"Analysis and Follow-up of Mutual Learning in the Context of Peer Review in the Social Protection and Social Inclusion Programme"

Executive Summary

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⭕ ONCE UPON A PEER REVIEW ASSESSMENT

This Executive Summary provides a short overview of the large body of material that has been produced in the European Commission-funded research project ([1]) carried out by the Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI) and the European Social Observatory (OSE). It deals with the Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion Programme. The study examines 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.

The specific **objectives and products** of the research project are:

1. To provide an **overview and mapping of the Peer Reviews** that have been organized so far (Task 1). This deliverable was submitted by the PPMI to the European Commission in July 2011 (PPMI and OSE, 2011a).
2. To examine **the contribution of the Peer Reviews to 'consensus framing'** within the Social OMC through an in-depth analysis of the messages that have come out of the Peer Review process (Task 2). This deliverable was submitted by the PPMI in July 2011 (PPMI and OSE, 2011b).
3. To follow up **a selection of ten Peer Reviews** on a particular policy or project in the *host country* and examine **factors of success and failure** (Task 3). This deliverable was submitted by the OSE in May 2012 (OSE and PPMI, 2012a).
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, and in that process identify elements conducive to such mutual learning (Task 4). This deliverable was submitted by the OSE in May 2012 (OSE and PPMI, 2012b).
5. Based on the project's findings, to propose a set of **recommendations** that could help the European Commission and the Member States to further improve the Peer Review process (Task 5). This deliverable was submitted by the OSE in May 2012 (OSE and PPMI, 2012c).

The Deliverables 3, 4 and 5 have been written on the basis of **ten case studies produced by some 15 OSE, PPMI, and external experts** (see bibliography and Annex 1 for more details), and benefited from different rounds of comments and feedback from the European Commission officials who followed the project along the way.

This executive summary is structured as follows: s**ection 1** outlines the scope of the assignment as well as the research methodology. **Section 2** summarises the findings of the overview and mapping of the Peer Reviews, while **section 3** does the same with regard to the Peer Review's contribution to 'consensus framing' within the Social OMC. **Section 4** summarises the assessment of the impact and usages of the Peer Reviews in host countries. **Section 5** then looks at whether and how the PROGRESS Peer Review process is conducive to policy learning in peer countries. **Section 6** briefly revisits the stated aims of the Progress Peer Reviews.

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1. Service Order No. VC/2011/0108 "Analysis and follow-up of mutual learning in the context of Peer Review in the Social Protection and Social Inclusion Programme", financed under the PROGRESS Programme.

⭕ 1. SCOPE OF THE ASSIGNMENT AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: AN OVERVIEW

The assessment of the mutual learning dimension of the Peer Review in the Social Protection and Social Inclusion Programme started off with a careful selection of ten Peer Reviews for analysis by the research teams. Importantly, it was agreed in the Inception Report that experts would apply Task 3 and Task 4, mentioned above, *to the same* case study/Peer Review. This would allow for a much more comprehensive view of the Peer Reviews analysed. In other words, in the context of this project we are carrying out ten 'in depth' case studies which we study at two 'levels': (a) development of the national policy/project and (b) the EU/mutual learning dimension.

This **selection of case studies** was done as follows. We first pooled all the Peer Reviews that examined country-specific policies or projects in the host country (and not general or EU-level policy problems). Second, we selected cases that met the following four criteria:

- The selected Peer Reviews, taken together, cover a variety of key themes. Higher priority was given to more popular themes.
- Selected Peer Reviews cover both "new" and "old" Member States as the host countries of the meetings. In addition, we selected Peer Reviews that have been held in the different "worlds of welfare capitalism" (Anglo-Saxon, Nordic, Continental, Southern and Eastern European).
- Selected Peer Reviews cover older, as well as more recent, cases. Obviously, with Peer Review meetings that took place long ago, the impacts of the Peer Review (if any) were more easily observed, although we did meet with the fallibility of human memory. By contrast, with more recent meetings, information and respondents were more easily accessible, but in some of these Peer Reviews, it seemed too early for tangible effects to have materialised.
- In our selection, we tried to reflect a diversity of Peer Reviews as regards to their success in terms of mutual learning. The rationale for the inclusion of not very successful cases is that we may also learn a lot from "failed" Peer Reviews.

Third, from the shortlist of Peer Reviews that fulfil the criteria above, ten cases were selected, taking into account the results of Task 1 and Task 2, as well as suggestions made by the European Commission. The final list of selected case studies is shown in Annex 1.

> For every one of the selected Peer Reviews, we examined how the discussed policies or projects *developed over time in the host country,* how they were *adapted* (responding to changes in circumstances and obstacles encountered), and most importantly, whether the discussion during the Peer Reviews and the comments and experiences of the peer countries *influenced in any way* the development of these policies and projects in the host country (Task 3) and selected peer counties (Task 4).

