

# HAS OPEN COORDINATION MATTERED? TRACING AND EVALUATING THE PROCESS FROM THE BELGIAN PRESIDENCY 2001 TO THE NEW STATE REFORM

BY

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## INTRODUCTION: A MOST LIKELY CASE<sup>1</sup>

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It would be naïve to assume that the European Union's (EU) 'Open Method of Co-ordination' in Social Protection and Social Inclusion (Social OMC) has been 'shaking' social policymaking in Belgium in the past decade. And yet, this article argues, features of both the social inclusion and (to a lesser extent) the pensions strand of this soft process are perceived as useful by a variety of actors at different levels of government. As a result these actors selectively pick up Social OMC tools and use them to pursue their policy goals. While doing so, their opinions, behaviour and interests are altered. Perhaps more important is that the use of certain OMC instruments has spilled over into other-than-OMC issue areas (such as equal opportunities) and is becoming a template for federal, regional and at times local policy coordination in Belgium. In one particular case the use of the OMC has even been codified in regional legislation. As a result, this article contends, the Social OMC has had a tangible impact on Belgian social policymaking.

While such findings will certainly come as a surprise to policymakers, academics and stakeholders alike, they are plausible if – and only if – one considers Belgium as a 'most likely case' in terms of OMC usage. Indeed, 'soft' instruments such as the OMC fit well with the (still) on-going gradual reform process of the country's institutions and its social policies, but also with the Belgian informal decision-making culture. The findings also reflect the positive attitude of the general population towards the EU, which is equally present among the decision-making political elite. During this Presidency, Belgian policymakers played a key role in 'shaping' the basic architecture of the social inclusion OMC and launching the pensions OMC, which

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created a certain ‘commitment’ to these processes among domestic actors. These actors also include academics, who have been very much engaged in reflections about the detailed architecture of the OMC, especially in the initial years. The overall positive attitude toward the Social OMC should thus not come as a surprise. We will argue that if the extensive regional powers in Belgium (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels) continue to coincide with a high level of cooperative behaviour, the further state reform that is currently being implemented may raise the prospect of an ‘OMC for all policies’ in Belgium.

The present article assesses the operation of the three strands of the Social OMC in Belgium. It is first based on two waves of interviews (in 2007 and 2010) with European, national, and subnational civil servants, politicians and stakeholders (social partners and NGO representatives) working in the areas of poverty and social exclusion, pensions and health and long-term care. Taken together, these semi-structured interviews with more than 50 respondents allow for a comparison between the 2006/2008 and 2008/2010 National Strategic Reports (see Appendix 1 for details about respondents). The 2010 round of interviews was accompanied by an on-line survey with closed questions that was completed – between November and December 2010 – by 59 experts working in the three policy fields. We corroborated all claims made by our respondents by comparing them, first, with the views of other interviewees and, second, with as many primary and secondary sources as possible (see bibliography).

The remainder of this article is organised as follows: the emergence of a Belgian advocacy coalition supporting the OMC in the area of social protection and social inclusion during the ‘Lisbon I’ period (2000-2005) is discussed in Section 1. The period following the ‘streamlining’ of the different strands of the Social OMC into a single process (2006-2010) is explained in Section 2 as the ‘time of harvest’. Section 3 tries to explain OMC influence, by disentangling mechanisms of change such as learning, legitimisation and leverage. Section 4 concludes by comparing effects across time and OMC strands.

## **1. A BELGIAN ADVOCACY COALITION BETWEEN POLITICS AND ACADEMIA**

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This section discusses the operation of and attitudes towards the Social Inclusion, Pensions and Health Care OMCs in Belgium, between the emergence of the respective processes (from 2000) and the 2005 decision to streamline them into a single Social OMC. Unsurprisingly, given the OMCs’ temporal development, most publications during this first period examined the Social Inclusion strand, to which we turn first.

### 1.1. SOCIAL INCLUSION: THE BELGIAN PRESIDENCY MOMENTUM

From the outset, the new Open Method of Co-ordination on Social Inclusion (OMC/SI) aroused a great deal of attention from Belgian academics. An important driver for the abundant written material produced was the 2001 Belgian Presidency of the EU. Berghman and Okma (2002a) describe how the Presidency, together with the European Commission (EC), involved the Belgian and EU research community in its political work on social indicators and social protection (notably pensions), while starting a debate about health care and the EU. This was done through the organisation of three international conferences (see below) that were thoroughly prepared by scientific reports and were deemed ‘amazingly effective’ in setting the political agenda (Berghman and Okma, 2002b, p. 552).

At the same time, these authors identified some risks that resulted from this peculiar dialogue within the epistemic community of researchers and politicians, which could potentially lead to a parallel decision-making process and blurred boundaries between politics and science: *“When academics act as ‘policy advocates’, taking normative positions, and when politicians present themselves as academics, it is hard for the reader or listener to know who is acting in what capacity, and to understand the basic rules of the debate. The clarification of roles requires a certain respectful distance between academics and politicians, even where the two worlds address the same topics and although they both need each other”* (Berghman and Okma, 2003).

A range of academics indeed openly contributed to supporting the Belgian input to the development of the OMC/SI (see Box 1 below).

**BOX 1: INITIAL ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS IN SUPPORT OF THE SOCIAL OMC (2000-2005)**

Some of the academic contributions were written at the specific request of – and with funding from – the Belgian government. This was notably the case for reports produced by Atkinson et al. (2002), Esping-Andersen et al. (2001), and Mossialos et al. (2001). These strengthened Belgium’s key role in keeping the momentum generated in Lisbon going (Berghman and Okma, 2002a; Armstrong, 2010, p. 70; Marlier, 2003).

Cantillon et al. (2001) set out recommendations for a European poverty norm, while the same team from the Centre of Social Policy discussed the possibilities and difficulties facing Belgium in working with poverty targets, drawing on the experience of other countries (Cantillon et al., 2003).

Several publications analysed the instruments of the OMC/SI and provided recommendations for their improvement. Examples include:

- indicator development (Adriaensens et al., 2003; Peña-Casas, 2004, Van Dam, 2005);
- improving participation (Nicaise and Groenez, 2003; Wuiame, 2009);
- monitoring (Nicaise and Groenez, 2003);
- the overall development of the OMC process (CNT-NAR, 2005; Marlier, 2003; several studies of the Higher Institute for Labour Studies, KU Leuven).

Source: compiled by author.

Kröger (2004, p. 20) refers to the particular role played by Frank Vandenbroucke, the then Belgian Federal Minister of Social Affairs and Pensions who had made these indicators one of his top-priorities for the Belgian Presidency of the EU (second half of 2001). This crucially included the establishment of a group of high-level academic experts<sup>2</sup>, which drafted the final report for the Social Protection Committee (SPC), later published as Atkinson et al. (2002) and thereby secured the agreement on the so-called Laeken indicators (Armstrong, 2010, p. 78). The Belgian Presidency strongly encouraged the Atkinson group to consult with the SPC's subgroup on indicators and a broader informed academic network, which is a prime example of cooperative, successful academic participation in a political process (Friedrich, 2005).

Several national and regional policymakers also published papers on the OMC/SI at an early stage<sup>3</sup>. Social partner organisations (CNT-NAR and CCE-CRB 2001a, b; CNT-NAR, 2005) and the European Anti-Poverty Network equally engaged with the topic (EAPN, 2001, 2003, 2005). There was also interest in and writings about the OMC/SI from the social partners, gathering in both the National Labour Council (CNT-NAR) and the Central Economic Council (CCE-CRB) (referred to as 'the Councils' hereafter). In the period 2001-2005 these social partner institutions adopted no fewer than six joint Opinions that dealt, among other things, with the OMC (see Box 2). One highly significant early 'spill over' effect of the CNT-NAR being formally consulted about the OMC is that through this *'we became aware that all of this is not so soft after all, that it could have serious consequences. Before we were consulted about the OMC, Europe did not exist in this institution'* (Interview, CNT-NAR). So, surprising as it may seem, 'soft law' raised awareness about the EU as an important policy arena in these central domestic institutions.

It is rather striking that a range of sources underlines the positive impact of the OMC/SI in Belgium at the procedural level, already during the early years of the OMC. Thus, work on the National Action Plan against poverty and social exclusion (NAP/SI) led to the creation of new bodies such as the national 'Interministerial Conference on Social Inclusion', which was created between the first and second rounds of the NAP/SI to achieve greater consistency in social inclusion policies<sup>4</sup>. New bodies for vertical and horizontal coordination (inter-ministerial level) were also created at the regional level. This happened in Flanders, with extensive mo-

(2) Named after its chair Sir Tony Atkinson; the group also included Brian Nolan as well as Belgians Bea Cantillon and Eric Marlier.

(3) Examples include Adriaensens et al. (2003); Guio (2003); Jansen (2007); Marlier (2003); SPP Intégration Sociale/POD Maatschappelijke Integratie (2005); Van Dam (2005); and Vandenbroucke (2002a,b).

(4) The Inter-Ministerial Conference for Social Integration is responsible for the design and monitoring of coordinated government policies at all levels of government (federal, community and regional). It is supposed to meet at least twice a year, but this varies a great deal.

bilisation of actors and stakeholders, and the aim of including the voice of people experiencing poverty (Groenez and Nicaise, 2004); in 2003 a regional steering committee for the NAP/SI was set up in Wallonia, bringing together the administrations concerned and chaired by the cabinet of the Minister-President (Jansen, 2007).

**BOX 2: THE BELGIAN SOCIAL PARTNERS MEET THE SOCIAL OMC**

The interest from the CNT-NAR and CCE-CRB in the Social OMC was more than just a formality: from the very beginning of the OMC/SI, the Councils asked to be informed about OMC activities at the EU level and implementation at the national level (CNT-NAR and CCE-CRB, 2001b).

