

Fighting poverty through the OMC/inclusion: The distinct national trajectories of Belgium and the United Kingdom

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The literature on the open method of coordination on social inclusion (OMC/inclusion) focuses mainly on the efficiency and legitimacy of the European process rather than on the trajectories taken by the member states. This paper analyzes how the Belgian and UK poverty reduction strategies interact with the OMC/inclusion to define distinct national OMC/inclusion trajectories. The importance of national poverty reduction strategy approaches, which can be cast in a universalist or a social investment perspective, stand out from the comparison.

Belgium and the United Kingdom have taken an active part in the development of the Open Method of Coordination on social inclusion (OMC/inclusion) at the European level. Over the first three rounds, they also have shared political characteristics that seem determinant in defining national OMC/inclusion trajectories; namely the pre-OMC existence of a national poverty reduction strategy, developed in the 1990s, and the presence of relatively stable centre-left governments (Larocque and Noël, 2008). These similar political contexts, however, have not led to identical implementations of the OMC/inclusion. Each country followed its own trajectory in the OMC/inclusion process.

Based on a systematic analysis of a variety of OMC/inclusion documents (national action plans and reports, joint reports, independent experts reports, and EAPN reports) and on more than 40 interviews conducted with European, Belgian and UK actors¹, this study seeks to specify how national politics has shaped the distinct trajectories of Belgium and the UK in the first three rounds of the OMC/inclusion. Our findings suggest that the OMC/inclusion national trajectories of Belgium and the UK have been shaped primarily by their respective poverty reduction strategy, in interaction with the OMC/inclusion process.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of the OMC/inclusion process and of national poverty reduction strategies. Then, it describes the poverty reduction strategies actually

¹ Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 46 persons between May and August 2007. Of these persons, 20 were working at the European level (European Commission personnel, non-governmental organizations leaders, and independent experts), 17 in Belgium and 9 in the UK (officials, social leaders, and experts).

developed in Belgium and the UK, before comparing their OMC/inclusion trajectories on both the policy content and the elaboration process of the national action plans on social inclusion (NAPs/inclusion)².

1. Different routes to fight poverty and social exclusion

1.1. OMC/inclusion and national trajectories

The empirical and analytical OMC/inclusion literature focuses on the evaluation of the OMC as a new mode of governance, in particular on its effectiveness and legitimacy (Büchs, 2008; Daly, 2006a: 472; Sakellaropoulos, 2004: 69).

On the efficiency or potential influence of the process, some authors argue that the OMC/inclusion is a mode of governance too soft to have real impacts (Adnett and Hardy, 2005: 204; de la Porte and Pochet, 2002: 53; Idema and Kelemen, 2006: 109-115; Kröger, 2005; Robles Carrillo, 2005: 43; Hatzopoulos, 2006: 315-316), while others defend its potential or concrete influence (Erhel and Palier, 2005: 698-699; Hamel and Vanhercke, 2009; Heidenreich and Bischoff, 2006; Kelleher, 2006; Zeitlin, 2005: 457-458, 464). National differences in the implementation have also been observed, and attributed to the national will and political priorities (Kröger, 2008: 42, 193-194; 2006: 14; Cherchye, Moesen and van PuyenBroeck, 2004: 921; Sacchi, 2004: 27-29; Scharpf, 2002: 654; Ragaglia, 2001: 76-78; Maydell et al., 2006: 264; Idema and Kelemen, 2006: 109; Hamel and Vanhercke, 2009), the mobilization of actors involved (O'Connor, 2006; de la Porte, 2008: 258), and the “success of initial uploading efforts by a Member State” (Hamel and Vanhercke, 2009).

With respect to the legitimacy of the process, mostly understood as the integration of all relevant actors (NGOs and orders of government) in the national processes, great differences have been observed between countries. Overall, the literature has underlined the very limited participation of NGOs in the first round (Silva, 2003: 67-70; Atkinson, 2002: 629-630; Armstrong, 2003: 26-27; Radaelli, 2003: 49-50), with improvements in some countries in the second round, although not sufficient to have a significative influence on the content of action plans (Brandsen et al., 2005: 14-21; de la Porte and Pochet, 2005: 378; Frazer, 2005: 382-383;

² In the third round of the OMC, member states could include a NAP/inclusion in their strategic reports on social protection and social inclusion, and both Belgium and the UK did so, which is why we refer throughout this paper to NAPs/inclusion for the three rounds of the OMC/inclusion.

