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Five years down the road: An evaluation of the streamlining of the Open Method of Coordination in social policy fields

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Introduction

In 2006, the EU streamlined its hitherto separated social Open Methods of Coordination (OMCs) inclusion, pension, health and long-term care. Streamlining was meant to refer to the integration of the separate OMCs into one reporting cycle, with common overarching goals. The argument in favour of streamlining was the potential for synergies of the three previously separated social OMCs. Five years down the streamlining road, we may now ask whether this potential has started to be exploited or not. Doing so, we will first present the general context of the streamlining process, move on to general evaluations of it by involved EU actors, in order to then ask four more specific questions: Do the relevant actors and documents representing any one strand of the streamlined OMC: 1) Mention the importance of the other strands? 2) Mention the common challenges between the three strands? 3) Provide arguments for synergies? 4) Provide evidence of synergies (e.g. examples of joined-up measures)? In order to answer these questions, a wide range of sources were consulted, i.e. all the official documents since 2005 of the Council, the Commission, the SPC and of European stakeholders as well as expert reports available on those websites of the Commission that relate to the streamlined Social Protection and Social Inclusion (SPSI) OMC. Concluding, we shall discuss in how far, in light of the empirical findings, the streamlining process can be seen as a measure that strengthens both anti-poverty policies and the actors involved therein.

1. OMC Streamlining: Key aspects

In 2003 already, the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines (BEPG) had become synchronized with the policy cycle of the European Employment Strategy (EES) in order to allow for synergies and coherent policies between the macro-economic and the employment coordination processes. In 2005, and in the context of the revised Lisbon Strategy, the time had come for a similar synchronisation of different cycles (inclusion, pensions, health and long-term care) of the social OMCs which followed different rhythms, yet with similar reporting obligations. As early as 2003, the European Commission had suggested the strengthening of the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy via a streamlined social OMC (CEC 2003) [1]. In its renewed Social Agenda, the European Commission reiterated that it would propose that the OMC be "rationalised and simplified" [2]. The rationalisation should include cross-cutting objectives for all three, formerly separated strands and an integrated reporting cycle. The ensuing changes became known under the heading of "streamlining". The ambition of the rationalisation processes were double: first, there should be

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1.   European Commission, 2003, Communication "Strengthening the social dimension of Lisbon strategy: Streamlining open coordination in the field of social protection", COM (2003) 261.
2.   European Commission, 2005, Communication of the Commission on the Social Agenda, COM (2005) 33 final, Brussels, 9.2.2005, p. 9.

mutual "feeding in" (contribution of social policies to growth and jobs) and "feeding out" (contribution of economic and employment policies to greater social cohesion) between the economic and employment processes on the one hand and the social processes on the other; second, there should be mutual interaction between the different strands (inclusion, pensions, health and long-term care) of the then streamlined social OMC.

What should be the advantages of such a streamlined process? By streamlining the three different social OMCs, the Commission sought to create a stronger process than had previously been the case and to associate the OMC process better to the economic and employment processes. As with the idea of "feeding in" and "feeding out" between economic and social policies and their mutual benefits, the idea was that linking inclusion, pensions and health policies would work to their mutual benefit in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and coherence. The streamlined process should thereby be strengthened politically, become more visible, and promote "good governance", not least through the involvement of a broad variety of actors in order to close the existing "gap between objective setting and policy implementation" [3].

From the evaluation of the first years of the OMC, undertaken in 2005 by a commissioned institute [4], the Commission concluded that Member States were supportive of such a rationalisation, and that they favoured a reduction of the reporting obligations while at the same time being keen on keeping somewhat distinct processes intact [5]. Besides reduced reporting duties, Member States seemed to perceive of a streamlined OMC as an opportunity to highlight common challenges and to facilitate mutual learning processes. Stakeholders, who have generally been supportive of the social OMCs in view to deepen "Social Europe", were rather in favour of a streamlined process in order for the social OMC to become more visible, to underline the "positive role played by good social protection and inclusion policies" [6] and to support more learning. However, they also cautioned that what had been achieved by the separate processes, particularly in-depth focus and, as far as the social inclusion process was concerned, the involvement of stakeholders, should not erode in a streamlined process:

- "Whilst the NAP inclusion can be heralded as a relatively good practice in consistently involving a wide-range of stakeholders, other areas of streamlining and particularly the National Reform Programme process have restricted stakeholder involvement and partnerships to government

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3. European Commission, 2006, Commission Staff Working Document, Evaluation of the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion. A synthesis of replies by Member States and other actors to an evaluation questionnaire on the Open Method of Coordination in the fields of social inclusion and adequate and sustainable pensions, SEC (2006) 345, Brussels, 8.3.2006, p. 10.
4. The Tavistock Institute, 2005, Evaluation of the Programme of Community Action to encourage co-operation between Member States to combat social exclusion. Interim Synthesis Report realised for the European Commission, September 2005.
5. European Commission, 2005, Communication of the Commission on Working together, working better: A new framework for the open coordination of social protection and inclusion policies in the European Union, COM (2005) 706 final, Brussels, 12.12.2005, p. 3.
6. Ibid., p. 4.

representatives, some social partners and with minimal participation of civil society and socially excluded people ([7]).