As a result, the CNT-NAR met on a regular basis with the Belgian representatives in the SPC and asked them to take its view into account in EU-level discussions. There was a particular interest in the procedures for the elaboration of the National Action Plan against poverty and social exclusion and in the debates about the indicators (CNT-NAR and CCE-CRB, 2001a, b).

At the same time, the CNT-NAR pointed out that the OMC is a closed shop with a high administrative burden (CNT-NAR, 2005); the institution also struggles with the complexity of the policy process, including as a result of a variety of coexisting domestic and EU processes (CNT-NAR and CCE-CRB, 2001a). The Councils underline that the OMC cannot be the only instrument for social policy: legislation and social dialogue must play an important role in EU social policymaking (CNT-NAR and CCE-CRB, 2001a). The OMC should therefore be seen as a first essential step towards a social EU (CNT-NAR, 2005).

In 2005 the Councils published an elaborate evaluation of the pensions and OMC/SI which was prepared for by two seminars on 22 March and 10 May 2005 (CNT-NAR, 2005).

Source: compiled by author.

At the start of the OMC/SI in 2000, Belgium was relatively confident about the way it organised stakeholder involvement in its social inclusion policies (Hamel and Vanhercke, 2009; Wuiame, 2009). Proud of their ‘Resource Centre’ for the Fight against Poverty, Precariousness and Social Exclusion<sup>5</sup> as well as other institutional arrangements, many Belgian actors indeed considered the country a ‘model’ and a potential source of inspiration for other Member States (*Interviews*, CAB/FED, NET/POOR; REG/MIN). This is also why Belgium organised, for the first time, the European Meeting of people experiencing poverty during its 2001 Presidency (Atkinson et al., 2005, p. 171). In the years after the Presidency, Belgium played a key role in institutionalising this European event as part of the Social OMC toolbox. One would think that under such circumstances – a large apparent fit between EU requirements and domestic policies – a ‘soft’ mode of governance could hardly have any significant procedural impact at the national level.

(5) The ‘Resource Centre’ was set up in 1999 in order to guarantee a permanent dialogue between all relevant parties (including representatives of the associations of the poor, the social partners, health insurance organisations and the local public agencies). The Resource Centre produces reports on the evolution of poverty on a biannual basis.

And yet, several authors have described how Belgium's participation in the OMC quickly revealed that its 'model' of stakeholder involvement looked much better on paper than in practice (see Box 3).

**BOX 3: STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN THE FIRST NAP/SI: FROM A 'MODEL' TO A COLD SHOWER**

The elaboration of the first NAP/SI in 2001 was seen as a purely administrative process without involvement of grassroots organisations; the plan looked in some respects like 'a carbon copy' of the National Action Plan on Employment (Nicaise and Groenez, 2003, p. 16).

The NAP/SI's monitoring tool was equally seen as problematic, despite real efforts by the federal administration (Ibid; CEC, 2006). Most importantly, however, there was no time to consult with the social partners about the draft NAP/SI, even though they had explicitly asked to be heard (CNT-NAR and CCE-CRB, 2001b).

People experiencing poverty were equally disregarded in the writing process (Nicaise and Groenez, 2003, p. 29). Which is why the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) was clear in its assessment: the 'government failed in what was for us the key aspect': effectively involving people referred to in the 4th Nice Objective (EAPN, 2001: 5).

Belgium was openly criticised by the European Commission in its Joint Reports on Social Inclusion, which were perceived as 'cold showers' by some of the actors (Hamel and Vanhercke, 2009, p. 91).

Source: compiled by author.

Belgium responded to EU criticism, notably through the creation, in 2003, of two 'Indicators' and 'Actions' Task Forces that were entrusted with the preparation and follow-up of the NAP/SI and later the Social Inclusion part of the National Strategic Report on social protection and social inclusion (NSR) (Wuiame, 2009). These Task Forces are chaired by the federal 'Social Integration' and 'Social Security' administrations, respectively. The regional administrations are equally members of the Task Forces, together with a variety of stakeholders: service providers, European non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and experts. There are no formal criteria for participation in these groups, which are open for representatives of interested parties to exchange ideas and propose solutions but do not make decisions (INBAS and ENGENDER, 2010, p. 51).

As a result, a slow but steady increase in the efforts to include a wider range of actors (including social partners) in the OMC process in the period 2000-2005 has been noticed by stakeholder organisations (EAPN 2001, 2003, 2005; CNT-NAR, 2005) and scholars alike (Nicaise et al., 2004; Peña-Casas, 2004). However, the existence of an institutional infrastructure for stakeholder consultation does not automatically imply that their opinions are genuinely considered or transposed in the NAP/SI, which mainly remained governmental documents (EAPN, 2003; Wuiame 2009). Noël and Laroque (2009) equally conclude that consultation in the initial period did not influence the contents of the NAPs/SI.

A second early impact of the Social OMC in Belgium is related to the *development of indicators*, an area where quite a strong link developed between EU and domestic debates. Or, to be more precise: domestic actors (especially academics and civil servants) used the window of opportunity to draw attention to long-existing deficiencies, and revitalised domestic debates about them (see Box 4). As a result, the National Statistical Institute decided to boost its own statistical capacity so that it could organise the collection of social data itself, namely in the context of the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). In other words: Belgian commitment to the Social OMC had a tangible impact on statistical capacity building. Note that economists from the University of Leuven discussed the feasibility of combining the Laeken set of indicators into ‘subsidiarity-respecting’ synthetic indicators for social inclusion (Cherchye et al., 2004).

**BOX 4: THE BELGIAN PRESIDENCY: BOOSTING STATISTICAL CAPACITY**

At the end of the 1990s, Belgium’s official statistical capacity with regard to poverty and social exclusion faced real challenges, to put it mildly. The National Statistical Institute possessed hardly any know-how in this area, and the validity of the Belgian European Community Household Panel Study (ECHP) data was contested.

This led to considerable confusion and sharp national debates: depending on the source used, Belgium performed between ‘very well’ and ‘average’ as compared to other countries. Even more important, there was no agreement about the long-term evolution of the poverty situation: according to Eurostat calculations, poverty was decreasing over time, while the Belgian data indicated the contrary.

As a result of (a) Belgium’s high-profile commitment to find an agreement on the Laeken indicators for Social Inclusion during its Presidency and (b) the need to include commonly agreed indicators in the first NAP/SI due by September 2001, the inadequacy of national data collection and statistics was abruptly brought into the spotlight (Adriaensens et al., 2003; EAPN, 2003; Guio, 2003).

Source: compiled by author.

In terms of substantive impact, evidence about this early OMC period is somewhat inconclusive: The CNT-NAR was probably the most positive in its appreciation of the ‘early OMC’: judging that the newly created structures allowed for a better understanding of policy problems and solutions, and helped to create a common vocabulary between the national and EU levels. What is more, Belgian social partners agreed that – in spite of its problematic lack of visibility – the OMC may *‘have made it possible to by-pass the classical institutional debate (federalisation or defederalisation), to deal with the issue of the fight against poverty through a gradual convergence of the policies undertaken by the federal and federated entities’* (CNT-NAR, 2005, p. 5).

While the latter may be overstating things – especially in view of the CNT-NAR’s own conclusion that the OMC only had a minor impact on the content of policies – it should be noted that the federal administration, for the first time, explains how a selection of some of the good practices of the second NAP/SI may be

pertinent for the other regions because they are on the agenda in the entire country (SPP Intégration Sociale/POD Maatschappelijke Integratie, 2005). In other words: a variety of actors seemed ready to engage in the OMC/SI.

## 1.2. OMC PENSIONS AND HEALTHCARE: SOWING THE SEEDS OF AN EU APPROACH

The rather abundant production of texts relating to the OMC/SI contrasts with the relatively small amount of material written by academics and policymakers, in the initial years of the Social OMC, about the pensions and health care strands. And yet the Open Method of Co-ordination on Pensions (OMC/P) was clearly among the three priorities the 2001 Belgian Presidency had set in the field of social affairs: *“Firstly, to make European co-operation in the fight against poverty and social exclusion operational; secondly, to launch the OMC in the field of pensions; thirdly, to prepare the ground for reforming the current rules governing the co-ordination of social security schemes for mobile citizens”* (Vandenbroucke, 2002a).

Belgium indeed prepared the ground for the OMC on pensions<sup>6</sup> during its Presidency. The combination of a high-level Presidency conference (Leuven, 19-20 October, 2001), prepared for by a scientific report<sup>7</sup> encouraged a political compromise on the first cornerstone of the OMC/P: the Common Objectives.

In a critical article, Peemans-Pouillet (2003) questioned the lack of a real gender dimension in this strand of the OMC and found that Belgium drew up its first ‘strategic plan without women’, as competent advisory bodies such as the Equal Opportunities Council had not been consulted. More generally, one could say that the first National Strategy Report/Pensions (NSR/P) was a purely formal exercise, which only involved federal administrations (see Section 2.2.1) and thereby did not generate much enthusiasm. And yet, the OMC/P was fully supported by the Belgian social partners, who saw it as an opportunity to take a ‘balanced approach’ to pensions at the EU level, not limited to the financial dimension of the sustainability of pension systems (CNT-NAR and CCE-CRB, 2001). This interest was also confirmed by the aforementioned seminar (22 March 2005) which the CNT-NAR organised to evaluate the OMC/P.

In its first evaluation of the Social OMC, the EC explained that Belgium is amongst those countries (with the Netherlands and the UK) that claim that learning about pension reforms across the EU has positively impacted their policy making. However, no examples of the policy impact of the OMC/P in Belgium were provided.