Meeting the core goal of the Peer Review assessment, namely **to trace 'policy learning' effects, was in itself challenging**, as in some cases interviewees make bold claims about the alleged "impact" of a given Peer Review. In other Peer Reviews we found the opposite, i.e., that interviewees suggested that no policy learning had taken place, and that the PROGRESS seminar had had no influence upon domestic policy. In both extreme cases, the coordination team (through the Case Study Guidelines for Experts: OSE and PPMI, 2011) has pushed the authors of the case studies, to conduct **detailed process tracing** to ensure that:

- The "impact" claims of the Peer Review are empirically plausible, i.e., there is an observed link between the persons who participated in the Peer Review and the people in charge of a reform that would have been inspired by the Peer Review; and that they are in a position to enact such changes;
- That strong denials of (any) effects tied to the Peer Review are corroborated by a variety of interviewees, as some interviewees may have an interest in denying any form of "outside influence", especially from the EU.

The empirical challenge of making plausible claims has been addressed in the ten case studies through a **careful triangulation of several sources of information**:

- First of all, a thorough review of the relevant **primary and secondary sources** was undertaken for each Peer Review. This involved analysing, firstly, the key documents produced for the Peer Review meetings ([2]); secondly, national evaluation reports, National Strategy Reports and assessments, if available; thirdly, academic literature; and finally, key documents of the Social OMC such as the Joint Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion.
- The findings of this documentary analysis were then supplemented, for each of the ten case studies, with interview data. Between August 2011 and March 2012, 106 semi-structured interviews ([3]) were carried out for Task 3 (focussing on the host countries) and 65 interviews for Task 4 (regarding the peer countries), adding up to **171 interviews with the key actors involved** (see last column of Annex 1). Interviewees included Peer Review participants (national and EU representatives, stakeholders), as well as experts who did not participate in the meetings themselves. These interviews prioritized respondents from the host and peer countries, but wherever possible Peer Review managers, Commission officials and thematic experts were interviewed as well, as well as some non-participants. Most interviews were conducted through Skype or telephone, although some interviews were conducted face-to-face or (exceptionally) by e-mail.
- In some cases, additional information (e.g., press coverage) has been drawn from the **internet**.

It should be noted that **reaching Peer Review participants was a challenge** in most of the case studies. This part of the research has been particularly difficult in some case studies, and such in spite of intense efforts on the part of the researchers and the coordination team ([4]). The following challenges were especially salient: participants of Peer Reviews moved to a different administration, institutions dissolved or were merged, people retired, resigned or moved abroad. Even when we reached them, participants were sometimes hesitant to take part in this research, as the topic of the Peer Review was sometimes politically sensitive, or because potential interviewees were overburdened, had difficulties speaking English or French ([5]), felt

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2. Discussion papers, Comments papers, Synthesis reports, Minutes, Short reports.
3. In the Case Study Guidelines for Experts (OSE and PPMI, 2011) the coordination team provided an "Interview Guide" to support the authors in their task of conducting semi-structured interviews with different categories of respondents. These questions needed to be adapted (by the expert in charge of each case study) to the specific topic and the respondent (hence the "semi"-structured nature).
4. The latter included retrieving contact details of participants through their still active colleagues (which works well in some administrations, but is inconceivable in other administrative cultures), tracing former Peer Review participants through professional networking sites like LinkedIn, sending e-mails in the respondent's native language and mails for the Project coordinator.
5. In several cases experts therefore sent e-mails in the respondent's native language. Since the prospect of conducting an interview in English over the phone was sometimes a deterrent to

we were assessing their work, and/or were involved in the organisation of a new Peer Review. However, through the extensive use of primary and secondary written sources, and by conducting additional interviews with non-participants, these ten case studies are sufficiently robust to allow for a sound horizontal analysis.

2. OVERVIEW AND MAPPING OF THE PEER REVIEWS

The **specific objective** of Task 1/Deliverable 1 was to systematically overview and map the 58 Peer Reviews that took place between the start of the programme in 2004 and the end of 2010. The key sources of information for the mapping exercise (at the heart of which are a set of tables and matrixes that are presented in annexes of Task 1) were the documents available on the Peer Review web-site; specifically: the Peer Review minutes, synthesis reports, short reports, discussion papers, host country reports, comment papers and stakeholder papers. We also used extensively the annual technical reports of the service contracts assisting the European Commission and Member States in carrying out Peer Reviews. In most cases the matrixes/ tables present objective data, such as the number of Peer Reviews, the key theme, the number of countries taking part, etc. However in a few instances we also used our expert judgement (e.g., based on the contents analysis of documents presented on the Peer Review web-site we indicate when the transferability of practices was most likely to take place).