Subirats et al., 2004: 67-69; Friedrich, 2006: 375; Kröger, 2006: 6, 9; 2008: 41; Ferrera, 2006: 273). Some authors have also stated that the integration of relevant orders of government in the second round of the OMC varied from a strongly centralized process in some countries (France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, and Portugal) to an integration of regional authorities in the elaboration of policies elsewhere (in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain, and the UK) (Subirats et al., 2004: 66; Kröger, 2006; Ferrera, 2005: 19; Vanhercke, 2007; Hamel and Vanhercke, 2009). National differences concerning the integration of NGOs and other orders of government have been attributed to national circumstances, governmental will and leadership, the involvement of officials, and the mobilization of civil society (Armstrong, 2003: 30; Brandsen et al., 2005: 30; de la Porte, 2007; de la Porte and Pochet, 2005: 281; Friedrich, 2006: 175; Kröger, 2008: 120, 193-194; 2007, 578; 2006).

Perhaps surprisingly, this literature on the OMC has not paid all that much attention to the substance of national strategies. Focused on the effectiveness and legitimacy of the process, authors have rarely taken advantage of this elaborate reporting process to analyze how national pre-OMC approaches with respect to poverty and social exclusion have interacted with the OMC. This is our aim here, and for this purpose, we need to characterize poverty reduction strategies.

1.2. Poverty reduction strategies

Poverty and social exclusion emerged on the political agenda in the 1990s, and a great number of analyses were undertaken to define and measure them (Noël, 2006). The literature on poverty reduction strategies, however, remained relatively scarce, and mainly focused on pioneer cases like Ireland (see, for example: Johnston, 2007; Layte, Noland and Whelan, 2000; Nolan, 2002) and Québec (see, for example: Dufour, 2004; Noël, 2002; 2004).

Of course, the development of welfare states in the second half of the 20th century was already related to fighting poverty (Levasseur, 1995: 48; Heikkilä and Kuivalainen, 2002: 61). Each welfare state regime emphasised a specific way to tackle low income, centered on universal programs (social-democrat regime), on social insurance (conservative regime), or on means-tested measures (liberal regime) (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Yet, these welfare state regimes do not explain fully the recent emergence of poverty reduction strategies, meant to tackle the poverty that remains despite the welfare state (except maybe for the social-democrat welfare states, which prevent high rates of poverty and therefore preclude an important redefinition of social policy).

In recent years, such strategies were developed by liberal (Ireland, UK, and Canadian provinces) and conservative welfare states (Belgium, France, and Portugal), and they have taken various directions.

For the purpose of this discussion, we can theoretically define two poverty reduction approaches, that can modify welfare state regimes to create new institutional configurations: a universalist approach, focused on rights, transfers and empowerment, and a social investment approach, centered on human capital, work, and participation. These approaches can be characterized as in table 1.

Table 1: Main characteristics of the two poverty reduction strategy approaches

	Universalist	Social investment
<i>Main reference</i>	Social rights	Human capital
<i>Route out of poverty</i>	Redistribution (services and work also encouraged)	More efficient combination of work, services, and redistribution
<i>Policy focus</i>	Everyone at risk (including prevention)	Children (especially low-income)
<i>Role of anti-poverty NGOs and of people experiencing poverty</i>	Institutionalized	Informal

Although each of these approaches may be more at home in a specific welfare state regime, they both can emerge within any of them, depending on the political context. One should keep in mind, indeed, that everywhere the policies of last resort regarding poverty, namely social assistance, remain residual and means-tested, that is liberal. When they address poverty in a new way, states redefine, at least at the edge, their welfare state institutions, and they open new paths.