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(6) Note that it was the 2002 Barcelona European Council (under Spanish Presidency) that formally launched the OMC on pensions at the highest political level.

(7) ‘A New Welfare Architecture for Europe?’ (Esping - Andersen et al., 2001).

Belgium continued to push for the operationalisation of the OMC/P after the 2001 Presidency, including through a range of influential texts (for example, Vandembroucke, 2002b).

The lack of attention given to the OMC on Health and Long term Care (OMC/H-LTC) in its early years can easily be understood. Firstly, the healthcare strand was effectively launched only with the streamlining of the Social OMC: it became operational as of 2005 as a result of Member State resistance to engage in this area (Baeten, 2002). Secondly, and as a related point, healthcare was not among the social priorities of the Belgian Presidency in 2001 and thus benefited less from the political momentum compared to the OMC/SI and OMC/P.

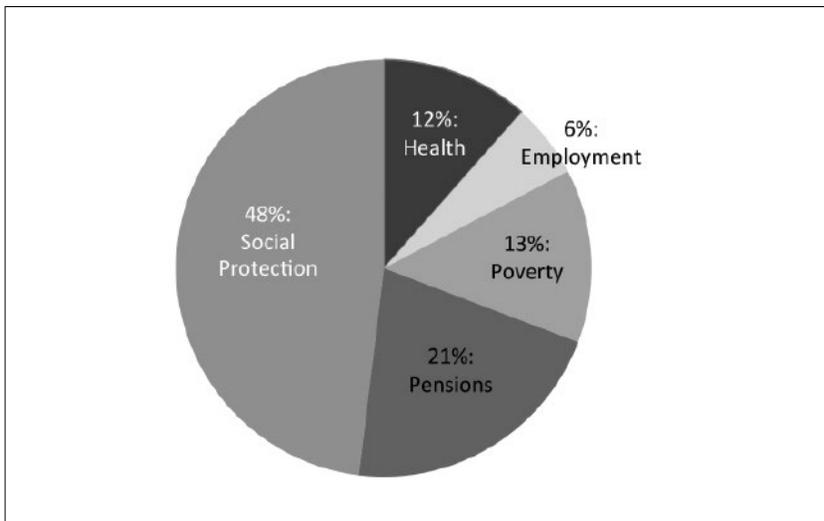
And yet, the Belgian Presidency was convinced that the increasing impact of European integration on health care systems justified the preparation of European coordination in this field. With the aim of launching the European debate (Berghman and Okma, 2002b), an international Presidency Conference was organised (Ghent, 7-8 December 2001) by the European Social Observatory on 'European Integration and National Health care Systems: A Challenge for Social Policy'. Again, the conference was prepared for by a high-profile academic report (Mossialos et al., 2001). The conference and the report did exactly what they were supposed to do: they fed into the Laeken European Council Conclusions, which set the terms of the healthcare debate by requesting that "*particular attention will have to be given to the impact of European integration on Member States' health care systems*" (Ibid).

Note that the Belgian (national and regional) Parliaments were completely absent from the initial OMC. We found *one single* Parliamentary question about the Social OMC, which deals with healthcare. The question – about the progress made with regard to the development of the OMC/H-LTC – was asked in November 2003; the minister found time to answer it *fully 2.5 years later*, and when he did he merely confirmed that Belgium had supported the implementation of an OMC in the field of health care and long term care, including the general objectives of accessibility, quality and financial sustainability (Parliament, 2003).

In sum, this section has explained that during the initial years of the Social OMC (2000-2005) in Belgium it sometimes seemed difficult to distinguish critical academic production from partisan stakeholder positions regarding this new process. Academics reflected on the detailed architecture of the OMC: when criticism was formulated, it was often paired with concrete suggestions for improvement of the process. At the same time, quite a few decision-makers published their views in scientific journals, more particularly the *Belgian Review of Social Security (Revue belge de sécurité sociale-Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Sociale Zekerheid, RBSS-BTSZ)*, which seems to have been quite instrumental in this regard.

Thus, a rough estimate shows that in the period 2000-2010 no less than 52 articles – or about 15% of the total number of articles published in the RBSS-BTSZ over that decade – were primarily concerned with the OMC<sup>8</sup>. Nearly 60% of these articles were published in the years around the 2001 Belgian Presidency of the EU (2000-2002). Thus, in the year following the Presidency, no less than *half* of the RBSS-BTSZ-articles had a strong tie with the Social OMC (there were fourteen such articles in 2002); some eight OMC-related articles were published both in 2000 and in 2001. As can be seen from Figure 1, nearly half of the 52 OMC-related articles published over the decade dealt with ‘Social Protection’ in general, while (unsurprisingly in view of the nature of the RBSS-BTSZ) a modest 6% dealt with employment issues; the remainder covered the specific strands of the Social OMC: health, poverty, and pensions.

**FIGURE 1:** ARTICLES RELATED TO THE OMC PUBLISHED IN RBSS-BTSZ BY STRAND: 2000-2010



This section has shown that due to the timeframe – the OMC/SI was launched very quickly, whereas the pensions and OMC/H-LTC developed much more slowly – the former was able to create a considerable degree of commitment, even in the first years, and initial procedural effects (boosting statistical capacity and actor in-

(8) The abstracts of the articles published in the *Revue belge de sécurité sociale/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Sociale Zekerheid* (2000 – 2010) were scanned on the presence of key words such as ‘Méthode ouverte de coordination’, ‘Open Method of Coordination’ and ‘coopération ouverte’. These articles were selected if the abstract revealed that OMC was at the centre of the analysis (rather than simply mentioned).

volvement) became apparent. Actors needed more time to embrace the OMC/P and OMC/H-LTC, but the seeds were sown. The next section explains more recent developments.

## **2. THE 'STREAMLINED' SOCIAL OMC (2006-2010): TIME FOR HARVEST**

As explained above, the three sectoral strands of the 'Social OMC', covering social inclusion (since 2000), pensions (since 2001), and health and long-term care (since 2004), were 'streamlined' into a single overarching process in 2006. The main purpose was to enhance 'the quality and coherence' of 'socio-economic governance of the EU' and make the cooperation on social protection 'more efficient and less burdensome' (European Commission, 2003, p. 4). By bringing together three social policy fields which are substantially interdependent but often treated separately in institutional terms, many hoped that synergies could be generated and the treatment of complex and multi-dimensional challenges improved. In effect, "the policy discussion in 2006-10 devoted significant attention to the questions of whether the three strands communicated with each other and decreased coordination costs, or, alternatively, whether it was just a familiar case of 'EU spin' trying to construct distinct areas as single policy" (Barcevcicius et al., 2014).

A range of scholars and stakeholders have questioned streamlining has achieved any of its goals, and some even claim that 'it is not apparent that the combination of the social inclusion, pensions and healthcare processes has produced any added value' (Armstrong, 2010, p. 293). Perhaps this explains why many actors in our online survey support the streamlining of the three strands, but are at the same time convinced that that it had not been implemented in Belgium during the period under scrutiny (2006-2010).

### **2.1. THE OMC SOCIAL INCLUSION PROCESS: AN EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE**

Does the lack of enthusiasm for streamlining imply that Belgian actors rejected the revamped OMC process in the 2006-2010 period? The contrary seems to be the case: during our 2010 round of interviews, 20 respondents were explicitly asked whether they would, having considered the advantages and costs of their investment in the OMC, be in favour of abandoning the process. It may come as some surprise that *not a single respondent* expressed a preference for 'abandoning' the OMC. As we will see in the sections below, most actors seem to agree that the NSR process has led to tangible results in Belgium, and is therefore largely believed to be valuable. In other words: it seems that the attitude towards the Social OMC was critically positive. What is it then, that leads most actors to commit to continuing this process? We first turn to the Social Inclusion OMC.

### **2.1.1. Organisation of the Inclusion strand: towards quality of participation**

Section 1.1. described how involvement of stakeholders in the preparation of the NAP/SI matured step by step. This continued in the 2006-2012 period: thus, the Actions Task Force met ten times to discuss several drafts of the 2008-2010 NSR, thereby providing for continued involvement of stakeholders, and rather intense inter-institutional coordination, throughout the writing process. As it seemed necessary to create a platform where regional and federal decision-makers could meet 'on their own' (i.e. without the stakeholders), a smaller group was created that brought together administrations and government representatives.

There has been some participation by local actors through the Actions Task Force (social inclusion strand), but one of our respondents explained that it has become increasingly difficult to convince local actors to continue to take part in these (very technical) discussions, also because the OMC infrastructure changes so quickly that it is hard for people to stay up to speed (*Interview*, REG/MIN). The Federal Parliament was involved in the NSR Inclusion – for the first time – in June 2008: during this period of finalisation of the NSR Inclusion, the representative of the federal government (State Secretary) as well as other key stakeholders from the regions (minister, representative from the administration and national and regional anti-poverty networks) took part in a Parliamentary session. According to an assessment of stakeholder involvement in the Social OMC, 'This was an important event, enabling Parliament to discuss the proposed plan on fighting poverty. Following the adoption of the plan in July 2008, information sessions with specific committees of the Parliament were also organised' (INBAS and ENGENDER, 2010, p. 52).

Thus, Belgian authorities learned that their 'participatory model' could be further improved so as to raise the 'quality of participation', a notion that is now promoted by the EC so as to further increase pressure on the Member States in this respect (CEC, 2009). This by no means implies that the work is done. Several of our interviewees still refer to 'pro forma consultation' (e.g. *Interview*, REG/MIN) or use similar terms to describe the situation whereby – in their view – the meetings of the Task Forces do not allow stakeholders (let alone people experiencing poverty) to really take part in the discussions. Since there are no standards for participation in Belgium, it is difficult to assess this in an objective way, but the 2008-2010 NSR indeed recognises that, in spite of real progress, much work still needs to be done in this respect.