A first set of maps presented in Deliverable 1 dealt with the **key trends of the Peer Review programme**, which included:

1.   A general overview: number of Peer Reviews per programme year, participation by Member States as host and participant etc.;
2.   A discussion of the issues analysed during the Peer Reviews: division between the three strands of the Social OMC (social inclusion, pension, health and long-term care), the number of Peer Review seminars by the key themes etc.;
3.   An examination of the main types of participants, including participation by EU-level stakeholder networks;
4.   A mapping of the features of the Peer Review process: the number of site visits compared to the number of Peer Reviews, documents prepared before and after a Peer Review etc.;
5.   A discussion of the aspect of transferability and presentation of the results of evaluations of the Peer Reviews by participants.

Especially the latter point revealed to be highly relevant: the impact assessment demonstrates that on the one hand the majority of the participants find the information gained useful for policy development first and foremost because the Peer Reviews provided positive examples of policies/practices which could be learned from. According to the participants, they also disseminate the information about the Peer Review within their own organisation, but also to people in other organisations. On the other hand, however, the more substantive impacts of the Peer Reviews were judged to be less significant; less than half of the respondents agree that the Peer Reviews contributed to the policy discussions or policy debate within their own country and even fewer see any impacts on bilateral exchange or further contact with the host country (or another Member State).

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interviewees, several interviews have been conducted in respondent's native language (in SE, ES, SK, CZ, etc.).

We also analysed the comments of Member States' representatives in the Peer Reviews' short reports, synthesis reports, comments' papers (and other documents), and assessed whether these representatives signal clearly their intention to use or transfer at least some elements of the practice discussed, or they rather choose to underline the institutional and other differences that make the transfer unlikely. The mapping exercise indicated that **every year there were around 10-20 cases when Member States expressed clearly their intention to use/transfer the ideas discussed** and 15-25 cases when MSs indicated that they find the ideas interesting. Very frequently however the **participants also mentioned important constraints** which make transferability difficult (especially differences in terms of division of responsibility between national and regional/ local institutions, budgetary constraints, strength of the NGO sector, etc.). Indeed in many cases the participants both expressed their interest in the practices presented and also discussed the potential difficulties of taking over the ideas to other social and policy contexts.

3. CONTRIBUTION OF THE PEER REVIEWS TO 'CONSENSUS FRAMING

The **specific objective** of Deliverable 2 was to assess how the Peer Reviews carried out so far have contributed to 'consensus framing' among the participating countries and whether this consensus has been reflected in EU level documents.

Several approaches were used to determine areas of commonality ('consensus') and connections to EU-level documents. First, topics of the Peer Reviews were assessed along with the key themes covered by these topics. Any general trends in Peer Reviews were noted, and qualitative analyses of the synthesis reports and minutes for all 58 Peer Reviews that took place until the end of 2010 were undertaken, looking for key issues addressed and whether any agreement was reached on these topics. This analysis helped to identify several elements: (a) general overall trends; (b) general trends in themes over time; (c) general trends year by year; and (d) areas of commonality and consensus. The Peer Reviews were then compared to EU-level documents in the area, most notably the joint reports prepared as part of the Social OMC and many other documents (detailed in the bibliography of the Deliverable). The EU documents were searched for key terms and issues related to the general Peer Review process, specific key themes, policy areas, and specific Peer Reviews.

The analysis in Deliverable 2 found **some clear general trends in consensus framing: across all Peer Reviews**, there were consistent messages regarding the importance of (1) definitions of social issues; (2) the necessity of common data and information; (3) the importance of common measures, indicators, monitoring and evaluation; (4) the division of responsibility between national, regional and local levels; (5) mainstreaming of issues across policy areas; (6) cooperation and coordination between stakeholders; and (7) balancing between targeting and universalism. The report also looks into thematic trends in consensus framing in the three strands of the Social OMC. Here the conclusion is rather prudent: in some aspects of these themes, there was some consensus, specifically on issues to be discussed, but there were often also areas of divergence, mostly in approaches to addressing these issues and institutional constraints on action.

Clearly a key finding of this Task 2 is that all in all, **Peer Reviews are iterative process, with information, consensus and influence flowing both into and out of the process**. Peer reviews commonly focused on issues raised first at the EU level, but also seem to have raised

debates that subsequently led to wider recognition at the EU level (a finding which is being corroborated by the case studies, see sections 3 and 4 below). In addition, there is evidence of **Member State support and reliance on the Peer Review process**, both in helping to develop new policy (Hungary's 'Sure Start' programme, reflecting the UK's Sure Start programme presented in 2006) and highlighting the importance of mutual learning in providing insight on how to address institutional and policy issues at the Member State level.

Recent Peer Reviews have increasingly focussed on (or fed into) concrete discussions that help to develop a firmer understanding of issues, new approaches to 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, etc.) rather than more limited policy-specific good practice examples.

Thus, the conclusions of Task 2 seem to confirm that 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 Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion (NSR) and of their impact. Whether the Peer Reviews also deliver on two other overall objectives (to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of social policies through learning; and to facilitate the transfer of key components of policies or of institutional arrangements) has been addressed in Tasks 3 and 4, the results of which are summarised next.

