What kind of consensus? Conflicting notions of effectiveness within the Social Protection Committee*

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Abstract: The Social Protection Committee (SPC) is the main forum for exchanging information and best practices among the member states within the framework of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the fields of social protection and social inclusion. This implies that looking at how and when the SPC can work 'effectively' is crucial in understanding the potentials of the so-called social OMC. As committee delegates – together with other key actors – define the acceptable and desirable modes of interactions, the successfulness of these interactions is also tied to their own perceptions of effectiveness. Therefore, this article looks at participants' perceptions in order to reconstruct abstract categories based on which the actors themselves evaluate their own working practices, taking into account both the "uploading" and the "downloading" dimension of the process. The article has two main goals. First, it lists the criteria of effectiveness linked to both national and European-level factors that SPC members rely on when evaluating the work of their own committee. Second, based on the abstract concepts of effectiveness that emerge on the basis of in-depth interviews, the article formulates more general hypotheses about the effective functioning of EU level committees, which can be used as bases for future research.

Keywords: institutionalisation; open coordination; expert committees; governance; participation; organisation theory; social policy; political science

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1. Introduction ⬆

The Social Protection Committee (SPC) is the main forum for exchanging information and

best practices among the member states within the framework of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the fields of social protection and social inclusion. Its role is important for several reasons. First, committee members coming from national ministries are the ones who are mainly responsible – together with the European Commission – for developing European level policy frameworks (i.e. common objectives, guidelines and opinions) in social policy areas. Second, these national delegates represent a key link between European and national administrations: Policy "uploading" and "downloading" (Börzel 2002) go through the SPC. Finally, while the SPC was established by a Council Decision and its tasks are included in the EC Treaty, no detailed instructions are given about its working practices. Hence, the OMC and the SPC in particular largely rely on semi-formal governance practices (Christiansen and Piattoni 2004), which means that committee members themselves are responsible for establishing the informal 'rules of the game' according to which the OMC can work (Horvath 2008). Therefore, their regular exchanges in committee meetings heavily influence the effective functioning of the whole coordination process. As will be explained below, effectiveness in this context refers to the effectiveness of communicative interactions and the effective participation of committee members. Both of these factors are linked to policy-making within the OMC: The uploading and downloading of policy objectives.

The concept of effectiveness is usually defined as the capacity of the OMC to influence national-level policy-making. In other words, it refers to the OMC's "potential to transform the practices of the member states" (Jacobsson 2004: 356). The keyword of analysis in this case is 'policy learning'. Empirical assessments on the potentials of the OMC to enhance policy learning usually map changes – frame shifts or policy changes – at the national level. The results depend on the analysed country and the policy issue. Therefore, conclusions vary widely (for a broad overview, see Kröger this issue and Zeitlin 2009). This article takes a different approach to assessing effectiveness: It focuses on the policy-making process at the European level. Thus, the article does not deal with the domestic implementation of European policies, but looks at how their very construction is influenced by organisational factors. This process is crucial in understanding how the OMC can induce national level impacts. As many argue, if European level policy principles are the results of an open, equal and consensual decision-making process, member states are more likely to become committed to their implementation (Jacobsson 2004; Puetter 2006).

Therefore, this article focuses on how and when the SPC can work effectively and assumes that taking into account both the uploading and the downloading dimension of policy-making is crucial in understanding the potentials of the OMC (see also Vanhercke this issue). Since committee delegates, together with other key actors, define the acceptable and desirable modes of interactions – i.e. the goals and rules of committee meetings and the principles of communication among representatives – the success of these interactions is also to a large extent tied to their own perceptions of effectiveness. Therefore, instead of analysing the operation of the SPC based on pre-defined indicators of effectiveness, the article looks at participants' perceptions in order to reconstruct abstract categories based on which the actors themselves evaluate their own working practices. From a methodological point of view, this implies an inductive research design.

Yet, the article does not want to suggest that the effective functioning of the SPC – and in turn the OMC – only depends on committee members' perceptions. Certainly, external factors such as the political framework in which the SPC operates cannot be neglected. Nevertheless, since previous empirical analyses have rarely opened the 'black box' of committee level interactions, the present analysis emphasises the importance of SPC members' interpretations and their perceptions on the functioning of the committee. As will be discussed below, such focus includes looking at how committee representatives reconstruct the external political framework of their organisation.