2. Poverty reduction strategies in Belgium and the UK

In both Belgium and the UK, poverty reduction strategies were developed in the 1990s, but each country did so in its own way. The differences between the origin and the implementation of these strategies is central in explaining their preference for two different approaches, respectively the universalist and social investment ones.

2.1. Belgium's universalist poverty reduction approach³

The poverty reduction strategy of Belgium was not launched at any single moment in the 1990s: a number of steps were taken, here and there, and at different levels, in that direction. What came out of these various initiatives was a universalist poverty approach, based on rights, addressing everyone's potential poverty, and institutionalizing the participation of people experiencing poverty.

Poverty emerged as a social issue in Belgium in the 1980s, as forums with people experiencing poverty were organized by social actors locally, and progressively regionalized and institutionalized. At the political level, regions⁴ were the first to take action, with the recognition of the structural nature of poverty and the creation of an intersectorial committee by the Flemish government (1989), the decision of the Brussels Parliament to produce poverty reports annually (1991), and the creation of a social inclusion unit in the Walloon government (1992). In 1995, poverty clearly became a priority in the program of the Dehaene II (federal) government (left coalition), following the publication of the General Report on Poverty (1994), that had been commissioned in 1992 by the Dehaene I government to the Roi-Baudouin Foundation (in collaboration with NGOs, and the Association of Belgian Towns and Cities). In 1995, a poverty unit was created in the federal government and, since then, interministerial conferences on social inclusion have taken place regularly.

The recognition of fundamental rights was integrated at the outset, throughout these various initiatives (therefore associating poverty to a violation of these rights), both by social actors and governments. The Wallonia example is telling in this respect. The first local forums were created because of the perceived necessity to “speak with people, [...] to give them public places where to express themselves” and the conviction that “we cannot live in a society in which we cannot talk about fundamental rights” (authors translation; interview, Belgian social actor). This social rights dimension was also manifest in the governmental approach, and the General Report on Poverty (1994) was structured around ten fundamental rights. A clear governmental

³ In addition to references presented explicitly, this section is based on interviews held in Belgium, and on the following sources: Belgium, 2001; 2006; Choffé, Viard and Randon, 2001: 60-63; Claeys et al., 2002; Jansen, 2007; Service de lutte, 2001; Service de lutte's website (<http://www.luttepauvrete.be/>); OSS-Bruxelles's website (<http://www.observatbru.be/>); DIIS's website (<http://cohesionsociale.wallonie.be/spip/>).

⁴ Belgian (economic) regions are Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels, while the Belgian (cultural/linguistic) communities are the Flemish/Flanders, French, and German ones.

commitment to social rights was expressed in the article 23 of the 1994 Belgian constitution, explicitly recognizing:

- “1) Le droit au travail et au libre choix d’une activité professionnelle dans le cadre d’une politique générale de l’emploi, visant entre autres à assurer un niveau d’emploi aussi stable et élevé que possible, le droit à des conditions de travail et à une rémunération équitable, ainsi que le droit d’information, de consultation et de négociation collective;
- 2) Le droit à la sécurité sociale, à la protection de la santé et à l’aide sociale, médicale et juridique;
- 3) Le droit à un logement décent;
- 4) Le droit à la protection d’un environnement sain;
- 5) Le droit à l’épanouissement culturel et social” (Belgium, 2001: 5).

In 1999, before the Dehaene II government was replaced by the rainbow centre-left coalition (Verhofstadt I), the poverty reduction approach of Belgium was taken a step further, with the adoption (by decree) of the Cooperation Agreement between the Federal Government, Communities, and Regions on Poverty Policy. Anchored in fundamental rights, this agreement institutionalized the participation of people experiencing poverty and NGOs with the creation of a new public unit placed under the jurisdiction of the regions, the communities, and the federal government (*Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale*). This new unit was responsible for the production of biannual reports on precarity, poverty, social exclusion, and inequity in access to rights, in collaboration with NGOs and anti-poverty forums/networks.