In regard to the substance and priorities of the streamlined OMC, the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) also raised serious concerns:

- "With the 2010 objectives still in mind, the introduction of the new streamlined approach risks reducing the clarity and precision of focus on combating poverty unless there are robust mechanisms to mainstream combating poverty throughout the National Reports (on Social Protection and Social Inclusion) and in the National Reform Programmes" ([8]).

This warning was backed by the Social Platform, the European umbrella structure of all European civil society organisations active in the social policy field:

- "A strong message from NGOs regarding the overall streamlining process is that the effectiveness of the different strands must not be sacrificed for the sake of simplicity – this would turn back the clock on progress made so far especially in the social inclusion process. Streamlining should therefore not be used to simplify planning, but rather to enable learning across the different processes where it is appropriate" ([9]).

These warnings notwithstanding, the Commission, in its Communication "Working together, working better" ([10]), proposed to streamline the fields of social inclusion, health and long-term care and pensions in order to simplify reporting procedures, achieve more coherence across policies, encourage Member States to take a more strategic, cross-cutting approach and facilitate synergy effects with the streamlined Lisbon process. In 2006, the proposal was adopted by the European Council and the new streamlined process of the Social Protection and Social Inclusion OMC (SPSI OMC) thereby started. The SPSI OMC follows a three year cycle, with three overarching objectives and three specific objectives for each policy field:

(a) Promote social cohesion and equal opportunities for all through adequate, accessible, financially sustainable, adaptable and efficient social protection systems and social inclusion policies.

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7. EAPN, 2007, Strengthening the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy. Proposals from the European Anti-Poverty Network. Brussels, July 2007, p. 11.
8. EAPN, 2006, The 2006-8 national reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion. What do they deliver for people in poverty? Report and key messages from the European Anti-Poverty Network, Brussels, p. 22.
9. Social Platform, 2005, Social Platform Contribution to the Evaluation of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on Social Protection & Social Inclusion, July 2005, Brussels, p. 2.
10. See footnote 4.

(b)   Interact closely with the Lisbon objectives on achieving greater economic growth and more and better jobs and with the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy.

(c)   Strengthen governance, transparency and the involvement of stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of policy.

The specific objectives are:

Making a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion:

(d)   Ensure the active social inclusion of all by promoting participation in the labour market and by fighting poverty and exclusion among the most marginalised people and groups.

(e)   Guarantee access for all to the basic resources, rights and social services needed for participation in society, while addressing extreme forms of exclusion and fighting all forms of discrimination leading to exclusion.

(f)   Ensure that social inclusion policies are well-coordinated and involve all levels of government and relevant actors, including people experiencing poverty, that they are efficient and effective and mainstreamed into all relevant public policies, including economic, budgetary, education and training policies and structural fund (notably ESF) programmes and that they are gender mainstreamed.

Providing adequate and sustainable pensions:

(g)   In the spirit of solidarity and fairness between and within generations, guarantee adequate retirement incomes for all and access to pensions which allow people to maintain, to a reasonable degree, their living standard after retirement.

(h)   In the context of sound public finances, ensure the financial sustainability of public and private pension schemes, notably by: supporting longer working lives and active ageing; ensuring an appropriate and fair balance of contributions and benefits; and promoting the affordability and ensuring the security of funded and private schemes.

(i)   Ensure that pension systems are transparent, well adapted to the needs and aspirations of women and men and the requirements of modern societies, demographic ageing and structural change; that people receive the information they need to plan their retirement and that reforms are conducted on the basis of the broadest possible consensus.

Ensuring accessible, high-quality and sustainable healthcare and long-term care:

(j)   Guarantee access for all to adequate health and long-term care and ensure that the need for care does not lead to poverty and financial dependency. Address inequities in access to care and in health outcomes.

(k)   Promote quality in health and long-term care and adapt care to the changing needs and preferences of society and individuals, notably by establishing quality standards reflecting best international practice and by strengthening the responsibility of health professionals and of patients and care recipients.

(l)   Ensure that adequate and high quality health and long-term care remains affordable and sustainable by promoting healthy and active life styles, good human resources for the care sector and a rational use of resources, notably through appropriate incentives for users and providers, good governance and coordination between care systems and institutions ([11]).