### **2.1.2. Procedural effects: indicators, targets and 'light' steering effects**

Section 1.1 described how the commitment to the Social OMC had a major impact on statistical capacity building in Belgium. A similar effect can be identified in a related area: *target-setting*. In the NSR 2006–2008, Belgium proposed a set of quan-

titative targets: this was in fact the very first time that Belgium formally committed itself to explicit targets in this area. What is perhaps even more important is that these targets cover some of the most difficult policy areas in terms of the internal sharing of competencies. Thus, targets address housing, education and employment, which are mainly subnational (regional) competencies, but with important federal involvement.

The fact that these targets formally exist by no means implies that they have been thoroughly discussed, let alone that they are a main driver for policymaking. Thus a key federal actor explained how the targets ended up in the 2006-2008 NSR: *'The day before the final inter-cabinet meeting we sent our proposal to the cabinet. It was agreed without discussion, and integrated into the NAP – we are not even sure they know what they agreed to'* (Interview, SPP/IS-POD/MI).

The target section of the 2008-2010 NSR confirms that 'light' political weight is given to these targets. In fact the latest NSR notes that no progress has been made on *any* of the social inclusion targets, as compared to the situation at the time of the previous NSR (Belgian NSR 2008-2010, pp. 13-17). The new NSR therefore re-adopts the same targets as those set previously, without, however, assessing how these could be reached. It would be wrong to conclude from this that target setting in the context of the Social OMC is of no importance for Belgium. Firstly, we will show in Section 3.5 that the practice of adopting targets had spill-over effects beyond the Social OMC. Secondly, some of our interviewees argue that the current negotiations on the National Reform Programmes (Belgian NRP, 2012) under the European Semester drastically change the position of the social (inclusion) targets: these are now more frequently addressed and are being discussed far more seriously by social and economic policymakers (Interview, FPS/SS). Thirdly, the importance of having overall 'Belgian' targets (and *not* subnational ones) in the NSRs cannot be overestimated: it is widely acknowledged that pursuing each of these national targets – at some point in time – requires follow-up measures in different policy areas and at different levels of government. This in turn strengthens the demand for coordination at federal level.

A third procedural effect of Belgium's commitment in the Social Inclusion strand is that *federal administrations acquired an important role* in the process. Thus, the meetings and proceedings of the aforementioned Actions and Indicator Task Forces are prepared and chaired by federal civil servants, from the Federal Social Integration and Social Security administrations, respectively. In addition, the federal Social Integration administration interpreted its role very broadly in setting the abovementioned national targets, convincing the other levels of government to play along. The same is true for the decision on the priorities of the social inclusion part of the NSR (Interview, SPP/IS-POD/MI). The least one can say is that the federal level has

regained – through the new institutional structures described for the purpose of the Social OMC – a better overview of the poverty policies of the Belgian Regions and the Communities (based on cultural and linguistic differences: the Flemish, French- and German-language Communities). But one could also speak of a ‘light steering effect’ or a ‘more active vertical coordination’ than in the past.

A fourth procedural effect of the Social Inclusion strand of the OMC derives from the fact that, on paper at least, the aforementioned Indicators and Actions Task Forces are meant to *monitor and evaluate* the social inclusion strand of the NSRs. To this end, a monitoring instrument for the NAP/SI was set up by the federal Social Integration administration. At the time of the 2006-2008 NSR, there was some hope that external (EU) pressure on those involved in social policymaking would contribute to a mind shift in this respect. Since the 2008-2010 NSR, however, we know that the Social OMC perhaps contributed to a ‘spirit of evaluation’ in Belgian social inclusion policymaking (Morissens and Nicaise, 2007, p. 17), but important technical and other obstacles still impede the implementation of genuine monitoring of measures.

There is some evidence that the preparation of the NAPs/SI has led to increased efforts to *coordinate and streamline policy initiatives across social inclusion sectors* within the Brussels Region. After the 2006-2008 NSR the Brussels government announced that it would start elaborating strategic poverty reports as of 2008, which – according to the coordinator of the Brussels Region part of the NAP/SI – would probably not have happened without the EU (*Interview, REG/MIN*). The influence of the Social OMC on the emergence of the Brussels Poverty Report is also evident from the draft piece of legislation that proposed it (Béghin, 2005): a large part of the legitimisation consists of references to the OMC. The Brussels Poverty Report (which includes a bi-annual Action Plan against Poverty), was issued for the first time in 2008. It not only refers to the EU process, but it also uses the Laeken indicators wherever possible, pushing (hard) for the oversampling of EU-SILC so that the indicators can be applied to Brussels.

### **2.1.3. Substantive effects: soft governance in social inclusion acquires ‘bite’**

In addition to undeniable procedural effects, the OMC triggered quite a direct policy shift: the arrival of child poverty in the political arena. The 2007 Joint Report highlighted that the third policy priority in the Belgian NSR 2006-2008 was ‘to tackle child poverty by breaking the poverty cycle’ (CEC, 2007). According to Morissens et al. (2007, p. 5) ‘*the choice of child poverty as one of the policy priorities in the Belgian NAP/Inclusion illustrates the growing influence of Europe and the OMC on the Belgian social inclusion agenda*’. Prior to its appearance in the 2006-2008 NSR, child poverty was not explicitly on the political agenda, to the point that children living in

poverty were almost invisible in the Belgian social inclusion discourse (Ibid).

Thus, child poverty has been catapulted from the OMC into the Belgian political arena through external pressure. Many actors (both governmental and stakeholders) remain sceptical towards the issue from a normative perspective: they do not think the poverty debate should be reduced to this narrow focus. In this context a trade unionist said that an ‘OMC alibi’ is not ambitious enough (*Interview*, FGVB-ABVV). At the same time, however, key actors quickly revised their position towards it and by and large embraced the concept of child poverty for *pragmatic* reasons: they feel that in spite of the risks it entails the issue helps to keep poverty on the agenda more generally (see Box 5). It is acknowledged that a number of blind spots in the knowledge about this issue were uncovered through the work on child poverty (e.g. teenage pregnancies, children’s experience of poverty, and the situation of migrant children), especially because the search for indicators only started after it was decided to select child poverty as a priority in the NAP/SI (Morissens et al., 2007, pp. 7, 23).

**BOX 5: THE AGENDA-SETTING EFFECTS OF THE CHILD POVERTY ISSUE**

During the weeks before the May 2009 European elections, a picture of a pretty girl saying ‘I wish I were a cow’ (‘Ik wou dat ik een koe was’; a slogan also broadcast on radio and television) drew attention to the assertion that ‘thanks to 41 billion European agricultural subsidies there are no cows living in poverty. But what about the 19 million poor children in Europe?’ The intense look of the ten-year-old was probably meant to underline that Flemish social democrats were serious about their ‘zero tolerance regarding child poverty’.

The Flemish Minister-President Kris Peeters launched himself into the fight against child poverty by naming the issue as one of the desired priorities of Belgium’s 2010 EU-Presidency (Flemish Government, 2009a, p. 13).

In its ‘Pact 2020’ the Flemish government and key stakeholders went one step further and committed themselves to a concrete target in this policy area: the intensive fight against poverty and social exclusion should result within a decade in ‘halving the number of children born in poverty’ (Pact 2020, 2009, p. 28).

At the local level, several communities picked up the issue of child poverty as a new theme, as a result of earmarked resources being made available by the federal government (e.g. a number of projects in the city of Leuven); other cities organised a European peer review on child poverty (Sint-Niklaas) or announced they would boost their efforts regarding this issue (Mechelen and Aalst) (Het Laatste Nieuws, October, November and December 2010).

Source: compiled by author.

## 2.2. THE OMC PENSIONS PROCESS: SUBSTANTIVE EFFECTS AGAINST THE ODDS

### 2.2.1. The pensions strand: 'We are not going to interview all pensioners, are we?'

The pensions chapter of the two NSRs under scrutiny was coordinated by the Federal Public Service (FPS) for Social Security, while the Cabinet of the Minister for Pensions had the ultimate responsibility. The FPS received contributions from institutions such as the Planning Bureau, the Banking, Finance and Insurance Commission (CBFA), now Financial Services and Markets Authority (FSMA) and SIGEDIS. For 'historical' reasons (read: because of institutional tensions), the National Pension Office is surprisingly enough not actively involved in the writing process, even though its data are used. Neither is the Pension Service for the Public Sector (PDOS-SdPSP), as including information on this branch is considered as 'complicating things' (*Interview*, FPS/SS). A difference between the two NSR rounds is that for the 2006-2008 report, a formal structure was set up for this inter-institutional consultation, while for the 2008-2010 NSR the other administrations simply sent their contributions (mainly data) to the SPF (*Interview*, FPS/SS).

The drawing up of the pensions chapter of the 2006-2008 NSR was confined to an 'inner circle' of policymakers (cabinet and administration). The national ministry (FPS Social Security) acted as a gatekeeper of the process, and no new actors were brought to the table. The one exception is that the Advisory Committee for the Pension Sector was formally involved, but federal civil servants (some of whom had some difficulties in remembering the actual name of the Committee during the interviews) admitted that its contribution had not been taken into account; and that some had raised questions as regards the representativeness of this pensions stakeholder organisation. A top civil servant explained that when she proposed to 'open up' the writing of the NSR, the (political) cabinet answered with a rhetorical question: 'we are not going to interview all pensioners, are we?' (*Interview*, FPS/SS).