The national action plans on social inclusion produced in the framework of the OMC/inclusion in 2001, 2003, 2006, and 2008 were the expression of the coordination established with the cooperation agreement of 1999. The OMC plans referred to policies from all orders of government, chosen for their fit with the European guidelines. In parallel, some reports and action plans have been produced by regional governments in Flanders (annual action plans starting in 2001, and a four-year plan in 2005), Wallonia (a social cohesion report in 2001, actualized in 2004, 2006 and 2007, and a three-year strategic transversal social inclusion plan in 2005), and Brussels (a Brussels action plan being added in 2006 to the poverty reports regularly produced since 1991). The Flemish and Walloon social forums have also become institutionalized networks, by reinforcing the possibilities of participation for people experiencing

poverty. These networks are consulted regularly by governments and are integral parts of the Belgian anti-poverty network (EAPN Belgium).

Finally, it should be noted that throughout these years, the relative poverty/ risk-of-poverty rate (under 60% of median income) remained around 15% for the total Belgian population. More precisely, it was at 16% in 1995, went down to 14% in 1997 and 13% in 1999 and 2001, but increased back to 15% (2004 and 2007) (EC DG5, 2004: 257; 2007: 139; 2009: 160).

2.2. UK's social investment approach to poverty reduction⁵

In the UK, following the increase of inequality under the conservative governments of Thatcher and Major (in power from 1979 to 1997), social exclusion became a fundamental preoccupation of the *New Labour* party, a difference-marker from the traditional Labour focus on structural unemployment (Driver, 2008: 158; Hill, 2003: 37; Shaw, 2007: 44). The election of Tony Blair in 1997 raised poverty and social exclusion as central public policy themes, and the government priority was soon materialized with the creation in 1997 of the Social Exclusion Unit (replaced by the Social Exclusion Task Force in 2006). The leitmotiv of the UK strategy was the idea of social investment, and there were clearly two important objectives: tackling child poverty and making work pay.

Contrary to Belgium, where child poverty rates are similar to the total population rates since 1995, UK child poverty rates are higher than those for the whole population. While the total UK population poverty/ risk-of-poverty rates fluctuated around 19%, child poverty rates were close to 30% at the end of the 1990s (28% in 1995, 27% in 1997, and 29% in 1999), and remained high, despite a significant decrease of 5-6% at the turn of the century (reaching 24% in 2001, 22% in 2005, and 23% in 2007⁶) (EC DG5, 2004: 257; 2007: 139; 2009: 160). These decreases followed the focus on children of the UK strategy, about which Tony Blair made a clear pledge in 1999, as he promised to reduce child poverty by half by 2010 and to eliminate it by 2020.

⁵ In addition to the references presented here, this section is based on interviews held in the UK, and on the following sources: Armstrong, 2005; Choffé, Viard and Randon, 2001: 237-242; Duffy and Kiernan, 2007; Stewart and Hills, 2005; UK, 2003; 2006; DWP's website (<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/>); UKCAP's website (<http://www.ukcap.org/>).

⁶ It should be noted that child poverty rates provided for 1995, 1997, 1999, and 2001 are for people under 16 years old, while the ones for 2005 and 2007 are based on people under 18 years old.

The “making work pay” objective stressed work as the main route out of poverty. As one Blair’s minister would have said: “Benefits are not getting people off poverty and neither should they” (interview, UK actor). This is what led to the *New Deals*, which introduced cuts in benefits if opportunities were not taken by beneficiaries. Stephen Driver explained: “If the government was to make ‘work pay’, then clearly it would have to make sure that welfare did not, even if it acknowledged that social security should mean just that for those who really could not support themselves (and the ‘really’ has, of course, been one of the contentious parts)” (Driver, 2008: 161). As one government insider put it:

“I think, in 1997, when Tony Blair was elected as Prime minister, there was a substantial change. It was already happening before, for instance, this government, but it became much more built in the way [...] that what you really needed to do was not to focus on how much you’re spending on benefits, what you needed to do is to focus on the kind of support you gave people to get into a job” (interview, UK actor).

The UK national action plans on social inclusion presented in the framework of the OMC/inclusion since 2001 (and published nationally by the Department of Work and Pensions) have a broader scope than the *Opportunity for all* annual reports (which have presented the governmental strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion since 1999) and the Social Exclusion Task Force action plan (launched in September 2006, and focusing on extreme social exclusion situations).