Based on these objectives, Member States develop their policies and priorities and report about them and their implementation in the context of National Strategic Reports (NSRs) every three years, with smaller updates of the three different policy fields in between. The domestic reports are discussed at EU-level and synthesised in a Joint Council and Commission Report. Besides the reporting system, there are common indicators and specific national indicators which allow for the monitoring of the social situation in Member States and their (non-)achievements of adopted objectives. Existing indicators have been streamlined by strand in order to

"ensure that each list covers all key dimensions encompassed in the common objectives with a reduced number of primary indicators. Within each strand portfolio, for the sake of streamlining, a reduced number of primary EU and national indicators has been suggested as a condensed set of lead indicators which cover all essential dimensions of the defined objectives and/or highlight the social situation of key sub-populations (portfolio criteria 1 and 2); whereas secondary (EU and national) indicators would support these lead indicators by providing a greater insight into the nature of the problem (portfolio criteria 3)" ([12]).

Finally, the Community program PROGRESS allows for research activities, the dissemination of results, mutual learning exercises and networking activities. After the overview of the streamlined process, let us now turn to the evaluation of the streamlining of the social OMCs.

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11. Council of the European Union, 2006, Common objectives for the streamlined SPSI OMC.
12. European Commission, 2006, Portfolio of overarching indicators and streamlined Social Inclusion, Pensions, and Health Portfolios, Brussels, 7.6.2006, p. 7.

2. General Evaluation of the Streamlining Process by EU Actors

Two years after the introduction of the streamlined SPSI OMC, the Commission issued a Communication in which it proposed to strengthen this OMC further:

"by improving its visibility and working methods, strengthening its interaction with other policies, reinforcing its analytical tools and evidence base, and enhancing ownership in Member States through peer review, mutual learning and involvement of all relevant actors. The reinforcement will in particular be achieved by adopting progressively, in agreement with the Member States, some of the successful methods applied under the Lisbon strategy" ([13]).

While the Commission generally draws a positive picture of the streamlined process (see below), the initiative to further strengthen it equally expresses concerns that it is not sufficiently delivering yet.

The Commission, in its first assessment of the streamlined SPSI OMC finds that streamlining has "led to a stronger focus on policy implementation and a positive interaction with the renewed Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs" ([14]). National Reports of 2006, launching the first cycle of the streamlined process, are judged more strategic, coherent and consistent than previous ones, with more in-depth analysis than in previous years. 2007 followed a year without full reporting. Instead, selected themes – child poverty in the social inclusion strand, longer working lives and privately managed pensions in the pensions strand, and access to health care and evolving long-term care needs in the health and long-term care strand – were dealt with in more detail. The Commission concludes that overall, the streamlined process had "served the purpose of creating a shared understanding of the issues at stake while providing Member States with helpful indications of the specific challenges to be addressed in order to achieve the common goals" ([15]).

Despite the positive overall assessment by the Commission, one also finds criticism when reading between the lines. The Commission seems to be rather unsatisfied with the usage Member States make of the commonly agreed indicators. It notes that:

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13. European Commission, 2008, Communication "A renewed commitment to social Europe: Reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion", COM (2008) 418 final, Brussels, 2.7.2008, p.2.
14. European Commission, 2008, Communication "A renewed commitment to social Europe: Reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion", COM (2008) 418 final, Brussels, 2.7.2008, p. 3.
15. European Commission, 2008, Commission Working Staff Document accompanying the Communication from the Commission "A renewed commitment to social Europe: Reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion" - Assessment, SEC (2008) 2169, Brussels, 2.7.2008, p. 8.

"the adequate use of the commonly agreed indicators is essential to support this streamlined approach. Each portfolio (overarching, social inclusion, pensions, and health) has been designed to cover all key dimensions encompassed in the common objectives with a reduced number of primary indicators. Each strand list therefore constitutes a commonly agreed condensed and comprehensive monitoring tool of a country's social situation with regards to the common objectives in each strand. Member States should therefore assess their situation using the primary level streamlined strand lists. This assessment, supported by relevant national level information, should provide a powerful tool to identify priority objectives" [16].

Despite the usually diplomatic wording of Commission documents, the message is rather clear: Member States did not explore the commonly agreed indicators to their full potential, a recurrent topic ever since the introduction of the Laeken indicators in December 2001 [17].

Some four months after the assessment of the streamlined process by the Commission, the Social Protection Committee (SPC) equally comes to a positive conclusion, noting that the "streamlining of the Social OMC is contributing to more effective policy implementation and better interaction with the Growth and Employment Strategy" [18]. However, the SPC remains so vague that it is impossible to know just what is meant with "more effective policy implementation and better interaction" and whether this has really been achieved. When reading the related documents, one therefore certainly needs to bear in mind that both the SPC and the Commission officials involved in the SPSI are political actors which seek to bring support to and strengthen a political process in a context of neoliberal restructuring of the EU and therefore have limited interest in officially documenting shortcomings or failures.