◯ 4. HOST COUNTRY ASSESSMENT

Providing a synthesis of 10 empirically rich case studies of some 20 pages each (see bibliography) that cover a range of countries, policy domains, practices and topics is quite a challenge (but see OSE and PPMI, 2012a). Wrapping up this synthesis in a few concluding points is even more challenging (a more detailed summary of the findings can be found in the boxes at the end of each section of Deliverable 3). We do so by contrasting the key findings of this PROGRESS Peer Review Assessment against some of the existing findings in the academic literature about the Social OMC.

4.1 Motivations for hosting Peer reviews: going beyond showcasing

At least part of the academic literature about the Social OMC in general and about Peer Reviews more specifically seems to agree that organising a Peer Review is mostly about "showing off". Indeed, this assessment has found several instances where the initial objective of the host country was, sometimes quite explicitly, to showcase a good practice. In other Peer Reviews however, Member States were genuinely looking for feedback and ideas from their peers, in spite of their strong belief that they had a good practice already. Finally, we had some (admittedly exceptional) cases in our sample where the host country was very well aware that the policy or practice under review was not considered a good practice by peers, or by the European Commission.

The reason for such variation is that Member States have a **variety of motivations, amongst which window dressing is only one, to host a Peer Review.** Other motivations include discussing internal differences with European peers, uploading an issue to the EU agenda, getting transnational work on a particular issues going, signalling that the 'EU is watching' on a

certain topic, and responding to EU pressure. Hosting a Peer Review can also be inspired by the desire to come across as a 'good European pupil' by actively engaging in the Social OMC, or even by the genuine desire to learn from other participants' successes and failures.

4.2 Between window dressing and critical discussions

The motivations behind a country's decision to host a Peer Review have an unavoidable impact on the quality of the discussions. For example, discussion may suffer because the host country uses a large share of the available time to present the good practice, or because the host is not really enthusiastic about hosting the PR at all (in this case EU or stakeholder pressure led them to host). As a result, in some Peer Reviews, even the most glaring problems with the host country's programme were not openly addressed. More important, however, is that **even in those instances where the Peer Review was initially conceived as a 'showcase', the discussions during the PR were often rather frank and openly critical**, even if 'frontal attacks' on the host country are rare. As a result, these talks often proved to be a good learning experience after all, for peers and host alike, obviously provided it is well organised, with quality papers prepared, room for critical feedback, and the like.

St**akeholders often took the lead in bringing critical issues forward during debates,** which is highly valued by the other participants. In several instances PR discussions led to considerable "surprises" for the host country, in that its representatives discovered that their "best practice" was perhaps not as good as they had assumed. In many cases, the **site visits**, which were organised in all but two of our ten case studies, **provided exactly such a "reality check" for PR participants.** Indeed, oftentimes the site visit sparked new questions and discussions brought to the PR table.

4.3 Participation in Peer Reviews: more than "non-accountable bureaucrats"

Our case studies illustrated that the results of specific Peer Review meetings are regularly used and diffused by European stakeholders in their EU-wide initiatives and campaigns. While there is clear evidence that elements from these **Peer Reviews are being picked up and used** by such actors to pursue their goals, this more often happens "behind closed doors", without explicit reference to the Peer Review. In addition, nongovernmental experts and EU stakeholder networks sometimes have a strong influence on Member States' preference to host a Peer Review on a certain topic (e.g., social impact assessment, homelessness). Through exchanges with other network members and their participation in drawing up EU comparative analyses, such as benchmarking exercises and development of scoreboards, experts and stakeholders acquire cross country knowledge and become part of what could be called the "Social OMC Community", of which the PROGRESS Peer Reviews are part and parcel.

In the context of the Social OMC, these stakeholders thereby contribute to "capillary effects", in that **Peer Review as a governance tool is increasingly being promoted outside the formal OMC inner circle**, i.e., governments and Commission officials. Indeed, we have found examples of Peer Reviews being organised in different countries at national, regional, and even local level. That said, the fact remains that in many cases only European stakeholder organisations take part in the Peer Review. A notable exception, however, is the Irish case study in our sample, which had national stakeholders for every one of the peer countries.

4.4 Reflexive learning: when tutors become learners and vice versa

The notions of "tutors" and "learners" are regularly referred to in the scholarly literature about the OMC. Which is more, these notions are regularly referred to by the Peer Review participants themselves as a way to situate themselves in the meeting. The standard assumption is that of the host country presenting a good practice and acting as a tutor/teacher vis-à-vis other participants, while the peer countries act as learners. This assessment has found that this assumption is of limited value-added in the real world of EU Peer Reviews. Indeed, in some of our cases the Host country more or less clearly defines itself as a learner, while some of the Peer countries and the European Commission in practice act as tutors. But there is more: even in those Peer Reviews where there seems to have been little or no interest from the host to "learn" from the other countries, the host-tutor often became a learner after all, once other participants start raising critical points about the practice analysed. This points to an important finding of our research, namely that **tutor/learner roles *change* during the course of the Peer Reviews, which suggests that genuine** (and perhaps surprising) **reflexive learning is taking place** in at least some PROGRESS Peer Review sessions.

