring and evaluation;

2) Identification of contextual differences among Member States:
   a) Division of responsibility between national, regional and local levels;
   b) Balancing between targeted and universal approaches;
3) Consensus about the cross-cutting nature of social policy:
   a) Mainstreaming of issues across policy areas;
   b) Cooperation and coordination across stakeholder.

Summing up, the Peer Review programme is delivering on at least one objective, namely to contribute to a better understanding of the Member States’ policies, as laid down in their National Reports on Social protection and Social Inclusion, and of their impact.
Exploratory Peer Reviews in the making

It’s interesting to note that recent peer reviews have increasingly focussed on (or fed into) concrete issues that help to develop a firmer understanding of issues, new approaches for dealing with them and a new focus on how to assess them.

This has included an increase in ‘exploratory Peer Reviews’ that look at tools, processes and methods (information provision, impact assessment, indicator development, data gathering,...) rather than more limited policy-specific good practice examples.

→ Why do they do it?
4. HOST COUNTRY ASSESSMENT

HOSTING A PEER REVIEW: A VARIETY OF MOTIVATIONS
(not mutually exclusive):

- ‘Show-off’ (e.g. UK 2004 on ‘The Rough Sleepers Unit’ and UK 2006 on ‘Sure Start’);

- Need to answer EU ‘pressures’ (e.g. CZ 2005 on ‘Field Social Work Programmes in Neighbourhoods threatened with Social Exclusion’);
Attempts to upload a political agenda at the EU level by MS (e.g. BE 2005 on ‘Minimum Income and Social Integration Institutional Arrangements’) or by the EC (e.g. SK 2008 on ‘Social Impact Assessment’);

Settle internal differences (e.g. DE 2010 on ‘Achieving quality long-term care in residential facilities’);

Promoting dynamics of mutual learning (e.g. NO 2009 on ‘Developing well-targeted tools for the active inclusion of vulnerable people’).
‘TENOR’ OF DISCUSSIONS

• The motivations behind the choice of hosting the meeting have an unavoidable impact on the quality of the discussions (especially concerning the time left to peer countries’ and stakeholders’ statements).

• Peer countries’s representatives sometimes exert a ‘gate-keepers’ role during the meetings (e.g. avoiding to openly address the most glaring problems with their own practices).

• Criticisms are possible but they are expressed following an obvious ‘logic of appropriateness’ (i.e., ‘frontal attacks’ are normally avoided).
• This said, even in those instances where the Peer Review was initially conceived as a ‘showcase’, the **discussions during the meeting were often rather frank and openly critical**. This enhances learning opportunities, especially for the host countries.

• **Stakeholders** often took the lead in bridging critical issues forward during debates.

• An important role is often played by the **site visits, which sometimes provide a sort of ‘reality check’** for the participants.
LEARNING IN THE PEER REVIEWS

a) Reflexive learning: In many cases, it is not possible to clearly identify actors acting as ‘tutors’ and actors acting as ‘learners’. Moreover, positions often change during the meetings, depending on specific issues dealt. This suggests that genuine (and perhaps surprising) reflexive learning is taking place in at least some PROGRESS Peer Review sessions.

b) Learning from differences: There are some clear examples of policy learning between countries belonging to different welfare regimes (or with different practices). ‘Learning from differences’ represents an important ‘opening up’ of perspectives, even if it does not lead to immediate policy transfer.
TRACING DOMESTIC IMPACT IN THE HOST COUNTRY

• Direct impact on national practices: There is only limited evidence of any “direct” impact of individual Peer Review meetings on host countries’ national practices (IE 2007 and NO 2009);

• ‘Mirror effect’: in many cases, Peer Reviews entailed important ‘mirror effects’ for both host country officials, experts and stakeholders. Actors sometimes revise their opinions on their own practices. In some case, this is the consequences of having illustrated and discussed the domestic practice with others. In other cases, this is simply the consequence of having put an issue in the EU spotlight: in the latter cases, Peer Reviews signal that Europe is paying attention and MS cannot simply “do as they like”.
‘Legitimising effect’: Peer Reviews sometimes confirm pre-established ideas, i.e. by giving the impression of being ‘on the right track’, and thereby provide outside legitimation for the reviewed national, regional, or local programme.