So, both Belgium and the UK have developed poverty reduction strategies in the 1990s, but each did so with different bases, priorities, and instruments. We will now analyze how their respective approaches have interacted with the OMC/inclusion inclusion and influenced the policy content and the elaboration process of the NAPs/inclusion.

3. NAPs/inclusion policy content

At the policy level, the European common objectives on social inclusion did not take position in favour of a single poverty reduction strategy approach: there is a “logical inconsistency, in the very opening of the sentence [with the promotion of] participation in employment and access by all to resources, rights, goods and services” (interview, European actor). And, indeed, in Belgium and the UK, the trajectories taken in the OMC/inclusion process on the rights and services dimension, and on employment and benefits policy are best explained by their respective poverty reduction strategy approach.

3.1. Rights and services

The rights and services dimension of the NAPs/inclusion differs greatly from a country to another according to the association (or not) of poverty to a violation of human rights and of structural health and housing measures to social inclusion. The nature of the pre-existing national poverty reduction strategy is an important determinant of these differences (Larocque and Noël, 2008). While Belgium presents poverty and social exclusion as threats to human rights in its NAPs/inclusion, in the UK, there is no such recognition of rights, nor a structural approach to health in its NAPs/inclusion. UK housing measures stand as an exception, however.

In its first NAP/inclusion, Belgium quoted directly the article 23 of the 1994 Belgian constitution, listing social rights, and, over the first three rounds, the link between rights and structural measures in health and housing was implicit (for example with measures in favour of accessible and affordable health care, and of increased supply, monitored quality standards and the creation of social housing units) (Belgium, 2001: 5; 2003; 2006; EC DG5 2002; 2004; 2005; 2007; Groenez and Nicaise, 2004: 11-12; interviews, Belgian actors). This association was also fundamental for NGOs, who clearly preferred the structure of the first two national action plans on social inclusion, based on social rights, rather than the three-priority-only format of the third action plan (interviews, Belgian social and governmental actors). Besides, at the regional level, the first task of the Walloon anti-poverty network (Walloon forum institutionalized in 2003) was to “work with NGOs to identify which fundamental rights they wanted to work on. And [they] identified three: housing, healthcare, and employment” (authors translation; interview, Belgian social actor). Through the governmental discourse and the revendications of the NGOs, the Belgian universalist poverty reduction strategy approach stood out.

The content of the UK NAPs differed greatly from the Belgian ones on rights and services, as it did not include any reference to social rights, and the European Commission did not note any structural measures for health care (EC DG5 2002; 2004; 2005; 2007; UK, 2001; 2003; 2006). Together with the country’s liberal welfare state focus on social standards (rather than rights), its poverty reduction strategy approach explained the low salience of social rights in the national action plans. This approach logically led to the recognition of children’s rather than universal rights (interviews, UK actors; de la Porte, 2008: 240), and not to the integration of structural measures on health in a social inclusion action plan. As for housing, the European Commission Joint Reports noted that the UK had presented measures in a housing market policy

framework: to guarantee minimum housing quality standards, and to provide affordable or social units. This resulted from the new housing approach adopted by Tony Blair, which contrasted heavily with the selling of the majority of social units in the 1970s and 1980s. The basis of Blair's approach was found in the *Housing Green Paper Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All*, launched in 2000, and was designed to “deliver improvements in quality and a fairer market that allow people to make real choices about their homes, that support people moving into work and self-dependence, and that protect the vulnerable” (UK, 2000: 6). The social investment poverty reduction strategy approach (which was based on needs rather than rights and targeted-to-children rather than universal measures) clearly shaped the UK OMC/inclusion trajectory with respect to rights and services.