The situation remained largely unchanged for the preparation of the 2008-2010 Belgian NSR, which explicitly recognises that considerable effort is needed in this respect (Belgian NSR 2008-2010). Note that the aforementioned Advisory Committee for the Pension Sector was again not consulted in due time regarding the 2008-2010 NSR, which led to 'a tirade' from the Committee (two interviews, FPS/SS). Even though Parliaments have not engaged in debates about the pensions strand of the Social OMC, parliamentary questions have been asked about the replacement rates (*Interview*, CAB/FED).

With such a 'closed shop' preparation, it will come as no surprise that many actors were not very satisfied about the way their contribution was taken on board in the NSR. Participation in the case of pensions is understood as 'information', namely through the social partners gathered in the CNT-NAR-NAR. Perhaps surprisingly,

our respondents from both sides of industry explained that these information sessions actually put them in a far better position than most of their European counterparts (both employers and employees), who would be even less informed. At some point employer representatives from other Member States even asked whether the Belgian employer representative in the CNT-NAR-NAR could circulate the confidential SPC and ISG documents (*Interview*, FEB-VBO).

### 2.2.2. Substantive effects in the area of Pensions: GRAPA and the Generation Pact

Our research has not been able to identify any procedural effects on pension policies in Belgium. By contrast, there seems to be wide agreement among key Belgian players that the OMC/P in substantive terms promoted a focus on a minimum pension, a three-pillar pension model (in Belgium this means: increasing the 2nd and especially the 3rd – private – pension pillar), and the actuarial neutrality of pension systems (*Interviews*, FPS/SS, PLAN and SPC). The latter idea at least seems to conflict with the dominant concept in Belgium, but, according to one Belgian SPC member, ‘it is the Commission that distils these key messages from the melting pot of very diverse policy initiatives and orientations of the Member States; namely those messages which resonate with the Commission’s concerns’ (*Interview*, SPC). According to the same Belgian SPC member ‘it has become increasingly difficult to change one word in the discourse of the European Commission’.

There are also two illustrations of revisions of national legislation as a result (or better: with the help) of the OMC. The first is the significant increase of the minimum income for elderly people (*Garantie de revenus aux personnes âgées* or ‘GRAPA’ in French in December 2006, followed by further increases afterwards). A former Belgian Minister for Pensions explains: ‘We justified the increase in the GRAPA by pointing out that the benefit levels were below the European risk-of-poverty line. Probably no one would dare to reverse that decision, since it would give the message that older people are pushed below the poverty line once again’ (*Interview*, FED/MIN).

In more recent years, the European at-risk-of-poverty norm acquired a broader mobilising character, including in budgetary negotiations (Hamel and Vanhercke, 2009). This can be seen in the fact that the minimum pension for self-employed workers was raised to the GRAPA level (*Interview*, FPS/SS), and ‘to determine whether people are entitled to free legal assistance, the European risk-of-poverty norm is also the relevant criterion now’ (*Interview*, CAB/FED).

A second tangible example of OMC influence on Belgian legislation can be seen in the 2005 Generation Pact, which was later transposed into Belgian legislation (Belgian NSR 2008-2010, pp. 117-118). One of its key negotiators from the trade

union side explained: ‘Since the European objectives already determined the priorities, actors within the CNT-NAR-NAR probably felt less compelled to ‘occupy the territory’’ (*Interview*, CNT-NAR-NAR). Another negotiator confirms: ‘It is EU pressure that led to the Generation Pact. So you could say that soft law has legal consequences, since one is obliged to take measures’ (*Interview*, CGSLB-ACLVB). It seems that trade union attitudes towards soft law are rather mixed: some use the term ‘terror of benchmarks’, while confirming that ‘they are also a very important authoritative argument, and we have learned to use them when it suits us’ (*Interview*, CSC-ACV). The Pact increased the age criterion for early retirement benefits: actors from the trade unions’ and employers’ sides involved in the process confirm that European discourse, studies, arguments and statistics played a key role in this. The Generation Pact seems to be a case where the OMC enabled political entrepreneurs to push an idea whose time had come onto the decision-making table.

According to this key trade unionist, the European debate creates ‘a context in which one can convince others that there is no other option than to talk about the need to reform the Belgian pensions system, and to find an agreement’ (*Interviews* FGTB-ABVV and CAB/FED). Comparisons with other countries, through joint econometric analysis, further reinforce the arguments for reform, as they often show that the Belgian pensions system is ‘immobile’ (for example, in comparison with Sweden or The Netherlands). As a result of this EU pressure on pension reform, ‘everyone, including the trade unions, now realises that we need a second reform, and after that a third reform’ (*Interview*, PLAN). In a similar way, OMC messages, in combination with pressure from the European Employment Strategy, have made the magnitude of the early retirement problem crystal clear to Belgian social policy makers and have contributed to an important mind-shift among trade unions: ‘The European reference framework led actors to accept early retirement as ‘the Belgian problem’ and no longer as ‘the Belgian model’ (two interviews, EMCO; for further details on the pensions OMC, see Vanhercke, 2009).

## **2.3. THE VIRTUAL REALITY OF THE OMC HEALTH AND LONG-TERM CARE**

### **2.3.1. Organisation of the *Health and Long-Term Care* strand: a closed shop**

One example of value added by the health care section of the NSR that is now being identified is that it is considered by some to be the only document in Belgium that provides a comprehensive overview (in Dutch and French) of the health care policies of all levels of government in Belgium<sup>9</sup>. Regrettably, in view of the human resources

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(9) But see the Health Care Systems in Transition (HiT) country profiles (analytical description of a health care system and of reform initiatives) produced by the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies. For more information: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/home/projects/observatory/publications/health-system-profiles-hits>.

invested in this document, only its authors are aware of its existence and thus its value-added. The NSR's health care chapter is the result of consultation between several administrations: in this case an *ad hoc* platform was created, bringing together the FPS for Social Security (which is again in charge of the overall coordination), the International Department of the FPS Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment, and the administrations of the three Communities. According to our interviewees, this (new) inter-institutional coordination improved between the two rounds of NSR. However, key institutional players such as the sickness funds and the health care providers are not involved at all, while the National Institute for Health and Disability Insurance (INAMI-RIZIV) contribution is largely formal. Actors from other-than-social-policy fields have not been involved in the elaboration of the different sections of the NSRs: it is quite striking, for example, that the Finance Ministry is not involved, at all, in the drafting of the health care (or pensions) section. In terms of stakeholder participation the drafting of the health care section of the NSR can hardly be considered as a model: it only involves administrations.

In sum, while the 'quality' of stakeholder involvement in the Belgian NSR evolved considerably over the past decade in the field of inclusion, a lot of progress is still to be made, especially in health care, and pensions: these are increasingly closed shops. Clearly, the very modest efforts undertaken by the administration to involve stakeholders depend, partially but crucially, on the importance given to this European exercise by the (political) cabinet and thus, ultimately, by the Ministers. According to several of our interviewees, this 'interest' from consecutive Pensions Ministers in the OMC has steadily declined, to put it mildly (*Interview, FPS/SS*). In the case of health care, it was simply never there, confirming the picture of the healthcare OMC as 'virtual reality'.

### **2.3.2. Procedural effects in Health Care: a missed window of opportunity**

As explained in the previous section, the FPS Social Security created a new platform for discussion between several federal and regional administrations, in order to draft the health care section of the NSR. This platform could be considered as quite unique, in the sense that there is no other platform in Belgium where all federal and Community administrations consult with one another. This is why the FPS Social Security intended to institutionalise this newly created structure, with a view to organising the follow-up and monitoring of the health care section of the NSR. This plan, however, was postponed due to the overloaded agenda of the 2010 Belgian Presidency of the EU; afterwards, the window of opportunity closed (*Interview, FPS/SS*).

### 2.3.3. Substantive effects in Health Care: looking for a needle in the haystack

There is no solid evidence confirming any substantive policy change as a result of Belgium's involvement in the OMC/H-LTC. And yet, even if this may be like 'looking for a needle in the haystack' (Vanhercke and Wegener, 2012, developments regarding the issue of health inequalities should be further considered, as they may point to a more substantive impact of the OMC. Thus, some of our interviewees claimed that the Commission's insistence on the topic of health inequalities – through the joint reports, indicator development, and an SPC Opinion as well as through PROGRESS funding in support of innovative action in this field, etc. – led to increased awareness of this topic, which was also included in the 2010 EPSCO Council Conclusions.

## 3. EXPLAINING OMC INFLUENCE: MECHANISMS OF CHANGE

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### 3.1. LEARNING BY COMPARISON AND ITERATION

A more systematic comparison with other countries is cited by most of the actors as one of the most important contributions of the Social OMC: almost invariably, our interviews confirm that the OMC has increased institutionalised awareness of policies, practices, and performances in other countries, by non-state as well as by governmental actors. The OMC makes it easier to compare performance with other countries, which has become regular practice, also among social partners (*Interview, CNT-NAR-NAR*).

Such comparison does not always happen 'out in the open', as one academic involved in the drafting of the 2003 'WAP' reform of the 2nd pensions pillar (Moniteur Belge-Belgisch Staatsblad, 2003) explained: *'Even if the inspiration from abroad is evident, it happened entirely under the radar. In one meeting the minister explicitly asked us not to refer to what we had learned from these foreign comparisons'* (*Interview, ACAD*).