Against this background, the article has thus two main goals. First, based on an analysis of interviews, it lists the criteria of effectiveness linked to both national and European-level factors that SPC members rely on when evaluating the work of their own committee. The result of such an analysis is the detailed specification of categories, which can provide an

insight into how and when the "social OMC" (CEC 2008) can function effectively. Second, based on the abstract concepts of effectiveness identified on the basis of in-depth interviews, the article formulates more general hypotheses about the effective functioning of EU level committees. These can be used as bases for future deductive research.

The article is structured as follows. The next section presents a brief overview about the internal functioning and the policy environment of the SPC. This provides the basis for choosing the interpretative theoretical and methodological framework that is discussed in the third section. The article then turns to the empirical case study on prevailing perceptions of effectiveness within the SPC. This empirical section consists of four main parts: It reviews how participating actors themselves perceive the main functions of the SPC, outlines how they perceive the organisation of interactions within the SPC, discusses how actors interpret the individual and organisational conditions for effective participation, and finally constructs the abstract categories of effectiveness. In doing so, the analysis connects perceptions of effective participation with competing or complementary definitions of the SPC. The final section presents the conclusions.

2. The Social Protection Committee: Organisational and policy context ⬥

The SPC was established by Council Decision 2000/436/EC in 2000 and was re-established with slight modifications by Council Decision 2004/689/EC in 2004. As was mentioned above, it is the main "vehicle"(1) for exchanging information among EU member states and the Commission in the areas of social protection and social inclusion. In other words, this committee is the main forum for policy coordination among member state representatives where delegates discuss and debate about policy objectives, guidelines and opinions. The main tasks of the SPC include monitoring the social situation in the different member states, promoting the exchanges of information, preparing reports and formulating opinions on diverse subjects and initiatives (Council of the European Union 2000, 2004). This implies that the SPC is the site where "much of the consensus-building within the OMC" takes place (Armstrong 2003: 181).

In addition, committee members – two delegates from national ministries and two representatives of the European Commission – represent a central link between national and European administrations. This has two important aspects. On the one hand, the SPC is "an interface between the Commission and the Council" (Armstrong 2003: 181), thus between the Commission and member states. As such, it is the forum which shapes the European agenda (uploading dimension). On the other hand, committee members play a crucial role in influencing the position of national bureaucrats both about the OMC as a mode of governance and regarding the policy issues it deals with (downloading dimension). Hence, SPC members influence the potential of the OMC also through persuading or discouraging national civil servants concerning its significance (de la Porte, Natali and Pochet 2009).

The SPC is dealing with the issue areas of social protection and social inclusion. The first policy area in which the SPC has been involved is social inclusion, which was followed most importantly by the adequacy and sustainability of pension systems and health and long-term care. These policy areas are interesting for several reasons. First of all, social protection and social inclusion are "politically sensitive" issues where the competence of the EU has always been questioned (Radaelli 2003). Daly (2007: 2) describes social policy within the EU as "fitful", since there are "periods of intense activity followed by times when social policy is hardly spoken of". The launching of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 meant a new opportunity "to realise a model of social policy organised around social exclusion as the problem definition", choosing the OMC as the "policy-making methodology" in this field (Daly 2007: 3). Yet, the re-launching of the Lisbon Strategy in 2005, which refocused the strategy on growth and jobs at the expense of social cohesion, changed the status this coordination process. This made it more important for social policy actors to justify and prove their political significance.

The specificity of the institutional environment of the SPC is that it operates within a

framework that rests on purely voluntary, legally non-binding coordination processes in policy areas where problems and their importance are easily contested and redefined. Furthermore, the formal rules based on which the SPC operates are relatively vague, which means that committee members themselves have a crucial role in developing the working methods themselves. Such committees are often conceptualised as transnational governance "networks", where interactions "take place within a regulative, normative, cognitive and imaginary framework" (Sørensen and Torfing 2007: 9). Governance networks have the potential to "establish a framework for consensus building" (ibid.: 13). In the context of the OMC, such an institutional framework is often described as experimental governance (Sabel and Zeitlin 2006; Szyszczak 2006; Zeitlin 2005). The framework of democratic experimentalism focuses on the role of informal and flexible governance arrangements that facilitate the revision of institutional and policy standards through the process of consensus-seeking deliberation in multi-level fora.