In contrast to the positive evaluations by the Commission and by the SPC, an expert report in 2008 came to a different conclusion, noting that the network of independent social inclusion experts recognised only limited and mostly implicit linkages and synergies between growth and jobs and social inclusion policies across the EU [19]. This concern was shared by EAPN who, in an early evaluation (2006) of the streamlined SPSI OMC defends that "the positive potential of streamlining to integrate dimensions of the social agenda and raise the political profile of

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16. European Commission, 2008, Portfolio of overarching indicators and streamlined Social Inclusion, Pensions, and Health Portfolios, April 2008 Update, Brussels, April 2008, p. 2.
17. See Kröger, Sandra, 2008, Soft Governance in Hard Politics. European Coordination of Anti-Poverty Policies in France and Germany. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, chap 5.
18. SPC, Brussels, 7 November 2008, Opinion of the Social Protection Committee on reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination, as adopted by the Committee at its meeting in Paris on 27 October 2008, p. 2.
19. Frazer, Hugh and Eric Marlier, 2008, "Feeding in" and "feeding out": The extent of synergies between growth and jobs policies and social inclusion policies across the EU. Key lessons. Independent overview based on the 2007 second semester national reports of national independent experts on social inclusion, 25.2.2008, available at: http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/network-of-independent-experts/2007/second-semester-2007, accessed 16.11.2010.

combating poverty and promoting inclusion has failed" ([20]). Two years later, EAPN remained critical of what had been achieved that far through streamlining:

"EAPN's view is that streamlining is currently only advantageous in administrative terms and has not been positive for developing national OMC processes on social Europe. If 'streamlining' is to remain, it is vital to guarantee the continuation of a distinct National Action Plan for Social Inclusion and explicit mainstreaming of social inclusion impact assessment through the other strands" ([21]).

The priorities in the revised Lisbon Strategy are evidently conditioned by the political majorities in the Councils since 2002-3 and framed accordingly in the revised Lisbon Strategy: "Most importantly, the re-launch of the Lisbon process in March 2005 has sharpened the context into which work on social protection and inclusion must fit. The revised Lisbon strategy concentrates on policies to boost growth and employment and seeks to overcome the implementation gap identified in the review of Lisbon" ([22]). Accordingly, the SPSI OMC has not enjoyed broad political support in most Member States and has not been used to its full potential: "The streamlined strategy required a powerful relaunch for the OMC which it did not get" ([23]). Instead, some observe a "lack of active management of its implementation as more than an administrative convenience" ([24]), and that "evidence suggests that in fact most Member States have used OMCs as a reporting device rather than one of policy development" ([25]). This analysis of the Commission is shared by EAPN who "feels that streamlining has made it more not less likely that the national activity is merely a report to the Commission - over such a big area and in such a new mechanism, the strategic task is not achievable. Nor is it evident that the status of the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion is higher now than previously ([26]).

In order to respond to these concerns and to support greater interaction between the economic and social processes and objectives, from 2008 onwards, the SPSI OMC cycle was synchronised with the Lisbon Strategy cycle. We will now turn to a more specific evaluation of the streamlined OMC by EU actors.

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20. EAPN, 2006, The 2006-8 national reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion. What do they deliver for people in poverty? Report and key messages from the European Anti-Poverty Network, Brussels, p. 23.
21. EAPN, 2008, EAPN proposals for strengthening the OMC, Brussels, 8.4.2008, p. 4.
22. European Commission, 2005, Communication Working together, working better, p. 3.
23. EAPN, 2006, The 2006-8 national reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion. What do they deliver for people in poverty? Report and key messages from the European Anti-Poverty Network, Brussels, p. 30.
24. EAPN, 2006, The 2006-8 national reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion. What do they deliver for people in poverty? Report and key messages from the European Anti-Poverty Network, Brussels, p. 23.
25. Commission staff working document, Lisbon Strategy evaluation document, SEC (2010) 114 final, Brussels, 2.2.2010, p. 22.
26. EAPN, 2006, The 2006-8 national reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion. What do they deliver for people in poverty? Report and key messages from the European Anti-Poverty Network, Brussels, p. 22.

3. Evaluation of the Synergies through the Streamlining by EU actors

The first question that interests us is in how far involved actors mention the importance of the other strands. This topic is not often touched upon. If it is, it comes in three versions. The first stresses the general importance of the social OMC and that the latter had

"increasingly become a reference point for a wide range of social issues that are high on Member States' agendas and cut across different policy areas, such as the social impact of migration; the social inclusion of ethnic or disadvantaged minorities, including Roma communities; poverty in rural areas; long-term care and social inclusion of the disabled; social consequences of climate change, environmental degradation and trends in energy prices; educational disadvantage and unequal access to continuous training and lifelong learning; financial education and access to basic financial services; digital divide and social exclusion; active ageing and intergenerational solidarity" [27].