4.5 Learning from difference: opening up perspectives

In the OMC literature it is sometimes suggested that the Peer Review's impact could be enhanced by organising sessions between more 'similar' countries (e.g., in terms of welfare regime or policy practice). Our assessment indeed confirms that the problems associated with *policy transfer* are very important, especially so between countries belonging to different welfare models, or having very different concrete policies on certain issues (see Section 5 below). Thus, a Peer Review with a host country belonging to one model and a large majority of peer countries belonging to a second model does not work very well.

On the other hand, there are some clear examples of *policy learning* between countries belonging to very *different* welfare models (or with different practices on precise issues). Quite a few of the 171 respondents we interviewed in total for the ten case studies (Task 3 and 4) experienced this ***learning from difference* as an important 'opening up' of perspectives**, even if it does not lead to immediate policy transfer. It seems that in the end, **having a good "mix of welfare models/reviewed practices" is an** *absolutely key factor* **for the success of PROGRESS Peer Reviews.**

4.6 Tracing domestic impact: mirror effects and legitimising practices

This assessment began with the assumption that looking for "**impact**" of the Peer Reviews at the domestic level would be like looking for a needle in a haystack, especially in view of the fact that host countries rarely engage in meaningful follow-up impact assessments after EU Peer Reviews.

This assessment indeed found that **there is only limited evidence of any direct "impact" of individual Peer Review meetings on host countries' national practices**. Indeed, we only found two examples where the PR could be said to have improved the efficiency and effectiveness of the reviewed practice. This occurred in Ireland with the organisation features of the SIF and in Norway in raising attention for some aspects of the 'Qualification Programme' that had previously been underemphasized. In both cases, the impact was very modest.

Nonetheless, we found that in many cases **Peer Reviews entailed important 'mirror effects' for both host country officials and stakeholders.** As such, as a result of having explained

one's own practice to others, actors sometimes revise their opinion about these practices. Peer Reviews can challenge people's beliefs in yet another way: by putting issues in the EU spotlight, they signal that Europe is paying attention, and that as a consequence Member States cannot simply "do as they like". Perhaps surprisingly, several of our interviewees indeed referred to the **genuine pressure that can be exerted through a PR (it feels 'harder' than one would expect)**, and saw it as way for the European Commission to develop a **'supportive monitoring function'** that signals that "we are interested in what you are doing, but we are also watching over your shoulder'".

We also found that 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, if not impossible to attribute these effects *exclusively* to the PROGRESS Peer Reviews. However, it is true that many of our interviewees referred to the dynamic of having an "outside" - and thereby more "objective" – assessment by their European peers. While a PR sometimes highlights issues or problems that some people already acknowledge, the fact that people "from the outside" raise them makes them easier to accept. Or as our respondents put it, PR helps to "crystallise people's concerns", "articulate issues in different ways", and "open up the horizon". It seems plausible that by so doing, the **lessons learned at PROGRESS Peer Reviews,** often combined with discourses and knowledge from other sources, **moved certain, and often previously known problems higher on the list of priorities to be dealt with.**

4.7 EU-level impact: weak networking but stepping stones to building European consensus

Peer Reviews help build (or reinforce pre-existing) informal networks either on an ad-hoc basis between administrations, or more formally between stakeholder organisations and participating experts. However, the analysis found that these **networking effects were often weak, which participants blamed, in part, on the lack of follow-up events or activities** (see Section 4.9 below).

Some Peer Reviews clearly contribute to framing and further developing an issue the EU level**.** This was the case with the Peer Review on 'Social Impact Assessment' (SK 2008), minimum income (BE 2005), activation (NO 2009), and stakeholder involvement (IE 2007). Crucially, in these 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). Typically, a Peer Review builds on earlier work done in the context of EU expert networks. It also provides legitimacy for funding subsequent EU studies, resulting in a EU seminar, a Commission Communication, ultimately followed by a new Peer Review on the same (or similar) topic, which then squares the virtuous circle. In some cases, however, this did not always work out as planned. For example, in the DE 2010 Peer Review, the European Commission tried to bring in the issue of EU-wide quality guidelines on care for the elderly, but this was blocked by the host country.