3.2. Employment and benefits policies

Even though both Belgium and the UK have adhered to the activation perspective on labor market policies since the 1990s (resulting in more generous transfers and tax credits for low-wage earners) (Cassiers, Pochet and Vielle, 2005: 13; Carpentier, Cantillon and Van den Bosch, 2007: 408; Groenez and Nicaise, 2004: 4; Morissens and Nicaise, 2006: 26; de la Porte, 2008: 239-241; UK, 2001: 5; 2003: 20-21; 2006: 8; interviews, Belgian and UK actors), the employment and benefits dimensions of their OMC/inclusion trajectories are characterized by different principles and policies, which are directly linked to their respective poverty reduction strategies.

On principles, the consideration (or non consideration) of employment and redistribution as solutions/routes out of poverty in the NAPs of each country already set the tone for different policy orientations. Over the three rounds of the OMC/inclusion, Belgium and the UK acknowledged employment and activation towards employment as potential solutions to poverty (Belgium, 2001: 14, 15, 23; 2003: 19; 2006: 7,9; UK, 2001: 4, 5; 2003: 8, 20-21; 2006: 8), but Belgium noted that activation was not always tied to employment (Belgium, 2006: 20; interviews, Belgian actors). More strikingly, redistribution was recognized as part of the solution by Belgium, but not clearly by the UK (Belgium, 2001: 29; 2003: 4; 2006: 6; UK, 2001: 1; 2003: 4, 22; 2006: 8). These differences in the routes out of poverty perceived by Belgium and the UK were in direct line with their respective universalist and social investment poverty reduction strategies.

Differences went beyond principles and discourses, as the policy developments reported in the NAPs/inclusion showed. In Belgium, starting in 2001, various benefits were increased, first by the centre-left rainbow coalition (socialists, liberals, and ecolos), and then by the centre purple coalition (socialists and liberals):

“Since the start of the Verhofstadt I government, the level of the GMI benefit has increased in real terms by 7%. The intention is to reach a 10% increase overall by the end of 2007. This increase was necessary to compensate for a relative erosion of the amounts in the 1990s” (Morissens and Nicaise, 2006: 28).

The rainbow coalition did adopt a law introducing an “obligation to work” and limiting the right to a minimum income (*Loi du 26 mai 2002 concernant le droit à l’intégration sociale*), and NGOs were very critical (Gilson and Glorieux, 2005; Bodart, 2004; Morissens and Nicaise, 2006: 27; interviews, Belgian actors). The implementation of this law, however, was “softer than what the political discourse could first suggest” (authors translation; interview, Belgian actor). This soft implementation, to some extent, and the benefit increases demonstrated how a universalist poverty reduction strategy translated into policies in Belgium, creating an hybrid configuration within the existing welfare state institutions.

In the UK, the NAPs/inclusion presented more restrictive benefit policies, from the *New Deals* to the *Welfare Reform Bill*. The latter was adopted in 2006, and introduced stricter penalties for fraud and gave an higher priority to employment, even for people with limited work capacities. The NAPs also presented targeted benefit increases: an additional income support for families receiving the minimum income (2001), and an increase of the *Child Tax Credit* and *Child Benefit* (2006). These targeted increases confirmed that the Blair government was being “[very] careful with things [having] to do with benefits” (interview, UK actor). The priorities of the social investment poverty reduction strategy, in particular work for those who can and children needs, were clearly at the heart of the UK NAPs.

To sum up, the poverty reduction strategies previously elaborated in Belgium and the UK have shaped the policy content of the national NAPs/inclusion over the first three rounds of the OMC/inclusion. These approaches and the OMC/inclusion, however, have interacted differently when it comes to the NAPs elaboration process.

4. NAPs/inclusion elaboration process

In both Belgium and the UK, the NAPs/inclusion were produced through new elaboration processes. These processes resulted from the interaction between, on one hand, the poverty reduction strategy already put in place in each member state and, on the other hand, the OMC/inclusion as an “external driver”, or an external opportunity for officials and social actors (this expression was used by two persons interviewed in the UK).

4.1. Vertical and horizontal coordination

In both countries, coordination between orders of government and between ministries improved throughout the first three rounds of the OMC/inclusion, but did so in different ways, depending on the existing frameworks of the pre-OMC poverty reduction strategies.