The second version focuses on the role social protection systems have as a productive factor: "Social protection systems play a crucial role as automatic stabilisers and for sustaining the productive capacity of the economy beside their main role in protecting citizens against social risks over the lifecycle" [28], so the SPC in its analysis. It emphasises that "social protection plays a redistributive role over the life-cycle and helps to cushion against poverty and to insure people against the financial implications of social risks" [29]. More generally, it wishes to reconcile "ageing, health expenditure and inequalities to sustain growth and employment" [30], thereby emphasizing the mutual interaction of economic and social policies.

The third version is particularly pronounced by NGOs, fearing that the social inclusion strand attracts less attention by Member States than the two other strands of the streamlined OMC. Along these lines, EAPN fears that streamlining risks to "jeopardize the current dynamism of the NAP inclusion." [31] In its analysis, "poverty seems to have slipped off the broad EU political agenda, despite the commitments made in the Spring Council Presidency Conclusions reaffirming the eradication of poverty by 2010 as a central objective of Lisbon." [32] EAPN members are concerned about "the dominance of supply side labour market measures in the content of the National

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27. European Commission, 2008, Communication on a reinforced OMC, 2.7.2008, pp. 6-7.
28. Social Protection Committee, 2009, Opinion on the post-2010 Lisbon Strategy, SPC/2009/11/12/final pp. 2-3.
29. Social Protection Committee, 2009, Growth, Jobs and Social Progress in the EU. A contribution to the evaluation of the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy, p. 54.
30. Ibid., p. 64.
31. EAPN, 2007, Strengthening the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy. Proposals from the European Anti-Poverty Network. Brussels, July 2007, p. 11.
32. EAPN 2009 Making Lisbon deliver for people experiencing poverty. EAPN response to 2006 Implementation Reports on the National Reform Programs, Brussels, p. 3.

Reports and fear that streamlining is emptying the content out of the social inclusion strand." ([33]) While the "streamlined process was also intended to give prominence to an independent and equally strong social pillar within the Lisbon strategy. EAPN sees little progress in redressing the imbalance between economic, social and employment policies" ([34]).

The second question we are interested in is how far involved actors mention the common challenges between the three strands. While this topic is not very prominent either, common challenges between the strands are sometimes mentioned. For example, the Commission stresses in how far poverty is a potential concern for different parts of the population: Children, so the Commission, are often "at greater risk than the rest of the population"; 9.3% of the EU working-age population were living in jobless households in 2007, but also in-work poverty has increased in the last decade; 19% aged 65 and over are at risk of poverty in the EU while "life expectancy has increased spectacularly in the last half century"; finally, "data indicate that all EU countries are faced with substantial inequalities in health within their populations" ([35]). The Commission thus shows an awareness that poverty is a cross-cutting concern. The SPC equally calls upon Member States to recognize the interaction of economic and social policies and the interaction of different social policies with one another. Particularly, there seems to be an awareness that since people are increasingly living longer, preventive health care measures are necessary in order for people to work longer, to preserve a good health and to not live in poverty:

"Member States need to address the different risks associated with the impact of the economic and financial crisis for pension systems. Increasing resource constraints will affect other fields, including health and long-term care. Preventive measures, health promotion and active ageing policies are needed to mitigate the expected rise in age-related social protection expenditure" ([36]).

But even if in good health, increasingly typical career breaks can lead to poverty in old age, as is underlined by the SPC: "In reformed (pension) systems career breaks can reduce adequacy significantly and monitoring of pension outcomes is important for those who have difficulty fulfilling the new eligibility conditions, notably low wage earners and those with broken careers, among whom women are over-represented" ([37]). Similarly, inequalities in health are well

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33. Ibid., p. 8.
34. EAPN, 2006, The 2006-8 national reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion. What do they deliver for people in poverty? Report and key messages from the European Anti-Poverty Network, Brussels, p. 31.
35. European Commission, 2008, Commission Working Staff Document accompanying the Communication from the Commission "A renewed commitment to social Europe: Reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion" - Assessment, SEC (2008) 2169, Brussels, 2.7.2008, pp. 17-18; see also Social Protection Committee, Opinion of the Social Protection Committee on reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination, 7 November 2008, Brussels.
36. Social Protection Committee, 2009, Opinion on the post-2010 Lisbon Strategy, SPC/2009/11/12/final, Brussels, p. 4.
37. Ibid., p. 10.

documented and recognized by the SPC and many Member States: "Inequalities persist in health status and in life expectancy between different socio-economic groups and different regions. Evidence shows a clear correlation between ill health and poverty, unemployment and low education. Many NSRs explicitly recognise that social inequalities in health hamper people's life chances" ([38]). We can thus see that there is an awareness that pensions, health and inclusion policies are mutually linked and should therefore be coordinated.