4.8 Organising Peer Reviews: features of success (and failure)

By and large, the **organisation** and the quality of the Peer Reviews in our study are highly valued across the entire period (2004-2010), and this is often attributed to the quality of the Peer Review management (INBAS in earlier years, ÖSB more recently). Of course, we also found

several areas where the Peer Reviews left room for improvement. The following points are highlighted as essential for a successful Peer Review ([6]):

- The extent to which key participants, such as the Host country officials, the Peer Review Manager and the European Commission agree about the *objectives o*f the Peer Review, and discuss this well before the event is crucial. In some rare cases this did not work well, and in one case the thematic expert even withdrew from the assignment (with obvious nasty consequences for the PR). In particular, the timely interplay between the thematic expert (describing the EU context and debates) and the host country expert (setting the domestic scene) is an underappreciated "key to success".
- The occasion to participate in a well-targeted site visit that serves as a reality check, even if participants often stress that a balance must be struck between the time for such a site visit (the logistics of which should be kept simple) and the time to discuss (and provide feedback on the site visits themselves).
- While the quality of the Discussion Papers and Host Country Papers is often high, doubts are regularly raised about the quality of the Comment Papers, which is often a key determinant of the quality of debates. Thus, a recurrent feature is that time is being lost on presentations which have to compensate for low quality papers.
- The occasions for informal networking, such as museum and sauna visits, lunches and coffee breaks, foster bilateral exchanges, but also to build the much-needed trust between participants, which is essential for a frank and critical discussion.
- Having a manageable number of participants had a significant effect upon the quality of discussion. As a rule, the Peer Reviews we discussed had some 7-8 countries participating, as well as Peer Review manager, experts, and representatives from stakeholder organisations. This results in meetings of some 25 to around 50 participants, although around 30 participants seems ideal. In crowded sessions, in depth discussions are more difficult, even if the practice of splitting into smaller working groups seems to make up for some of this and can contribute to include stakeholders whenever possible. Even more important than the number of participants is their position; they should be carefully selected and include people that are close to decision-making circles.

4.9 After the Peer Review: après nous le deluge?

It is clear from this assessment that the **result of the Peer Reviews do not easily 'trickle down' to a broad circle of domestic policymakers**. Indeed, often dissemination of information is largely confined to the administration of some of the Peer Review participant. Traces in the national press are extremely rare and exceptional, even in the local press. Even this depends on whether or not participants take such an initiative, e.g., to include feedback about the Peer Review in a Newsletter, or at least 'talk about it' with colleagues. This comes in spite of a very well-developed reporting system (Peer Review website).

As a result, Peer Review results are still largely unknown to the (obviously large) world of OMC-outsiders. But even the *dissemination of knowledge to insiders* seems problematic, and most case studies indicate that references to the Peer Reviews in other OMC documents are scarce, although that this has improved more recently. Most striking perhaps is that the knowledge base built up during a Peer Review is not systematically considered during later Peer Reviews on the same topic, even if we came across interesting examples of accumulation of knowledge. Hence, 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. Expert and stakeholders seem to be most active as regards dissemination of PR outputs.

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6. These points are also further developed in Deliverable 5 on Policy Recommendations (OSE and PPMI, 2012c).

A recurrent feature in all of the case studies is the finding that the **Peer Review is not followed-up in any way** by the host country, the European Commission, or the Peer Review manager. In one case, the Commission unsuccessfully tried to organise such a follow-up, failing for want of Member State interest. The latter point also underlines a more general finding of this assessment, i.e., that contrary to what some expect, the PROGRESS Peer Review process is genuinely "owned" by the Members States. Indeed, while the Commission has its own agenda and tries to use the Peer Reviews if it fits that agenda, the Member States still decide on the hosting and participating, agenda setting, and the like. Ghost stories about the European Commission manipulating the Peer Reviews have not been corroborated in our study.

⭕ 5. PEER COUNTRY ASSESSMENT

The purpose of Task 4 was to examine to what **extent, under which circumstances, from whom and by whom, learning has taken place** during and after ten selected Peer Reviews. The focus was on the *participant countries*, not the host countries. The goal was also to identify elements conducive to or impeding such mutual learning. The case studies in Task 4 were structured around three evaluation questions and a number of hypotheses, which will guide us through this summary. A more detailed summary of the findings can be found in the boxes at the end of each section of Deliverable 4.

5.1 Who has been learning what and from whom: identifying "learners" and "tutors"

Unsurprisingly, Peer Reviews have been a good occasion for **individual learning**. This involves improving knowledge about the host countries' practices under review, the ones of the other participating countries, as well as actions and contributions at the community level. In most of the cases, the peer countries' attitude *changed* according to the specific issues under discussion. While some pure 'learning' and pure 'tutoring' attitudes were evident in the peer countries' Comment Papers, those attitudes usually emerged during the Review. That is**, the existence of national good practices is sometimes 'discovered' by the peer country representatives during the meetings, as a consequence of discussions held (***mirror effect***).** As was the case with host countries (see Section 4.6), peer countries mostly want to *exchange* ideas and experience with other participants, i.e., to learn *with* others, rather than only learning *from* others.

