



Open Method of Coordination in the European Union: A Trojan Horse – But who is the rider?

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Introduction

There seems to be another spectre in Europe, this time it has a little bit of a hydra. The original name was «governance», seemingly a new born child, supposedly the successor of «governing». The parents seem to be a large E, standing for Europe and a U, meaning Union. And there are children, living directly together with the parents – the many EU-committees, hearings and other bodies which claim to make EUrope open to all. And other of these children can be found in the member states, some of them being closely linked to their EUropean kin. They all reject the old-style idea of government, which they see as «closed shop of experts and technocrats». Instead, they aim on *governance*, a stakeholder society in which all those who have their stakes in the game should have a voice accordingly.

One of these offspring's is called «Open Method of Coordination». Its insemination took place with the launch of the *Luxembourg Employment Strategy*. There, the bones saw the light of EUropean policies. And the skeleton looks like the following:

- The Commission elaborates guidelines for the area in question;
- after being accepted by the Council they are released to the member states;
- on the basis of these guidelines the member states elaborate – in a process of broad consultation – National Action Plans. These plans include an analysis of the given situation and an outline of concrete measures to tackle the given problems;
- these NAPs are sent to the Commission – there the Social Protection Committee elaborates a Joint Report. This is used for developing new recommendations and guidelines and to make concrete proposals to individual member states.
- On this basis, a new round is set into motion. Now, however, the Member States know about each other, know about the successes and failures of the siblings across the EU.

In the meantime, and in particular with the launch of the Lisbon strategy from 2002 it had been baptised «Method of Open Coordination», its nickname is OMC. The *Conclusions* of the *Lisbon Summit* – its birth certificate – read as follows:

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Implementing this strategy will be achieved by improving the existing processes, introducing a new open method of coordination at all levels, coupled with a stronger guiding and coordinating role for the European Council to ensure more coherent strategic direction and effective monitoring of progress. A meeting of the European Council to be held every Spring will define the relevant mandates and ensure that they are followed up.

The Method of Open Coordination – Outline of a Policy Instrument

Since the *Lisbon Summit* in March 2000, the Method of Open Coordination – or Open Method of Coordination, as it is commonly named – is an instrument that has its strong foothold already in the field of combating poverty and social inclusion.

In the meantime the OMC is in one or another form applied in several areas that are relevant for social professions. The following table gives an overview, stating policy field, year of introduction and the official policy statements.

Areas where the OMC is Implemented and their Orientation²

Introduced	Area	Orientation
(1997)	Employment	<p>Change of attitudes and behaviour in the widest sense</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Improving Employability</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Tackling youth unemployment and preventing long-term unemployment</i> ○ <i>Transition from passive measures to active measures</i> ○ <i>Encouraging a partnership approach</i> ○ <i>Easing the transition from school to work</i> • <i>Developing Entrepreneurship</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Making it easier to start up and run businesses</i> ○ <i>Exploiting the opportunities for job creation</i> ○ <i>Exploiting the opportunities for job creation</i> • <i>Encouraging Adaptability in Business and their Employees</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Modernizing work organization</i> ○ <i>Support adaptability in enterprises</i>

² Italics: quotes from EU-documents

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Strengthening the Policies for Equal Opportunities</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Tackling gender gaps</i> ○ <i>Reconciling work and family life</i> ○ <i>Facilitating return to work</i> ○ <i>Promoting the integration of people with disabilities into working life</i>
2000	Poverty and social exclusion ³	<p>Change of behaviour and change of structure in a short-term perspective; direct support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>to facilitate participation in employment and access by all to the resources, rights, goods and services;</i> • <i>to prevent the risks of exclusion;</i> • <i>to help the most vulnerable;</i> • <i>to mobilise all relevant bodies;</i>
2001	Pensions	<p>Change of structures in a long-term perspective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>adequacy and financial sustainability</i> • <i>improving the portability of supplementary pension rights</i> • <i>pensions forum</i>
Bp ⁴	Education	Change of structures and establishment of structural incentives to change behaviour
Bp	Youth	Change of structures in a long-term perspective
Bp; COM 2001-723; questionnaire 2002	Health/ long-term care	<p>Change of behaviour: influencing of the demographic development; change of structure: «modernisation of social security»:</p> <p><i>to examine more thoroughly the questions of access, quality and financial sustainability of systems for healthcare and long-term care of the elderly</i></p>

³ Here and in the area of employment indicators are of special relevance.

⁴ bp – being prepared

Differences in the Fields where the OMC is Applied

Though the OMC is directly mentioned in the field of health care, the understanding in this area is somewhat different. There is yet no OMC-cycle in place. In other words the regular cycle of reporting, control and recommendations is not implemented as such. Furthermore, in this area there is only a limited orientation on the involvement and activation of all actors though this is usually seen as an essential element of this instrument. There are some signs of the OMC as well in the area of education. However, rather than seeing it at this stage as another OMC it is here suggested to see it as another form of expert-consultation. At least at this stage there are no considerations of an OMC-cycle as mentioned before.