This leads us to the next question of interest here: In how far do involved actors provide arguments for synergies between the different policy fields (inclusion, pensions, health and long-term care)? The need for encompassing coordination is today well established and recognized by involved actors. Along these lines, the SPC emphasises

"the importance of improved governance of the OMC on all levels, through better horizontal and vertical coordination. National strategies for social inclusion and social protection will only be effective if they are well rooted in the overall national policy framework, including the Lisbon National Reform Programmes and relevant financial and budgetary procedures. A special focus should be devoted to the mutual interaction between economic growth, employment and social cohesion. Also, the involvement of regional and local authorities, civil society and the social partners is crucial to ensure effective implementation and to reinforce ownership at national level" ([39]).

It seems plausible to assume that the world-wide economic crisis has contributed to a sharpened awareness that policies need to be efficient, coherent *and* sustainable. The crisis obviously had an impact on labour markets and public finances. Growth rates decreased, unemployment rates and over-indebtedness increased due to some 8½ million job losses in the EU for 2009-2010, in contrast to the net job creation of 9½ million during 2006-08, and the budget deficit doubled in 2009 in the EU (from 2.3% of GDP in 2008 to 6%) and is likely to be around 7% for 2010. The problems that the crisis poses and may pose in the years to come are recognized by the SPC:

"The global financial and economic crisis casts uncertainties and poses major challenges for the European economy and societies. National experiences from past crisis showed that stocks of long-term unemployed or inactive tend to persist long after recovery has set in. This may considerably aggravate problems of persistent and long-term social exclusion, affecting people's health status and the social outcome of present and future generations, as well as the sustainability of social protection systems" ([40]).

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38. Ibid., p. 11.
39. Social Protection Committee, 2008, Opinion of the Social Protection Committee on reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination, 7.11.2008, Brussels, p. 3.
40. Social Protection Committee, 2009, Opinion on the post-2010 Lisbon Strategy, SPC/2009/11/12/final, Brussels, p. 3.

There is now a growing awareness that social policies are intrinsically linked to one another and that coordination of these policies is therefore a must: "Because of the multidimensional nature of the challenges of social protection and social inclusion, they need to be addressed through integrated approaches and with the contribution of many policies" ([41]). This concern is not only shared by the respective working unit of the Commission but also by the Council as the following analysis testifies:

"In recent years social protection reforms and active inclusion policies have contributed to higher growth and more jobs. Still, more needs to be done to ensure that the benefits of an improved economic framework reach those at the margins of society and enhance social cohesion. Preventing and tackling poverty and social exclusion, and modernising social protection, combining both social adequacy and economic sustainability in a framework of sound fiscal policies, is therefore fundamental to Europe's sustainable development. Policy consistency and coordination, including mainstreaming gender equality and solidarity between generations are essential to achieve the objective of fully including the most vulnerable in society" ([42]).

There is thus an increasing awareness that social policies are mutually linked to one another and have effects on one another. The link between employment rates, pension and health systems costs in any event seems immediate:

"High levels of population health and longer, healthier lives are crucial in the context of an ageing population to allow for longer working lives. Reducing unnecessary and premature death and disease can make a contribution to meeting the Lisbon goals of employment and growth and achieving Europe's full potential for prosperity. On the other hand, there is some evidence that longer active lives may also have a positive effect on health" ([43]).

The SPC therefore concludes that "ageing will increase the pressure on the services to provide more and better medical care and more rehabilitative, nursing and social care" ([44]). A direct link between good health, an ageing population and potential for new jobs – and thereby inclusion – is also acknowledged:

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41. European Commission, 2008, Commission Working Staff Document accompanying the Communication from the Commission "A renewed commitment to social Europe: Reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion" - Assessment, SEC (2008) 2169, Brussels, 2.7.2008, p. 19.
42. European Commission, 2008, Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. Social inclusion, pensions, health care and long-term care, Brussels, March 2008, p. 107.
43. Social Protection Committee, 2009, Growth, Jobs and Social Progress in the EU. A contribution to the evaluation of the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy, p. 64.
44. Social Protection Committee, 2009, Growth, Jobs and Social Progress in the EU. A contribution to the evaluation of the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy, p. 66.