In many cases the information gained during the Peer Reviews has trickled down in peer countries' domestic organisations. Thus, Peer Reviews entailed at least some changes at the cognitive level. This is to say that the **Peer Reviews increased institutional knowledge of what other countries were doing**, provided examples of good practices from which inspiration was drawn for improving national practices, and increased awareness of domestic strengths and weakness. Strong learning points concern both **procedural and substantive** aspects of practices discussed during the Peer Review. This knowledge has sometimes been used in discourses developed at the national level, thus entering into the national debate (**discursive diffusion**). There are only two cases, for which we have evidence of a wider dissemination strategy in a peer country about a PROGRESS PR meeting

Both cognitive effects and discursive diffusion are typically limited to the **organisations of the national representatives**: national Ministries for the PCOs, and stakeholders' organisations or

academic and research institutes for the PCIEs. Peer countries have **very few channels for disseminating information** concerning the Peer Reviews (mostly in the form of oral debriefings, rather than broad "strategies").

The lack of dissemination is partially offset by the fact that, in most cases in our sample, peer countries' representatives can be considered as the 'right persons' for attending the meetings. Indeed, they tended to have knowledge of the topic and a role in national organizations that allowed them to contribute to discussions during the meeting and to subsequently influence national policies (at least by diffusing information in relevant national decision-making venues). The lack of systematic dissemination remains problematic, however, because without it there is a risk that information obtained and lessons learned are lost when participants change position, which happens very frequently. In some cases peer countries' representatives have **created networks** with other participants, and in a few cases this network has been exploited for inviting foreign experts in their own countries, thus contributing to the domestic debate. Overall, however, networking effects are rather limited.

5.2 What can we learn about features in the Peer Review process which are conducive to mutual learning?

As regards the characteristics of the countries involved, in 6 cases of our study the host and peer country belong to different welfare regimes: Belgium (in SK 2008), Bulgaria (in ES 2007), Denmark (in UK 2004), Hungary (in UK 2006), Romania (in BE 2005), United Kingdom (in NO 2009). However, there are *significant examples of policy learning between these countries*. It seems that those differences often provide unexpected learning opportunities by stimulating peer countries to focus on specific, and previously unknown issues. There are two cases in our study where the host and peer countries, though belonging to *different welfare regimes*, showed important *similarities* concerning the actual *practice* reviewed. We also have one case where, although the peer and host country belong to the *same welfare regime*, present rather *different practices* concerning the topic of the Peer Review, namely Austria (in DE 2010). In other words, any discussion about learning between countries belonging to 'the same welfare model' should be nuanced and **the similarities or differences between the *actual practices that are reviewed* should be taken into consideration.**

Contextual features such as financial resources, institutional setup and competences attributed to the 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 also has a significant impact on both mutual learning and policy transfer. **On-going reforms at the time of the Peer Review significantly increase the motivation of the peer countries**, thus facilitating mutual learning. This finding strongly suggests that there is value in earmarking part of the PROGRESS budget for assisting Member States with their reforms through **ad hoc Peer Reviews**, **so as to capitalise (on short notice) on the window that opens early in the reform process**. Of course such a "prompt" Peer Review will need to overcome some real challenges in terms of preparation, in view of our finding that the quality of preparation is a key success factor for PROGRESS PR.

5.3 What can we learn about transferability conditions?

In the four cases of policy transfer we found, it was procedural aspects of the practices under review that were transferred. This seems to confirm the hypothesis **that transferability is greater at the procedural level** (the *governance* of domestic policies) than at the substantive level (i.e., actual policies, agenda setting, and legislative changes). In all cases, a practical

solution for coping with a problem - or for improving national practice, even where existing practice was not seen as deficient per se, as in the Austrian case - was offered during the Peer Review. In three out of these four cases, policy transfer happened between countries which share some similarities in terms of existing programmes. This seems to confirm the hypothesis that **actual policy transfer is easier between 'similar' Member States** (both in terms of institutional setup and existing practices).

By contrast, there is no evidence to support our initial hypothesis that "transferability is easier where national transmission mechanisms exist". The truth is that we simply **did not come across any such transmission mechanism** (i.e., formal channels for disseminating information). As said above, dissemination mostly happens through oral briefings. What seems far more important for policy transfer is that a national actor with the right competences for recognising the usefulness of a solution (and interested in promoting that solution) was attending the meeting, and that those actors had a role in their national context which allowed them to introduce the practice, to advocate for it, or to promote higher-level awareness and encourage debates on it.

Finally, as almost all our case studies dealt with Social Inclusion, we have **not been able to test the hypothesis that transferability is easier in certain issue areas** (social inclusion) **than in others** (pensions, healthcare). But at first sight, our finding is that PR focussed on pensions and health and long-term care also provide high learning points. We do have **(limited) confirmation of the hypothesis that transferability is lower in new Member States** (i.e., those having acceded after 2004) due to other pressures (problem load, international influence, financial resources) on domestic welfare states. Participants from new Member States more often define themselves as 'learners'; and yet, participants from new Member States do act as tutors on some specific points.