Even though one of our interviewees explained that this particular example of 'learning from abroad' had taken place outside the context of the Social OMC (i.e. in bilateral meetings), another interviewee was of the strong opinion that the OMC contributed to creating a setting in which such 'looking over one's shoulder' became much easier (*Interview, FPS/SS*). One particular consequence of writing NSRs together in a country such as Belgium is that existing differences in *subnational* policymaking are more easily comparable. This is for example the case with regard to cross-sectoral policy integration in social inclusion policies: through the Social OMC the great variety between the regions was brought into the spotlight.

If and when an alteration of views occurs through participation in the OMC, it does not happen overnight, but rather gradually, through repetition of policy discourse.

One key actor explains: ‘one can imagine Europe’s influence as a trickle-down effect: Europe puts forth its ideas slowly and calmly, which allows certain issues to be brought to the table, some of which suit us, others do not’ (Interview, FGTB-ABVV). Or, as one (OMC-critical) representative of the Belgian employers’ federation put it: ‘The OMC has produced a number of fancy studies about pension systems in the Member States, and that’s it. [...] But then again if a message about social adequacy (BV) is repeated often enough, it influences our minds anyway’ (Interview, FEB-VBO).

Policy learning is one of the key goals of the PROGRESS peer reviews, even if the reasons why participants engage in peer reviews can be quite diverse (Box 6). Since the launch of the peer review exercise in 2004, Belgium has hosted seven peer reviews (the first one in 2005), while it has participated in sixteen peer reviews organised by other countries. This clearly flags Belgium as a strong supporter of the European peer review exercise, which contrasts with the overall decline in the interest of Member States during the last few years. Importantly, those respondents who have participated in a peer review are almost invariably satisfied about the information provided and the issues discussed, and would very much like to be involved more often – that is, if the peer review is directly relevant for their work, which normally means that it is as practical and detailed as possible (Interviews, PERMREP, CPAS-OCMW, FEB-VBO). Quite obviously, not all peer reviews succeed: one such review hosted by Belgium on minimum pensions (PROGRESS Peer Review on Minimum Incomes and Women’s Poverty, 20 June 2006) was described by a high-level civil servant as a ‘sad experience’, since at the end of the day ‘the other countries had a completely wrong picture of our minimum pensions and we did not know which concepts we were discussing’ (Interview, FPS/SS).

#### **BOX 6: REASONS FOR PROGRESS PEER REVIEW PARTICIPATION**

First, peer reviews sometimes help to solve a specific policy problem ‘here and now’ (Interview, REG/MIN). Thus, for the development of a ‘poverty test’ in Flanders, civil servants explained that they carefully studied the results of a peer review on Social Impact Assessment held in Slovakia in November 2008, and drew inspiration from the countries that presented their experience (Ibid).

Quite often, European peer reviews are described as a ‘general source of inspiration’ (also with regard to what not to do) that will serve ‘at some point in time’: what has been learned during the peer review will (necessarily) be combined with many other influences and ideas from other settings. In that sense, one actor is of the opinion that ‘trying to establish the ultimate proof that a peer review brought about any specific idea is like looking for the Holy Grail. The influence of the OMC is never exclusive, it brings its stone to the edifice’ (Interview, FPS/SS);

For some actors, these peer reviews help to put their own work in perspective and ‘de-dramatise’ the problems with which Belgium is faced (Interviews, PERMREP, CAB/FED); finally, one health care actor saw the in-depth peer review as an essential learning platform for European Commission officials, ‘who know very little about the health care systems of the 27 Member States and as a result underestimate the impact of their own legal proposals’ (Interview, PERMREP).

Source: OSE and PPMI (2012).

### 3.2. TRUST-BUILDING AND LEGITIMATION

For several of our interviewees it matters a great deal whether 'new' ideas emanate from the Social OMC, or derive from other sources. In the area of pensions, for example, one could argue that Belgium did not need the Social OMC to raise the issue of the financial sustainability of its pension system: the Economic Policy Committee (EPC) and the OECD had already done a fine job in this regard. And yet, key actors confirm that the feedback provided on the poor performance of Member States' pensions systems was considered far more legitimate, since the SPC and DG Social Affairs of the EC were involved, than previous reports that emanated from the EPC or the OECD alone. In other words, the OMC gave a legitimate basis to and raised awareness of difficult messages about budgetary constraints, now that they are backed up by the social wing of the process, which can be trusted.

Working together in the institutional bodies that were created to prepare the NAP/SI seems to have spilled over into 'conscious learning from each other, between the regions' (*Interview*, REG/MIN), for example with regard to involving in policymaking people who have experienced poverty (*Interview*, FPS/SS). Again, increased trust between the parties involved plays a key role: *we can be a bit sharper towards each other, now that we know each other and know what to expect. [...] We can do so, because people feel safer now* (*interview*, CAB/FED). The national coordinators of the Belgian NAP/SI indeed see an increase in interregional exchanges, and refer to 'a kind of OMC within Belgium', which is accompanied by increased informal contacts between regional and federal civil servants (*Interview*, SPP/IS-POD/MI), a new feature in Belgian social policymaking (*Interview*, NET/POOR). In principle this could also happen without the OMC, but the number of places with a broader view on the whole country, and where exchanges of ideas are possible, have become scarce.

### 3.3. LEVERAGE: GAMES REAL ACTORS PLAY

Clearly, messages from the Social OMC do not simply 'fall' into the domestic arena. The pension replacement rates, for example, were seized on and widely covered in the press by the president of the Flemish social democrats (sp.a) during the run-up to the federal elections in 2007. Johan Vande Lanotte indeed promised that his party would raise the pension replacement rate to an average of 70% (Knack, 31 January 2007, p. 10). The idea was immediately picked up by the president of the French-speaking socialists (Parti Socialiste), who declared that his party aimed at a replacement rate of 75% (*Interview*, CAB/FED). As the former Head of Cabinet of the Minister for pensions explained: *'the OMC was used to make the issues at stake in the elections clearer and increase the pressure in view of the upcoming governmental negotiations* (*Interview*, CAB/FED). These pension replacement rates are being actively used by trade unions to raise an issue to the decision-making agenda, no-

tably to show that Belgian pensions are relatively low in comparison to other countries (Swaerts, 2004, p. 14; *Interview*, CNT-NAR-NAR). Box 7 below illustrates – through the empirical example of pension replacement rates – how process tracing, combining in-depth interviews with key actors and detailed documentary research, contributes to understanding the impact of the Social OMC.

One illustration of how to ‘use Europe’ in the field of social inclusion is provided by the revamped Brussels Barometer, which is now part of the Brussels Poverty Report. One (OMC-sceptical) interviewee explained that since this Barometer uses the Laeken indicators and speaks euro-speak (notably child poverty), its political messages acquire far more resonance. As discussed above, some actors ensured that the EU poverty norm would spill over from the Social OMC into a number of adjacent policy areas. One trade unionist explains: ‘at our congress in 2002 we demanded that all the minima in social security should be raised to 60 per cent of the median income’ (*Interview*, CSC-ACV). A draft resolution adopted by the Senate in November 2007 used the European poverty norm to propose an increase of social security and minimum benefits to this level (Sénat de Belgique-Belgische Senaat, 2007).

**BOX 7: TRACING THE INFLUENCE OF THE SOCIAL OMC: THE CASE OF PENSION REPLACEMENT RATES**

A former Director-general at the Ministry for Social Affairs, who had been responsible for writing two of the Belgian National Strategic Reports on pensions, made a strong statement during an interview<sup>10</sup>. He claimed that the influential Study Committee on Ageing (‘Study Committee’) was influenced, in the calculation of its pension replacement rates, by the work done on this topic in the Social Protection Committee’s Subgroup on Indicators.

This came as some surprise, since another highly informed civil servant, working at the Banking, Finance and Insurance Commission, had explained in a previous interview that the Study Committee had been using replacement rates before the ISG subgroup started working on this topic (in 2003), and that it did so based on calculations of the Planning Bureau<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, this respondent did not see a significant influence coming from the OMC.

The question then is: how do we account for these apparently contradictory pieces of information provided by two highly informed civil servants?

The initial Annual Reports of the Study Committee seem to confirm the ‘no influence’ scenario: macro-economic replacement rates for pensions have been used by the Study Committee as of its first report in 2002<sup>12</sup>, i.e. immediately after the formal launch of the pensions strand of the Social OMC, and before the ISG started working on this topic. These macro-economic replacement rates (the rate between average pension and the average income of different categories of active persons in a given year) are calculated by the Planning Bureau in the context of their involvement in the Economic Policy Committee (EPC)’s Working Group on Ageing.

(10) Interview, Former Director General, Federal Public Service for Social Security, 14 December 2010.

(11) Interview, Member of Management Committee, Banking, Finance and Insurance Commission, 2010.

(12) Comité d’Etude sur le Vieillessement, *Rapport annuel 2002*, Brussels: Conseil Supérieur des Finances, p. 57 / Studiecommissie voor de Vergrijzing, *Jaarlijks verslag 2002*, Hoge Raad van Financiën, p. 58.

However, an examination of the Study Committee's following Annual Reports tells a different story. Thus, the 2004 Annual Report explains that the replacement rates examined are now based on the contribution of the Belgian delegation to the ISG's first report on prospective pension replacement rates<sup>13</sup>. The Study Committee's Annual report of 2005 then combines the previously developed macro-economic replacement rates with the micro-economic replacement rates developed in the context of the OMC. The latter reflect the level of pension income the first year after retirement as a percentage of individual earnings at the moment of take-up of pensions. The Study Committee's 2008 Annual Report continues to use both types of replacement rates, but "micro economic" replacement rates are now labelled "theoretical", using OMC jargon. The Study Committee's 2009 and 2010 Annual Reports, finally, present a number of indicators taken from EU-SILC, including aggregate replacement rates (a comparison is made with neighbouring EU Member States as well as the EU 25) and the 'at-risk-of-poverty' rate for persons aged 65 years and over.