"The healthcare and long-term care sectors are labour intensive and together employ a significant proportion of the population. As a result of ageing, patients' needs are likely to require increases in staff numbers. Yet, as more and more care professionals reach the retirement age it has become increasingly difficult to replace them. In some EU countries ageing is coupled with brain-drain to richer countries. These emerging staff shortages can aggravate access problems but also threaten the financial sustainability of the services. A human resources development strategy involving economic, employment and social policies is required to the sector to ensure sufficient recruitment, retention and motivation" ([45]).

The SPC therefore concludes that "active labour market policies that coincide with active social protection policies can facilitate returning individuals to the labour market and minimizing benefit dependency whiles still protecting the most vulnerable" ([46]).

In their Joint Opinion, being itself an expression of the interaction of economic, employment and social policies, SPC and the Employment Committee (EMCO) address a particular concern that is likely to be of increasing importance in the future of the EU, namely economic migration. In a situation of demographic change and lack of skilled labour, economic migration is likely to be key for European labour and pension markets in the future as it was in the past. The conclusion of the SPC and the EMCO therefore is that

"A comprehensive policy approach is needed to address labour market integration as well as all aspects of social integration of migrants and ethnic minorities, including in education, and to combat discrimination. (…) The portability of social rights can, in this context, contribute to labour mobility and should also be considered in the future. EU labour law and its correct implementation should ensure the free movement of services and workers and at the same time provide adequate working conditions, taking into account the basic freedoms and the protection of social rights as set out in the Treaty and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights" ([47]).

Another driver of an increased focus on mutual interaction and synergies is perceived in the Lisbon Treaty:

"In line with the new clause of the Lisbon Treaty, once adopted, adequate social protection and the fight against social exclusion should be taken into account in defining and implementing EU policies and activities. Securing synergy in the integrated vision of the 2020 agenda would imply that these goals are well reflected in the programming of other instruments, such as the Structural Funds and Community programmes" ([48]).

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45. Ibid., p. 66.
46. Ibid., p. 73.
47. Joint Opinion of SPC and EMCO 2008, November 2008, p. 4.
48. Social Protection Committee, 2009, Opinion on the post-2010 Lisbon Strategy, SPC/2009/11/12/final, p. 4-5.

There are thus traces of actors providing arguments for synergies between the different policy fields. Overall, however, while the diverse documents report extensively on poverty, labour market, pension reforms and health and long-term care, these topics are rather being dealt with in isolation whereas cross-references remain the exception.

This brings us to the fourth question which is in how far actors provide evidence of synergies (e.g. examples of joined-up measures). So far, and in line with the observations made above, there are hardly any concrete examples of synergies between different policy fields that Member States or supranational actors would refer to. Rather to the contrary, there is an awareness that these synergies have not to date been (sufficiently) explored. In 2008, the Commission acknowledged different weaknesses of the OMC, of which the "lack of political commitment and visibility" as well as a "need for stronger horizontal coordination across policy areas and mainstreaming social protection and social inclusion concerns in all relevant policy areas" ([49]). As a remedy, it proposes to apply "some of the procedures and working methods used under the Lisbon strategy, with a view to improving the political commitment and visibility (i.e. by setting quantitative targets), strengthening the links with other policies, enhancing analytical tools and evidence base, and stimulating monitoring, mutual learning and peer review by Member States" ([50]).

The SPC is also aware that further horizontal coordination efforts are needed arguing that the "consolidation of pension reforms will require further efforts to promote longer working lives, which in turn makes a strong case for fighting health inequalities and improving health and safety at work" ([51]). In its proposal for the post-Lisbon Strategy Europe 2020, it underlines the need for further reforms and increased interaction between the different economic and social policies:

"Greater coherence and mutual reinforcement between the initiatives pursued under the Social OMC and the post-2010 strategy need to be ensured. One of the ways to achieve this coherence could be to integrate relevant social aspects in the post-2010 strategy. (…) Enhanced coordination and mainstreaming of the Common Social Objectives will be of crucial importance. Promoting them across all relevant policy areas would reflect the holistic approach embraced by the Renewed Social Agenda" ([52]).

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49. European Commission, 2008, Commission Working Staff Document accompanying the Communication from the Commission "A renewed commitment to social Europe: Reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion" - Assessment, SEC (2008) 2169, Brussels, 2.7.2008, p. 19.
50. European Commission, 2008, Communication on Renewed social agenda: Opportunities, access and solidarity in 21st century Europe, COM (2008) 412 final, Brussels, 2.7.2008, p. 18.
51. Social Protection Committee, 2009, Growth, Jobs and Social Progress in the EU. A contribution to the evaluation of the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy, p.10.
52. Social Protection Committee, 2009, Post-Lisbon Strategy. Preliminary contribution, SPC/2009/05/8 - final, p. 4.

The SPC concludes that an improved articulation of the SPSI OMC "with the future strategy for growth and jobs in a post-2010 perspective becomes ever more urgent and relevant" ([53]).