Currently we can speak of two basic patterns in which the OMC evolves.

a) On the one hand we find the «classical OMC», consisting of

- of a more or less strict cycle of
 - central guidelines
 - decentralised consultation, further development and implementation and
 - feedback into the process of central consultation, coordination and further development
- a strong orientation on the participation of all concerned actors
- embedding of developing political strategies with political action programs in the widest sense – this is another channel of involving people active in the field and it is as well a mechanism by which the activities are meant to be made known to a wider public.

b) On the other hand we are confronted with a pattern of the OMC that applies the classical pattern in a modified way. The following characteristics exist:

- a less determined cycle of
 - central guidelines
 - decentral consultation and further development and
 - feedback into the process of central coordination and further development
- a strong orientation on expert knowledge which provides the basis for central and decentralised consultations
- a more pronounced orientation on developing central «technocratic solutions», i.e. decision-making, drafting of programs and plans for legislation etc.

Furthermore it is important to mention the streamlining-procedures that had been introduced for the area of all areas of «social protection». The aim is a tightening and strong coordination

between four areas which previously had been treated separately. In the words of the Commission we read of

policy cooperation on the different strands of social protection (pensions, social inclusion, health care and making work pay).

(http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/social_protection_committee/spc_topics_en.htm#streamline_docs)

Challenges for Social Professions

So far the description of the horse.

The one possible rider does not require much explanation or comment: it is the «ruling class» – and it does not make a lot of a difference if one uses another term as for instance «political administration», «economic power groups» or «elected parliamentary representatives». With consideration of these actors the debate on *governance* can be interpreted as mock battle. We are seemingly confronted with an «increasing openness of structures». In actual fact, however, the factual structures of power are covered. Perhaps even more important is the fact that rights are fundamentally individualised. Hand in hand with the governance orientation and the OMC we find the mention of the stakeholder concept. Although it is frequently claimed that such a concept aims on the equal inclusion of all people concerned, we find in actual fact a «political version of the shareholder concept».

The other possible rider, however, is the social professions and the «clientele», «users» or better: citizenry of organisations being involved in setting up and running social policy schemes and/or social services. At this stage it is in particular the area of combating poverty/social exclusion where the OMC can be utilised as at least in some respect considerable tool for influencing social policy. The specifically valuable feature consists of the following:

- One, though not the major reason for social policy being left aside of the European agenda is that this agenda is not easily capable to deal with issues that are outside of a legalistic approach. The EU is based on law – this means as well that it cannot easily deal with matters going beyond the reach of law. However, any topics that are relevant for social professions have a perspective that goes beyond such a legalistic approach. Of course, social professions should never forget that the best argument for sound social policy comes from a firm foundation in social rights. However, social rights cannot be reduced on simple law, let alone on an administrative approach. The OMC offers at least the opportunity of bringing «soft issues» to the fore. Of course, these have to be translated at a later stage into law; however, at the initial stage this is not of major concern. What is important is the fact that the OMC allows to raise issues that usually remain outside of the remit of EU social policy.
- As well, it should be recognised that the structure of the OMC is geared to a mix between national and European policies. In many cases we found during the history of European integration a strategy of covering own inactivity by the excuse of the supposed unwillingness of the others. The OMC is potentially a means to break this circle. Especially, if it is possible to include local and regional actors and professionals in the debate and where the national level can be put under pressure from two sides, progress in combating social exclusion is possible – Ireland is one, though modest example in this respect.

- Finally – and hand in hand with the before mentioned – the OMC can be used as means of reinterpreting «evidence-based practice». According to the Anglo-Saxon experience, evidence based practice is a means to launch a policy which is guided by «techno-expertocratic knowledge»: policy development is based on empirical facts and is set into a context that feeds back into itself. Meaning is not being issued let alone that it is questioned. Instead, an «empirical circle of self-fulfilment» is established. Any activity and action which is oriented along the requirements of the established system and for which evidence can be provided within this framework is considered as feasible and justified.

On the other hand, however, it has to be seen that the framework as given by the OMC provides at least an opportunity to turn this argument around. To the extent social professions are able to enter with their (and their «client's») genuine interest the debate evidence can be re-interpreted. In that case, it is meant to reflect the authentic meaning of political measures and the actual demands they put forward to the «users» of services. – As well with regard to this process, policies in some countries can be seen as successful.

Conclusion

Though it would be entirely wrong to set too many hopes in the OMC, it is nevertheless advisable to see in the OMC at least one possible means of influencing European social policy – it can well be seen as a small Trojan horse by which issues that are of genuine interest for social professions can enter the political space of European and national social policy.

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