The consequence of such a governance setting is that the ways in which committee members perceive their own role and the organisation they act in have significant consequences for the actual effective operation of the SPC and in turn, the OMC. First, communicative interactions have to be developed in a way that they facilitate consensus-seeking. If committee members do not perceive these interactions as potentially resulting in consensual solutions – thus as being effective – they will not engage in discussions, which in turn makes it impossible for the SPC to function effectively. This also influences the commitments of member states to implement the objectives of the OMC (downloading dimension). Certainly, the nature and purpose of such a consensus as well as the circumstances under which it might be reached has to be defined and embraced by committee members themselves. Second, committee members have to be able to participate in committee discussions effectively. Again, since the OMC depends on the self-commitments of member states and such a commitment starts with the engagement of SPC members, each one of them has to believe that they are able to participate effectively and influence the discussion (uploading dimension).

Organisational analyses that examine the perceptions and interactions of the members of specific committees usually focus on the way in which the organisation of committees (e.g. membership, meetings, etc.) influences the roles, identities and behaviour of committee members and vice versa, how the perceived roles of committee members shape the organisation of interactions (see e.g. de la Porte, Natali and Pochet 2009; Egeberg 2004; Egeberg, Schaefer and Trondal 2003; Thedvall 2005). In these cases, committees are often conceptualised as arenas or sites of socialisation for national civil servants, where committee members evoke new roles which shape their identities (Egeberg 2004). For example, based on participant observation, Thedvall (2005) analyses how the meeting format shapes decision-making in the Employment Committee (EMCO) as well as how it influences the role perceptions of committee members.

A recent organisational analysis of the SPC and the EMCO was conducted by de la Porte, Natali and Pochet (2009). In their article, the authors examine the means of socialisation and self-governance within these two committees. They argue that members of the SPC and the EMCO have three main roles: A "policy reform" role, an "expertocratic" role and a "technocratic" role (ibid.). They also examine the perceived strength of individual committee members in influencing discussions and find that the main factors that play an important role are the length of membership and language skills. Finally, the authors also confirm that the organisation of interactions within these two OMC committees is predominantly consensus-based (ibid.).

The present case study also includes a micro-level organisational analysis of a specific committee, but differs from previous studies in several respects. First of all, in contrast to many analyses on committees, it does not include pre-given hypotheses about relevant organisational factors that influence a socialisation process (e.g. conditions of deliberation), but looks at committee members' perceptions as a first step. Second, it links these perceptions of effectiveness and the sources of effective participation explicitly to the potential functions of the SPC and the roles of its members. Thus, the article does not examine organisational

factors independently from SPC members' own evaluation and interpretation about the purposes of their actions. Instead, it acknowledges that first, committee members' interactions are embedded in a political context that is reconstructed and given meaning(s) to by committee delegates themselves, and second, that the effective operation of the SPC is dependent on this reconstruction process. The next section presents an analytical framework that is useful in helping to evaluate such perceptions.

3. Theoretical and methodological assumptions ⬆

Analyses that focus on the ways in which actors involved in governance processes perceive, enact, and make sense of them rely on the concept of inter-subjectivity. The inter-subjective construction(2) of governance arrangements implies the following assumptions. On the one hand, institutions are designed on the basis of normative principles of appropriateness that guide institutional practice. These normative principles influence actors' perceptions and interactions within a given organisational structure. On the other hand, the principles are communicated and performed by actors who take part in this practice. Thus, discursive interactions within this structure contribute to the re-construction of these normative principles. In other words, institutions shape and legitimise the interactions of actors and vice versa: Actors who participate in policy processes discursively enact and legitimise governance arrangements.

This "performance" (Hajer 2006) and meaning-making through continuous contestation (Wiener 2007) brings about "living institutions" (Olsen 2000) through the process of institutionalisation (Olsen 1997). When actors start to enact and interpret certain organisational rules and norms and they do so in a more and more regular way, the process of institutionalisation starts. Olsen (1997) defines institutionalisation as a process that involves

1. "structuralization and routinization of behaviour";
2. "standardization, homogenization and authorization of codes of meaning and ways of reasoning"; and
3. "linking resources to values and world-views" (Olsen 1997: 213).

This article is concerned about the first and the last aspects: the organisation of interactions as well as the relationship between institutional stories and the perception of resources. These two factors are strongly connected to effectiveness and effective participation within a given institutional setting.