In Belgium, the NAPs/inclusion “gave a different color” to the federal-regions-communities coordination on social inclusion (already institutionalized through the cooperation agreement of 1999), as it gave the federal a specific defined role (the production of a *Belgian* plan), and revigorated the exchanges between regions (on some concrete best practices, but also on the basic identification of coherent actions throughout Belgium). A technical committee with delegates from the federal and regional governments was also created explicitly for the elaboration of the NAPs/inclusion. As for horizontal coordination, it evolved gradually toward the creation of a permanent inter-cabinet social inclusion group in Wallonia in 2006 and the recognition of the necessity to improve federal inter-ministerial consultation (interviews, Belgian actors; Belgium, 2003: 31; 2006: 10). Globally, the coordination of the NAPs/inclusion in Belgium reinforced existing institutions and gave an institutional framework to informal practices.

In the UK, the vertical and horizontal coordination of the NAPs/inclusion was largely an innovation that changed the governmental reports on the poverty reduction strategy because they became national (including the contributions of devolved units), and encouraged interministerial discussions (not limited to extreme social exclusion situations). And, although this coordination became more significant with the second NAP, it had already started with the first one:

“The 2001-2003 UK NAP/incl was largely devoted to reviewing policy initiatives designed to tackle poverty and social exclusion across government departments, in the different jurisdictions and at regional and local level. Before NAP/incl that kind of cross-cutting review had not been done” (Bradshaw et Bennett 2003a, 3).

Because of its innovative character, the coordination of the NAPs evolved in parallel to the existing processes, and rested mainly on informal contacts, that became increasingly important (Armstrong, 2005: 296; Miebach, 2004: 26, 30; interviews, UK actors).

Both in Belgium and in the UK, the coordination of the NAPs/inclusion elaboration was the result of the introduction of the OMC/inclusion in two different poverty reduction strategy frameworks. The European process and already existing ones cross-cut each other to create a new process, which in both cases improved from one round of the OMC/inclusion to the next.

4.2. Participation of people experiencing poverty and of NGOs

This cross-cutting between the OMC/inclusion and the poverty reduction strategy approach was also determinant in the participation of people experiencing poverty and of NGOs in the elaboration process of the NAPs/inclusion. As table 2 shows, the Belgian and UK trajectories did not take opposite directions, but they each defined their own trajectory: the participation of people experiencing poverty and NGOs increased over the first three rounds of the OMC/inclusion in both countries, but more intensively in the UK than in Belgium.

Table 2: Participation of people experiencing poverty, and NGOs in the first three rounds of the OMC/inclusion in Belgium and the UK

	Belgium		UK	
	<i>People exp. poverty</i>	<i>Anti-poverty NGOs</i>	<i>People exp. poverty</i>	<i>Anti-poverty NGOs</i>
2001 NAP	1	1	-	2
2003 NAP	2+	2	2+/4-	3+/ 4-
2006 NAP	2+	3	4	4

- : No mention

1 : Intention to consult in the future or simple recognition of its importance

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

3 : Bilateral exchanges/more intensive participation/new accesses created

4 : Impact of the discussions/participation noted in the plan/report

+/- : Used for nuances

Source: Armstrong, 2005: 306; Belgium, 2001: 6; 2003: 10, 31-33; 2006: 10, 25; Bradshaw and Bennett, 2003a: 3; 2003b: 11-14; 2003c: 13; 2004a: 31-33; 2004b: 13; 2006a: 15-16; 2006b: 25-26; 2007: 26; Brandsen et al., 2005: 13, 17, 20-21; EAPN, 2005: 27-28; EAPN Belgium, 2001; 2003; 2006; EAPN UK, 2006; EC DG5, 2002: 85-89, 171-176;

2004: 176, 241-242; 2007: 170, 403; Frazer, 2005: 382; Groenez and Nicaise, 2004: 3; Miebach, 2004: 34-35; Morissens and Nicaise, 2006: 20-21; Nicaise and Groenez, 2003: 26-28; Nicaise and Morissens, 2007: 17; Nicaise et al., 2004: 31; UK, 2001: 3, 11; 2003: 3, 4, 17, 19, 62; 2006: 18, 41-44; Vanhercke, 2007; interviews, Belgian and UK actors.