Similarly, EAPN suggests that the "feeding in" and "feeding out" as recommended in the Commission Communication "Working together, working better" have hardly been achieved: "whilst there has been limited feeding in, feeding out has been almost non-existent".[54] According to EAPN,

"'feeding in' has been followed to the point where it seems that social processes are inside and subservient to the orbit of economic processes. 'Feeding out' in terms of addressing social inclusion concerns in the employment and economic policy formulation of Member States is far from being achieved. EU processes in this respect have not provided the necessary lever to ensure this takes place" ([55]).

EAPN observes similar shortcomings in regard to the streamlining of the three social OMCs:

"...the 3 pillars continue in reality not to be "streamlined" at national level and are dealt with by different departments and ministers, following a separate process. In general there is much weaker stakeholder involvement in the other pillars, and normally anti-poverty NGO's are not invited to participate. However, EAPN is very concerned about the content of these strategies and how far social inclusion concerns are streamlined. They would welcome attempts by national governments to promote more integrated stakeholder debate on key areas" ([56]).

EAPN therefore recommends to "promote better coordination and articulation with the Lisbon NRP process, but also within the streamlined OMC: between the different pillars" ([57]).

The Commission and the SPC have started to jointly monitor the social impact of the crisis ([58]) - an exercise that certainly has the potential to address the interaction of different policies in the years to come and to increase horizontal and vertical cooperation: "The need to react swiftly to the crisis has led many Member States to reinforce their capacity to detect social problems and intensify cooperation among social and institutional actors" ([59]).

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53. Ibid., p. 2.
54. EAPN, 2007, Strengthening the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy. Proposals from the European Anti-Poverty Network. Brussels, p. 3.
55. EAPN, 2006, The 2006-8 national reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion. What do they deliver for people in poverty? Report and key messages from the European Anti-Poverty Network, Brussels, p. 31.
56. EAPN, 2008, Building security, giving hope. EAPN Assessment of the National Strategic Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (2008-10), Brussels, p. 12.
57. Ibid., p. 14.
58. Council of the European Union and European Commission, 2010, Draft Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2010, 6500/10, Brussels, 15.2.2010, p. 13.
59. Ibid.

4. Summary and Discussion

Summarizing the previous analysis, we can thus see that the streamlined SPSI OMC has to date not lived up to original expectations or the goals stated in official documents. The theoretical synergies so far remain underexplored as involved actors remain compartmentalised and either are not aware of the theoretical and practical interactions between the different strands or for some reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper ignore their knowledge of the interaction in the context of the SPSI OMC. At the same time, we know from the literature that learning processes do take time, so that expectations should be kept realistic as to possible synergy effects after only a few years.

How can the limited success of the streamlining process as analysed here be possibly explained? One reason for the missing interaction of the diverse policies and processes may be that there never has been a profound analysis on how such mutual interaction could work and what it should look like to begin with. This cannot really surprise given the existing differences between Member States and between party families about the right way to social integration and the role the EU should play in it. The result of the lack of in-depth analysis of what streamlining could and should mean and how it could be achieved are the ever same empty formulations about streamlining, "feeding in" and "feeding out" ([60]). EAPN therefore concludes that the "OMC has proven to be an imperfect mechanism for supporting such a governance process. (…) The commitment to active governance is not being embedded systematically in the Social OMC, nor are these good practices being reflected in the pensions, health and long-term care pillars of the EU Social Protection and Social Inclusion Strategy" ([61]).

Also, there seems to be raising awareness that employment may not always be the (safe) road to social inclusion as data increasingly indicates that in-work poverty has increased in the last decade:

"However, evidence has shown that considerable increases in employment rates observed in all EU countries coexisted alongside with significant numbers of workers in precarious jobs, working poor and jobless households. As concluded in the 2008 Joint SPSI Report, benefits of economic and employment growth have not always reached the most vulnerable and have not always led to increased social cohesion overall. Inequalities have often increased and limited progress has been achieved in the objective of making a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty" ([62]).

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60. Interviewees of Kröger 2008 (see footnote above) in 2005-6 indicated that no one really knew what "feeding in" and "feeding out" was supposed to mean and how it should be achieved.
61. EAPN, 2009, An EU we can trust. Proposals for a new EU post-2010 strategy, Brussels, 15.7.2009, p. 24, see also FEANTSA, 2007, Untapped potential: Using the full potential of the OMC to address poverty in Europe, Brussels, October 2007.
62. Social Protection Committee, 2009, SPC opinion on the post-2010 Lisbon Strategy, SPC/2009/11/12/final, Brussels, p. 2.

The road to a well-functioning social OMC and an EU with less poverty thus still seems long and thorny. In particular, it requires a stronger political will than has so far been detectable.