In sum, it seems that both our interviewees were right about 'their' side of the story: while the Study Committee on Ageing continued to use the calculations from the Federal Planning Bureau, their analysis was further enriched (and thus influenced), first by the ISG's theoretical replacement rates and later by EU-SILC indicators.

Source: compiled by author.

In a similar vein, the fact that Belgian policymakers did actually adapt their ways of doing things with regard to actor involvement (see Sections 1.1. and 2.1.1.) is no coincidence. The coordinator of the Belgian NAP/SI explains: 'The sector of organisations where the poor take the floor constantly refer to participation in the NAP/SI to underline the fourth Nice Objective concerning the mobilisation of actors. [...] 'Mobilisation' works as leverage, a powerful argument' (*Interview, SPP/IS-POD/MI*).

The fact that this strategy has actual consequences is illustrated by the Walloon Combat Poverty Forum, which 'drew inspiration from its Flemish counterparts, which have been structurally involved in the NAP/SI for a long time, and are now being invited to participate in the meetings' (*Interview, SPP/IS-POD/MI*). The Combat Poverty Forum is now entitled to structural funding as well. 'In this way the OMC provides stakeholders with a place in policymaking they never obtained before' (*Ibid*). In other words, it seems that the OMC 'gives legitimacy to participation' (*Interview REG/MIN*).

### 3.4. MAINSTREAMING POLICYMAKING

Whereas the design and follow-up of the first Belgian NAP/SI had to some extent been 'disconnected from "mainstream" policymaking and evaluation fora' (Nicaise et al., 2003), the OMC/SI more recently acquired strong 'ownership' (Morissens and Nicaise, 2007, p. 4). And whereas there used to be some competition between the NAP/SI on the one hand and the biannual reports on the evolution of pover-

(13) Social Protection Committee, Current and prospective pension replacement rates, Brussels, 2004.

ty produced by the Resource Centre on the other hand, a key actor explains that there is now also a clear ‘division of labour’ between the two plans (*Interview, SPP/IS-POD/MI*). A further indication of the ‘mainstreaming’ of the social inclusion strand is that the ‘Indicators’ and ‘Actions’ Task Forces are increasingly integrated into pre-existing national coordination mechanisms, such as the Inter-Ministerial Conference (IMC) for Social Integration, which was set up to achieve greater coherence in social inclusion policies<sup>14</sup>. In other words, the social inclusion strand of the Social OMC has been increasingly embedded into the mainstream policy architecture at the national level and thereby increased its influence. No such mainstreaming or integration is taking place in the fields of pensions or health care.

### 3.5. DISSEMINATION OF THE OMC TOOLBOX: TOWARDS A GOVERNANCE TEMPLATE?

One of the more recent mechanisms through which the OMC is strengthening its domestic impact in Belgium is the dissemination of the OMC toolbox to a range of policy fields and levels of government. The 2008 federal governmental agreement referred, for the first time, to ‘increasing the replacement rate’ of pensions (Federal Government, 2008, p. 13). The practice of organising peer reviews on a variety of topics has been spreading at the federal level (e.g. on the ‘Communication on Pension Rights in Europe’, ONP and ESIP, 2010), at the regional level such as on integrated services for target groups, access to housing and inclusive education (Flemish Parliament, 2010, p. 11), and also at the local level (including on child poverty).

The 2010 Policy Memorandum, from the Flemish minister for Poverty Reduction, Ingrid Lieten, contains multiple references to OMC instruments (National Action Plan, indicators, child poverty, European and Flemish peer reviews, benchmarking, etc.). In the same Policy Memorandum, the at-risk-of-poverty norm is confirmed as the dominant threshold when the Vice Minister-President uses it as a benchmark to raise ‘all minimum benefits’ (Flemish Parliament, 2010, p. 12). In other words, the OMC is not simply ‘referred to’ in this regional government programme; in this case its content has also impacted its level of ambition.

The Flemish ‘Pact 2020’ (see Section 2.1.3.) represents a commitment by the entire regional government, the employers’ organisations and the unions (united in the Social Economic Council of Flanders, SERV) as well as a variety of associations from civil society, to twenty quantified objectives. For each of these targets, the Pact stipulates how progress will be measured, how indicators are defined, which sources are used, etc. (Pact 2020, 2010). One of the objectives of ‘Pact 2020’ is to ensure that every family in Flanders has an income above the European poverty line by 2020.

(14) The IMC for Social Integration is entrusted with the design and monitoring of coordinated government policies at all levels of government. It is supposed to meet at least twice a year, but this varies a great deal.

What about the use of OMC *in policy areas outside the immediate scope* of the Social OMC? In 2004, the Flemish Minister for Equal Opportunities (Kathleen Van Brempt) launched an ‘OMC’ in equal opportunities to integrate the policies of the different departments (Flemish Government, 2004, pp. 23-25). Interestingly, the use of the OMC as a governance tool in the area of equal opportunities has been codified, in 2008 in a Decree (Flemish Parliament, 2008). The Decree transposes several EU equal treatment Directives into Flemish legislation and thereby provides the overall framework for the Flemish equal opportunities and equal treatment policy (see Box 8).

**BOX 8: A FLEMISH OMC IN EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES**

The Flemish Policy Memorandum defines this Flemish OMC as ‘a learning process in which explicit, clear, and mutually agreed equal opportunity objectives are defined, after which ‘peer review’ enables the policy entrepreneurs in the various Flemish issue areas to examine best practices’; and to learn from each other’s successes and failures (Flemish Parliament, 2010, p. 12).

Each minister in the Flemish government is invited to set equal opportunity objectives, which should be translated into (realistic and ambitious) benchmarks; quantifiable indicators will be used to measure progress (Ibid).

The OMC toolbox is considered part of ‘coordinated and coherent’ policymaking in this area: this includes strategic objectives (Ibid, Article 9), as well as an integrated action plan (Ibid, Article 10) which should be updated every two years and should include for each policy area, operational objectives, a time schedule, analysis, actions, indicators, and the planned resources and instruments (Ibid, Article 10, Sections 1-6).

The current Flemish Minister for Equal opportunities started a new cycle of the OMC in this area for the period 2010 – 2014 with updated objectives; his Policy Memorandum refers 24 times to the OMC (Flemish Government, 2009b).

Source: compiled by author.

The Walloon Government equally discovered the OMC for regional policymaking. The 2004 – 2009 governmental agreement launched the renewed ‘Contrat d’Avenir’ (contract for the future) as an ‘innovative governance method’ that is wrapped up in OMC-speak (Walloon Government, 2004). The agreement refers to ‘transversal strategic plans’, ‘qualitative and quantitative targets’ which will need ‘systematic monitoring’ through ‘impact indicators’, ‘reporting’ and ‘enforced evaluation’. Note that a group of more than 100 Belgian economists proposed at the beginning of 2008, that the coordination of regional employment policies be backed “by agreed-upon regional targets and mutual surveillance, in a way similar to the Open Method of Coordination (be it with a higher degree of enforceability than in the EU case)”<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, they suggest that redistributive policies should be benchmarked through

(15) Reforming the Belgian institutions: Combining flexibility and coordination, 26 January, 2008, p. 5. [http://www.cairn.info/load\\_pdf.php?ID\\_ARTICLE=RPVE\\_481\\_0035](http://www.cairn.info/load_pdf.php?ID_ARTICLE=RPVE_481_0035).

social security (regional transfers): this can be done “within Belgium, but also relative to other regions in Europe” (Ibid, p. 6).

It is equally noteworthy that some local communities and Public Centres for Social Assistance (CPAS-OCMW) are ‘picking up’ elements from the social inclusion OMC (see Box 9).

**BOX 9: LOCAL ‘OPEN COORDINATION’ IN SOCIAL INCLUSION**

The largest Public Centres for Social Assistance, in the City of Antwerp, described their ambition (‘strategic plan,’ October 2010) to reduce the number of early school leavers to a maximum of 10%, and the proportion of people living below the poverty line to 25% by 2020 (Het Laatste Nieuws, 13 October 2010, p. 19).

The Public Centre for Social Welfare of the city of Leuven explicitly adopted the same 3 key priorities as the 2006-2008 Belgian NAP/SI as this ‘made it easier to justify the Policy Memorandum 2007-2012. So in a way, Europe is a trick’ (Interview, CPAS-OCMW). At the same time, child poverty was put on the local political agenda as a new issue, together with the search for good practices at local level (OCMW Leuven, 2007).

The Public Centre for Social Assistance of Laakdal equally refers to the NAP/SI 2006-2008 and its implementation, as well as to housing targets (OCMW Laakdal, 2008). Its Secretary sees the European framework as a useful source of inspiration which ‘puts things in perspective’ (Interview, CPAS-OCMW).

The community of Chapelle-Lez-Herlaimont chose to re-form its pre-existing local practices (an ‘integrated approach’ with regard to social exclusion, coordination of local stakeholders, and mutual learning between actors) as a ‘local OMC’.

Source: compiled by author.

Obviously not every OMC process is a success story. In 2008, Belgium’s official news agency Belga, gave a report about a newly to be created OMC with regard to ‘ethical behaviour’ in sports: sports federations would have a large degree of responsibility while trying to live up to jointly agreed ‘guidelines’ (Belga, 12 November 2008). This OMC was never heard of again. The same is true for the OMC proposed by Olivier de Schutter (2002) for implementing the fundamental rights set out in the Charter of fundamental rights.