The concept of institutionalisation is applied to the OMC by Heidenreich and Bischoff (2008). They conceptualise the OMC as a process of institutionalisation "in which new social fields are created at the intersection of the European and the national politics and administrations" (ibid.: 505). As the authors argue, these social fields have their own "actors, organizations, issues, interests and rules of interpretation and appropriateness" (Heidenreich and Bischoff 2008: 505). Thus, the institutionalisation process includes the continuous redefinition of the 'rules of the game' according to actors' interests, the development and standardisation of appropriate patterns of behaviour based on formal and informal rules, and the formation of common frames of references (Heidenreich and Bischoff 2008: 506). While it is the overall level of institutionalisation that determines potentials for mutual learning within this framework, the development of common frames of references in which committees have a key role is seen as a crucial element (see also López-Santana 2006). This also highlights the importance of looking at how these common frames of references become accepted at the European level.

The first element of institutionalisation in the framework of Olsen (1997), the "structuralization and routinization of behaviour" within governance arrangements, can be interpreted as the mode of interaction: The way of discussing, communicating and interpreting issues. Modes of interaction or "requirements of communication" (March and Olsen 1995: 175) become conventionalised, well-established and legitimate through an institutionalisation

process. Thus, institutional practice contributes to the establishment of new, acceptable decision-making procedures. These procedures influence the effectiveness of committee meetings – how far these meetings fulfil their goals – and through this, the effective functioning of the OMC.

Concerning resources, March and Olsen (1995: 92) distinguish four types of resources or "capabilities". These are "rights and authorities", "political resources", "political competencies" and "organizing capacity", all of which develop distinctively within specific governance arrangements. Within the framework of this article, these resources or capabilities are conceptualised to be inter-subjective: They are dependent on the perceptions and interpretations of actors that evolve through discursive practices. Thus, individual and organisational capabilities and resources are seen as context-dependent, so are power and authority. Examples for such context-specific resources in a policy-shaping institutional setting can be, for example, "technical knowledge", the "seniority" of participants, "credibility, professional reputation and respectability" (Puetter 2006: 25-26), "personal authority", or "expertise" (Tallberg 2008). These resources influence the effective participation of committee delegates through shaping power relationships among actors, the sources of authority, as well as actors' opportunities to upload specific issues to the European level.

In order to map perceptions about the effective organisation of interactions and sources of effective participation, the case study of this article follows an interpretive and inductive research strategy. Focusing on the nature of interactions and the relevant resources of participants, it includes the micro-analysis of an organisation, where important organisational characteristics are not hypothesised a priori.

The article relies on the analysis of forty-five semi-structured, anonymous interviews(3) with member state representatives of the SPC, officials of the European Commission, social affairs attachés and counsellors from permanent representations who participate in SPC meetings more or less regularly, as well as NGO representatives observing the work of the committee. Since the analytical framework of the article centres on the concept of inter-subjectivity, the relevant actors to be interviewed were the ones who actively participate in the inter-subjective construction of the SPC and its governance and policy framework. In this case, the opinion of 'outsiders' was supposed to be less relevant for the internal institutionalisation process, since they do not have the possibility to contest or perform the rules of the game or the policy principles (they might do so indirectly, but then this indirect impact is reflected in the opinion of participating actors). Furthermore, while external factors of effectiveness are not dealt with explicitly in this article, their influence on the functioning of the SPC is taken into account to the extent of their impact on the perceptions of SPC members. In other words, it is assumed that committee members reconstruct and give meaning to the external political framework of the SPC and this shapes their perceptions of its effectiveness.

4. Perceptions of effectiveness within the SPC

The analysis of the SPC that follows in this section consists of four main parts. First, participating actors' interpretations about the main functions of the committee are presented. These interpretations give invaluable insights about actors' own definitions of the SPC and the OMC as a whole. One needs to look at these definitions since conceptions of effectiveness are linked to the perceived goals of the SPC and the OMC. Thus, these definitions are the starting points in actors' evaluations about appropriate patterns of behaviour and the necessary resources needed for effective participation in the committee. The second sub-section links such definitions with evaluations of the organisation of interactions within the committee. The third sub-section reviews how delegates perceive the conditions for effective participation in the SPC and the distribution of resources within the committee. Relationships between perceived resources and the competing or complementary definitions of the SPC are also analysed. Finally, the last sub-section summarises the empirical findings and presents the resulting categories of effectiveness.