It is often difficult to attribute the above mentioned effects exclusively to the PROGRESS peer reviews. However, many interviewees referred to the importance of having an “outside”- and thereby more “objective”- assessment by the European peers, even when it coincide with already existent beliefs. It is plausible that the lessons learnt at PROGRESS Peer Reviews, often combined with discourses and knowledge from other sources, moved certain (often previously known) problems higher on the list of priorities to be dealt with.
EU LEVEL IMPACT

• **Networking**: Peer Reviews help to build (or reinforce pre-existing) EU level informal networks, either on an ad-hoc basis (between administrations), and on more formal basis (between stakeholder organisations and participating experts). However these networking effects were often weak, which participants blamed, in part, on the lack of follow-up events or activities;

• **Feeding debates at the EU level**: EU stakeholders and experts often use ideas and documents produced during the meetings for their activities (e.g. stakeholders’ initiatives and campaigns). They importantly contribute to “capillary effects”, in that *Peer Review as a governance tool* is increasingly being promoted outside the formal OMC inner circle.
• Promoting topics on the EU agenda and keeping attention high: some Peer Reviews clearly contributed to frame and further develop an issue at the EU level (e.g. the meetings on ‘Minimum Income’ (BE 2005), ‘Social Impact Assessment’ (SK 2008), ‘Stakeholders involvement’ (IE 2007), ‘Activation’ (NO 2009). Crucially, in this cases the Peer Reviews were seen, and in fact engineered by the European Commission, to be a stepping stone in a longer process of building European consensus on a topic (and thereby influencing the European policy agenda).
ORGANISING PEER REVIEWS: FEATURES OF SUCCESS (AND FAILURE)

By and large, the quality of the Peer Review meetings considered in the study has been judged high. Looking at the organisation of the meetings, a few factors appear as particularly important:

• Key participants should agree about the objectives of the Peer review, discussing this well before the meeting;

• Whenever possible (and pertinent) a well-targeted site visit should be organised. However, the agenda should guarantee the right balance between the time devoted to the site visit and the time for the discussions;
• The quality of the documents produced before the meetings is important for the success of the Peer Review. While Host countries’ and Thematic experts’ papers are generally high quality documents, this is not always the case for Peer countries’ Comment papers;

• The occasions for informal networking are important for fostering bilateral contacts and building trust among the participants;

• Having a manageable number of participants has a significant effect upon the quality of discussion. Even more important is the position of the participants in their domestic contexts: they should be carefully selected and include people that are close to decision-making circles.
THE DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE MEETINGS IN THE HOST COUNTRIES

• Dissemination of the information is largely confined to the administrations of some of the Peer Review participants: the results of the meetings do not easily ‘trickle down’ to a broad circle of domestic policymakers.

• Generally, stakeholder and experts are among the most active actors in disseminating the results of the Peer Reviews. However, it should be noted that, while EU-level stakeholder are always invited to the meetings, this is not always the case for national stakeholders: this could represent a limit for the domestic diffusion of knowledge about the meetings.
• In most case, reference to the Peer Reviews in OMC documents are scarce (although some recent improvements) and the knowledge base build up during a Peer Review is not systematically considered during later Peer Reviews. It would seem that the PROGRESS Peer Reviews are still seen as the ‘odd’ tool of the Social OMC rather than an integral part of the OMC toolkit.

• A recurrent feature in all the case studies is the finding that, usually, Peer reviews are not followed-up in any way by the Host countries, the European Commission, or the Peer Review managers.
5. PEER COUNTRY ASSESSMENT

• Peer review meetings have often been a good occasion for individual learning.

• Indeed, in many cases, peer countries’ motivations for attending the meetings was to learn about host and peer countries’ experiences (learning from others) but also to exchange ideas (learning with others).

• As for the host countries, peer countries representatives’ role often changed during the meetings: pure ‘tutor’ or ‘learner’ attitudes are rare. 