#### **4. WRAPPING THINGS UP: AN OMC FOR ALL POLICIES IN BELGIUM?**

Even though none of the more than 50 Belgian key actors we interviewed claimed that the OMC was revolutionising domestic social policymaking, those working in the areas of social inclusion and pensions see the OMC as a useful governance template in federal, regional and local policymaking, notably with a view to organising coordination to tackle complex horizontal co-ordination issues in cross-cutting policy areas. None of the key actors involved were in favour of abandoning the process. The use of the OMC tools has spilled over to other policy areas (e.g. equal

opportunities), and has become institutionalised, including through (regional) legislation. While actors try to use the OMC tools to pursue their own ambitions, their opinions, behaviour and interests then change, *inter alia* because gaps in knowledge become apparent.

And yet, some important observations need to be made, since the OMCs' operation and influence varies a great deal across issue area and time.

In the area of social inclusion we identified two sets of effects which can be attributed to the OMC. Firstly, and probably least surprising, the OMC has caused procedural changes, including a boost in statistical capacity building. One key spill-over effect is that the European 'way of doing things' stimulates learning about one's own practices (a mirror effect), through prudent yet significant intra-regional policy learning. As a result of EU pressure as well as learning, participation in this OMC has step-by-step led to the strengthening and institutionalisation of stakeholder involvement, both in the OMC and in social inclusion policymaking more generally, especially in Brussels and Wallonia. The OMC/SI also facilitated 'horizontal coordination': increased cross-sectoral coordination initiatives in the Brussels Regions. Another striking finding is that the Social OMC preserves the key role of the federal level (through its coordination role for the NSR and its underpinning Task Forces), even in a policy area such as inclusion, which has largely been transferred to the Regions. This finding confirms the general conclusions of Beyers and Bursens (2006) that because of European integration the Belgian central government remains an influential actor, even with respect to issues outside its competences.

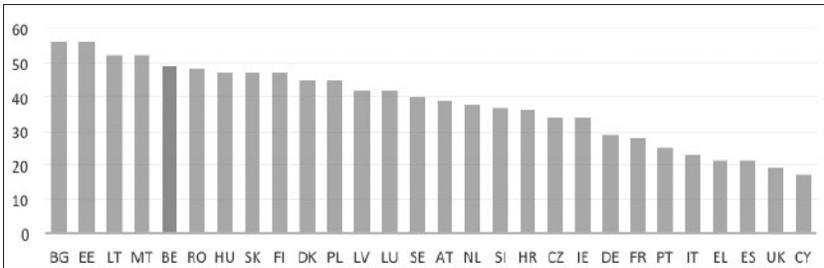
This article provides equally strong evidence for *substantive* shifts in social inclusion policies. First, participation in the OMC raised the profile of the poverty issue on the political agenda in Belgium. It provided bargaining arguments in budgetary negotiations (e.g. legitimisation for a significant increase in minimum income for the elderly). We have also presented compelling evidence that the OMC/SI pushed child poverty as a new issue onto policy agendas, despite rather strong initial resistance in this country. Furthermore, participation in this OMC convinced domestic social inclusion policy makers of the utility of adopting 'targets', even though their implementation and monitoring remains problematic.

The article has shown that the OMC's impact in the area of pensions is equally undeniable. In Belgium, this soft form of policy coordination provides the chance to create 'windows of opportunity', which policy makers use, together with other tools available, in their efforts to discuss, manage and reform pension systems. Most importantly, the article showed that the OMC influences the acceptance of compelling problems, so that decision makers pay serious attention to them. Thus, the gradual accumulation of ideas in the OMC (including the development of repla-

cement rates) altered actors' views with regard to active ageing, while the impact of the Social OMC on policy decisions was reflected in the increase of minimum pensions (GRAPA) and the Generation pact. Still, the OMC/P, and especially the drafting of the relevant section of the NSR, remains a task confined to a very small group of people.

By contrast, there is no convincing evidence that the OMC/H-LTC has had any significant effects (whether administrative or substantive) in the area of health and long term care. This strand remains a largely virtual process, only known to a very small circle of – mostly federal – civil servants. The more general group of health care actors is largely unaware of the process, which is struggling with a very low level of ownership. The existence of several competing EU soft governance processes (Vanhercke and Wegener, 2012) explains why the healthcare strand has not been picked up so far, nor is it likely that this will change in the foreseeable future.

The finding that the Social OMC has a considerable impact in Belgium is consistent with what we have described in the introduction: Belgium can be considered as a 'most likely case' in terms of OMC impact. The main reason for this is that in terms of its temporal dynamic, 'the self-transformation of the Belgian social insurance system, due to the particular institutional makeup of the Belgian polity, proceeded gradually, cumulatively and effectively by stealth' (Hemerijck and Marx, 2010). Soft instruments such as the OMC fit well with such a gradual reform process, with the Belgian informal decision-making culture and the positive general attitude towards the EU: when asked about respondents' level of trust in the EU, in Eurobarometer surveys, Belgium has amongst the highest scores, compared to the other 27 Member States (see Figure 2). The positive attitude towards the EU is also present among the decision-making political elite, who have repeatedly called for greater EU involvement, more particularly in social policies. Thus, the Belgian delegation tabled a proposal to the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference, with a view to proposing EU policy coordination on social protection, similar to the European Employment Strategy (Armstrong, 2010, p. 59). The Belgian Presidency of the European Union in 2001 provided a window of opportunity to revisit those earlier ambitions and deliver on them.

**FIGURE 2:** POPULATION TRUSTING THE EUROPEAN UNION (%)

Source: Eurobarometer public opinion in the European Union, autumn 2013.

Moreover we have explained how the momentum created by the Belgian Presidency of the EU in 2001 spurred ‘commitment’ to the process, including from academics who largely contributed to developing the OMC’s detailed architecture.

Crucially, this article has highlighted the importance of time when addressing the OMCs’ operation and impact. While the initial period (2000-2005) already showed the early, mostly procedural, effects of the OMC/SI, this period especially helped to sow the seeds of commitment to the Social OMC amongst a wide range of actors. The full procedural as well as substantive impact only materialised in the period 2006-2010, which we therefore called ‘time for harvest’: namely through mechanisms such as learning through comparison, trust-building, leverage, mainstreaming, and the dissemination of the OMC toolbox beyond its initial remit. The OMC seems to have mattered after all.

Whether or not the (recently ‘reinvigorated’) Social OMC will continue to play its part under the Europe 2020 strategy remains to be seen. But at first sight, its future seems guaranteed, especially in view of the sixth reform of the Belgian State, better known as the (hard-fought) ‘Butterfly Agreement’ of 11 October 2011. This reform, which is currently being implemented, will significantly extend regional competences in Belgium in social policies (Accord institutionnel, 2011). Thus family allowances and key components of health care policies (including hospital policy and long-term care) are further regionalised, and so are key employment policies. In other words, the need for policy coordination both internally and vis-à-vis the EU will increase even further. If – and only if – extensive regional powers in Belgium continue to coincide with a high level of cooperative behaviour, the new state reform raises the prospect of an ‘OMC for all policies’ in Belgium.

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**APPENDICES**


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**APPENDIX 1. LIST OF INTERVIEW PARTNERS (2007/2008 AND 2010)**

Abbreviation	Institution	No. respondents
ACAD	Academic	2
CAB/FED	Cabinet of federal Minister or State Secretary	7
CBFA	Banking, Finance and Insurance Commission	1
CGSLB-ACLVB	Liberal trade Union Organisation (Studies Dept.)	2
CNT-NAR	National Labour Council	3
CPAS-OCMW	Public Centre for Social Welfare	2
CSC-ACV	Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (Studies Dept.)	2
EC	European Commission	4
EMCO	EU Employment Committee	4
FEB-VBO	Federation of Belgian Enterprises	2
FED/MIN	Federal Minister or State Secretary	2
FGTB-ABVV	Belgian General Federation of Labour (Studies Dept.)	3
FPS/SS	Federal Public Service ('Ministry') for Social Security	3
ISG	Indicators Subgroup (SPC)	2
NET/POOR	Network of associations where the Poor take the floor	1
PERMREP	Permanent Representation of Belgium to the EU	1
PLAN	Federal Planning Bureau	1
REG/MIN	Regional Ministry for Social Integration	7
SPC	Social Protection Committee	6
SPP/IS-POD/MI	Federal Planning Public Service (Ministry) for Social Integration, Combating Poverty and Social Economy	3
	<b>TOTAL</b>	58

**APPENDIX 2. LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CCE-CRB	Central Economic Council
CNT-NAR	National Labour Council
CPAS-OCMW	Public Centre for Social Welfare
CSC-ACV	Confederation of Christian Trade Unions
EAPN	European Anti-Poverty Network
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
EU-SILC	European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions
FEB-VBO	Federation of Belgian Enterprises
FGTB-ABVV	Belgian General Federation of Labour
FPS	Federal Public Service ("Ministry")
FSMA	Financial Services and Markets Authority
GRAPA	Minimum Income for Elderly People
INAMI-RIZIV	National Institute for Health and Disability Insurance
NAP/SI	National Action Plan against poverty and social exclusion
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRP	National Reform Programme
NSR	National Strategic Report on social protection and social inclusion
NSR/P	National Strategy Report/Pensions
OMC/H-LTC	Open Method of Co-ordination/Health and Long term Care
OMC/P	Open Method of Co-ordination/Pensions
OMC/SI	Open Method of Co-ordination/Social Inclusion
PROGRESS	Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity
Social OMC	Open Method of Co-ordination in social protection and social inclusion
SPC	Social Protection Committee
SPP Intégration Sociale/ POD Maatschappelijke Integratie	(Federal) Planning Public Service for Social Integration, Combating Poverty and Social Economy

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