In Belgium, despite its progression, the participation of people experiencing poverty and NGOs in the OMC/inclusion process was clearly limited. While its progression can be attributed to its pre-OMC poverty reduction strategy and its centre-left government (Larocque and Noël, 2008), the explanation for its limited scope (compared to the UK) rested in the interaction of its universalist poverty reduction strategy approach with the OMC/inclusion. This approach led to the institutionalization of the participation of people experiencing poverty and anti-poverty NGOs at the regional and para-public level, before the OMC/inclusion was launched. The NAPs/inclusion consultation process was carried-on by the federal government (that wanted to keep an hand on it) and developed in parallel to the existing institutions, and therefore did not really influence the content of the NAPs/inclusion (interviews, Belgian actors; Nicaise et al., 2004: 31; Morissens and Nicaise, 2006: 21). As one Belgian actor puts it: “I think that, between what is discussed in the meetings [between NGOs and officials] and what is in the NAP, there is barely any link” (authors translation; interview, Belgian actor).

In the UK, the participation of people experiencing poverty and anti-poverty NGOs increased rapidly through the NAPs/inclusion process, and stood as “extremely unusual for the UK” (interview, UK actor). The country’s social investment poverty reduction approach and its informal basis for consultation created an opening for innovations from officials and social actors. Officials used the OMC/inclusion as an “‘opportunity’ to do something different and to break out of the traditional bureaucratic processes” (Armstrong, 2005: 297), and the Social Policy Task Force and EAPN took up this opportunity as well (Miebach, 2004: 34-35; interviews, UK actors). This informal participation increased from one round to another: it led to a regular dialogue with the responsible officials (since 2002-2003), the Get Heard project in collaboration with them (2005-2006), and the creation of the stakeholders group on the NAP (2006). And, although there has been only minor policy changes, these initiatives had some impact on the NAPs, in particular in their tone and regarding the integration of words from people experiencing poverty (interviews, UK actors; Armstrong, 2005: 297-298, 306; Brandsen et al., 2005: 13, 17, 20-21; Bradshaw and Bennett, 2003b: 12-14; 2003c: 13; 2004a: 31-32; 2006a: 15-16; 2006b: 25;

Miebach, 2004: 35). Yet, this participation was not institutionalized. As one social actor noted, about the stakeholders group: “if that [officials] team was to move, or to merge into something else, then [...] we potentially could be cut adrift” (interview, UK actor). Clearly, the social investment approach interacted with the OMC/inclusion to create a new process, which was hybrid and based on both influences.

6. Conclusion

The cases of Belgium and the UK expose the way national poverty reduction strategies interact with the OMC/inclusion to define the national trajectories followed by the member states in this European process. On one hand, the policy content of NAPs/inclusion is largely shaped by their respective poverty reduction strategy approach. On the other hand, the NAPs/inclusion elaboration process is the result of the interaction of this poverty reduction strategy approach with the OMC/inclusion, opening new paths. Our results are coherent with what Bruno Palier had found for the French case after two OMC/inclusion rounds:

“National policies remain oriented by national actors, trying to address national issues, keeping national trajectories. [...] OMC becomes then another supplementary source for national actors more than an external constraint that has to be applied. They used OMC procedures, guidelines, orientation, instruments as a lever to get their own position to win” (Palier, 2004: 14).

On the basis of the similar results encountered in Belgium, France, and the UK, three member states that had developed pre-OMC poverty reduction strategies, the case of Ireland would be interesting to look at, to see how its poverty reduction strategy (launched in 1997) interacted with the OMC/inclusion process.

Some may conclude from our results that the OMC/inclusion is ineffective as a mode of governance, since it is not leading to convergence. Rather, we see in these results the evolution of a multinational process, in which each member state defines its own way, based on its institutional features, its political preferences, and its actors. Clearly, the European common objectives have not overwhelmed the weight of national politics and actors, and of national commitments to fight poverty and social exclusion. But was it their role to do so?

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(including abstract, tables, footnotes, and references)

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