→ while policymakers teach - some of them - learn
IMPACT OF THE PEER REVIEWS IN THE PEER COUNTRIES

Beside the individual level, it is possible to identify 4 main kinds of impact in the domestic contexts:

1) Cognitive effects: In many cases, the information gained during the meetings has trickled down in peer countries’ domestic organisations. Consequently, Peer Reviews entailed at least some changes at the cognitive level consisting in: an increased institutional knowledge of what other countries are doing (as well as of EU activities and opportunities in the policy domain); the detection of examples of good practices from which drawing inspiration; an increased awareness of domestic strength and weakness. Strong learning points concerned both procedural and substantive aspects of the practices under review. However, cognitive effect are generally limited to the organisations of the national representatives.
2) Discursive diffusion: Knowledge acquired during the meetings has been sometimes used in discourses developed at the national level, thus entering into the national debate. However peer countries have very few channels for disseminating information concerning the Peer Review (mostly in the form of oral debriefings), so discursive diffusion is generally limited to national representatives’ organisations. However, the lack of dissemination is partially offset by the fact that, in most cases, peer countries’ representatives can be considered ‘the right persons’ for attending the meeting (knowledge of the topic/roles in national administrations).

3) Networking: In some cases, peer countries’ representatives have created networks with other participants, and, in a few cases, these networks have been ‘activated’ at the domestic level.
4) **Transfer**: In 4 out of ten cases, it can be said that elements of the practice under review have been transferred in the peer countries. Generally, transfer concerned **specific, procedural elements**:

- **Slovakia in CZ 2005** (‘Field work social programmes in neighbourhoods threatened by social exclusion’): **an alternative way of funding a national programme**;

- **United Kingdom in IE 2007** (‘The NAPIInclusion Social Inclusion Forum’): **practical ways for including people experiencing poverty through a dedicated forum**;

- **Belgium in SK 2008** (‘Social Impact Assessment’): **a specific policy device, namely the ‘Quick Scan Test’**;

- **Austria in DE 2010** (‘Achieving quality long-term care in residential facilities’): **a method for staff training**.
FEATURES CONDUCIVE TO MUTUAL LEARNING

• Differences among participating countries in terms of welfare regimes do not impede learning. On the contrary, these differences often provide unexpected learning opportunities by stimulating peer countries to focus on specific, previously unknown issues;

• More than welfare regimes, differences and similarities in the actual practices reviewed do play an important role in stimulating policy learning (and facilitating transfer);
• **Contextual features** such as financial resources, institutional setup, and competences attributed to different levels of government **do not impede mutual learning** (but significantly reduce the possibility of policy transfer);

• The **political context** surrounding the topic under review has a significative impact on both mutual learning and policy transfer: **ongoing reforms at the time of the Peer Review** significantly increase the motivations of the peer countries, thus facilitating mutual learning.
TRANSFERABILITY CONDITIONS

• Transferability is greater at the procedural level (the governance of the domestic policy) than at the substantive level;

• The probability of transfer is greater when policy problems in peer countries exist (and discussions held during the Peer Reviews offer possible solutions for coping with them);

• Actual policy transfer is easier between ‘similar’ Member States (both in terms of institutional setup and existing practices);
• There is no evidence that transferability is easier where national transmission mechanisms exist. Even more than transmission mechanisms, it is important that the ‘right persons’ attend the meetings (i.e. officials with the right competences for recognising the usefulness of the knowledge acquired and with a role in their national context which allows them to directly introduce the practice, to advocate for it, or to promote higher level awareness and encourage debate on it);

• There is a limited evidence that transferability is lower in ‘new’ Member States due to other pressures on domestic welfare states.
6. MAIN CONCLUSIONS

- Peer reviews are achieving at least two of the objectives of the programme:

a) To lead to a better understanding of the participating Member States’ policies.
b) To facilitate the transfer of key components of policies or of institutional arrangements.

With reference to the host countries, there is only limited evidence that the meetings are contributing to the improvement of the efficiency and effectiveness of the proposed practices.
- Host and peer countries which ‘have a stake’ in the Peer Review process (i.e. actively engage in it) clearly reap a return on that investment in terms of networking, individual learning, organisational learning or even policy transfer;

- Discussions during PROGRESS Peer Review seem to have achieved a degree of “depth”, with high quality documents written and a range of topics being discussed in considerable details. This finding is at odds with the stylized picture of the Peer Reviews provided by the literature on the Social OMC;
- In view of the important mirroe effects, the role of the Peer Reviews in legitimising the reviewed practices, their contribution to informal networking and, perhaps most importantly, the finding that they constitute a stepping stone in European consensus building on social topics, it should be concluded that PROGRESS Peer Reviews have a role to play in the future Social OMC and the Europe 2020 Strategy alike.