6. HOMINES DUM DOCENT, DISCUNT: REACHING THE STATED AIMS AFTER ALL?

Our analysis suggests that the PROGRESS Peer Reviews do achieve at least one of their overall objectives. The seminars clearly lead to a **better understanding of the participating Member States' policies, even in the event of "showcasing"**. The "teacher" is more often than not prepared to learn when the Peer Review raises important questions about the reviewed practice. In other words, "*homines dum docent, discunt*" (⁷) (**even when they teach, men learn**). This also applies to the other national and EU experts involved in the PR: many of them confirmed that they learned (a lot) about national experiences.

We found only limited evidence that the PROGRESS PR improved the efficiency and effectiveness of the presented good practice *in the host countries*, although a PR's impact is very difficult to establish in view of the absence of follow-up assessments by the Member States. By contrast the (perhaps surprising) finding that in four out of ten of our case studies policy transfer took place leads to the conclusion that PROGRESS **Peer Reviews indeed facilitate the transfer of key components** of policies or of institutional arrangements. **So the stated aims of the PROGRESS programme have at least partly been reached.**

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7.   Seneca ("the Younger') Epistulae Morales no. 7, sect. 8.

Indeed, **host and peer countries who "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. Further research will have to clarify whether the mechanisms that explain such effects - namely mutual learning (participants learn about other practices, or rediscover their own), activation of the network developed during the Peer Review, strategic usages (agency) of newly acquired knowledge by domestic actors, and availability of (EU) financial resources – equally produce effects in countries without such an investment in the PR (and which were largely out of the scope of our research).

In all, the **discussions during PROGRESS Peer Reviews seem to have achieved a degree of "depth"**, with high quality documents written and a range of topics being discussed in considerable detail. This finding is at odds with the stylised picture of how EU Peer Reviews are portrayed in the OMC literature. In fact, much of the criticism in the literature of 'OMC Peer Reviews' seems to refer to the early Peer Reviews, organized before EU enlargement in 2004, on national social inclusion strategies. These early Reviews tend to lead to endless and tedious meetings where the full national strategies of all Member States are reviewed one after the other with nearly no time for discussion. We believe that the **new academic literature on the topic should take into account the more recent experiences with PROGRESS Peer Reviews** and incorporate their dynamics into a theoretical framework which better explains the process and which is able to more accurately predict their impact.

In view of the important mirror effects, the role of the PR in **legitimizing** reviewed practices, its contribution to informal networking and, perhaps most importantly, the finding that PR constitutes a stepping stone in European consensus building on social topics, all lead us to conclude that **PROGRESS Peer Reviews have an important role to play in the future Social OMC and the Europe 2020 Strategy alike.**

ANNEX 1.
OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDIES AND EXPERTS INVOLVED

PR Date	Host country (code in text)	Topic	Key theme(s)	Author(s)	N° of Interviews (Task 3 + Task 4)
05-06.05.2004	United Kingdom (UK 2004)	The Rough Sleepers Unit (England)	Quality and accessibility of social services; Homelessness and housing exclusion	Volker Busch-Geertsema and Freek Spinnewijn	12 + 8
19-20.05.2005	Czech Republic (CZ 2005)	Field Social Work Programmes in Neighbourhoods Threatened by Social Exclusion	Integration of ethnic minorities and immigrants; Quality and accessibility of social services	Romana Careja	5 + 4
7-8.11. 2005	Belgium (BE 2005)	Minimum Incomes and social integration institutional arrangements	Promoting active inclusion	Ramón Peña-Casas and Sebastiano Sabato	15 + 6
04-05.06.2006	United Kingdom (UK 2006)	The UK government's Sure Start programme	Children and families	Mary Daly	10 + 6
13-14.09.2007	Sweden (SE 2007)	Freedom of choice and dignity for the elderly	Quality and accessibility of social services; Ageing and providing adequate and sustainable pensions; Health and LTC	David Natali and Tereza Wennerholm Čáslavská	14 + 10
25-26.10.2007	Spain (ES 2007)	Multi-regional Operational Programme to Combat Discrimination	Integration of ethnic minorities and immigrants; Promoting active inclusion	Dalila Ghailani and Maria Carolina Melo	11 + 4
15-16.11.2007	Ireland (IE 2007)	The NAPInclusion Social Inclusion Forum	Governance	Bart Vanhercke, Charlotte Hick and Tereza Wennerholm Čáslavská	13 + 7
06 -07.11.2008	Slovakia (SK 2008)	Social Impact Assessment	Governance	Régine Kiasuwa	6 + 6
29-30.10.2009	Norway (NO 2009)	Developing well-targeted tools for the active inclusion of vulnerable people	Promoting active inclusion	Irma Budginaitė	11 + 8
18-19.10.2010	Germany (DE 2010)	Achieving quality long-term care in residential facilities	Ageing and providing adequate and sustainable pensions; Health and LTC	Timo Weishaupt and Claudia Göbel	9 + 6
					TOTAL: 171

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