4.1. The main functions of the SPC ⬆

There are two main broader functions of the SPC that can be distinguished based the on interviews: A 'political forum' and a 'policy forum' function. The following quote summarises these two functions or 'pillars' well:

> "There is the political process, which is linked to the NAPs, to the monitoring, to strengthening the EU dimension. And then there is (…) the mutual learning process, which is more directed to policy developments at the national level, and it is more about exchange of policy and policy transfer" (Interview NGO, October 2007).

Accordingly, the perceived political forum function of the SPC is to promote the visibility of social issues at the European level. In addition, in its policy forum function, the SPC has to provide a platform for exchanging information and it has to promote policy learning. Radaelli (2003: 12) referred to this double role of the SPC as policy "learning in a political context", drawing attention to contradictions inherent in its institutional design. Such potential contradictions are analysed here in the context of effectiveness.

The political forum function of the SPC was referred to by seventeen SPC members (both from capitals and from permanent representations) and its fulfilment was questioned by only two of them. In a more detailed description, this function of the committee is to send input to the Employment and Social Affairs Council, and in turn to the European Council. Sending such key messages shows that "member states have a common vision on what the main policy priorities are to be achieved" (Interview COM, April 2006). Here lies the political nature of the SPC: This process aims to put social issues on the European agenda to increase their visibility on the European level and "to strengthen the social pillar of Lisbon" (Interview NGO, October 2007).

Such a "common vision" or common opinions are seen to be the results of a consensual process in which all views are taken into account. Thus, achieving a consensual opinion or a compromise during SPC meetings is argued to be central because the SPC is formulating opinions on several subjects, which can highlight the importance of certain policies. In other words, the SPC needs to send "ministers a clear message understood by the whole committee" (Interview SPC17, May 2006) in order to fulfil its goal of being a "social voice" (Interview COM, April 2006).

In parallel to its political forum function, the SPC is also often described as a policy forum. This was articulated by thirty SPC members. Nevertheless, though the policy forum function of the SPC was more often referred to than its political forum function, its fulfilment was also questioned by a greater proportion of its advocates (exactly half): Fifteen SPC members claimed that the SPC could not fulfil its policy forum function. This function of the SPC is to provide a platform for SPC delegates to engage in more detailed discussions on "important policy matters" (Interview SPC/PR3, September 2007), which have the potential to induce changes at the national level. For example, in this view, the added value of the SPC "is definitely more looking at the quantitative side, at indicators, monitoring certain processes, exchanging information and looking at best practices" (Interview SPC16, March 2006).

In the policy forum function of the SPC, dialogue is seen to be the instrument of the "exchange of knowledge and science" (Interview SPC/PR9, September 2007). The SPC is seen as a "conceptual committee" in which delegates can talk to all their "colleagues to try to understand their position" regardless of existing differences in perspectives (Interview SPC5, March 2006). Thus, the SPC is regarded as a forum in which mutual exchange is supposed to strengthen "evidence-based policy-making" (Interview SPC12, March 2006) and the "analytical capacity" at the national and the European level (Interview COM, September 2007).

These two definitions of the SPC exist in parallel, fifteen members perceiving both functions as important parts of the operation of the SPC. Nevertheless, some interviewees evaluated these goals as being the elements of competing rather than complementary definitions of the purposes of the committee. These actors perceived potential tensions and contradictions between these functions. For example, as one of the delegates noted, some think "that the Social Protection Committee was a sort of draft meeting for the Council; I do not think that this would be the purpose, I think we have to discuss" (Interview SPC3, September 2007).

Such a tension can be linked to competing definitions of appropriate patterns of behaviour and that of the appropriate functioning of the committee. For example, if the goal is to have a dialogue over policy problems and practices, then in an effective meeting, everyone can take the floor and share opinions with others. On the contrary, if the meeting serves the purpose of finding a consensus about a politically important document, then an effective meeting is relatively short where delegates do not come up with critical remarks and thus where a common position is easily accepted by all participants. Such organisational aspects are discussed in the next sub-section.

4.2. Organisation of interactions at the European level ⬆

The effectiveness of the organisation of interactions or the routinisation of modes of communication has to be linked to the above definitions of the SPC. As was argued beforehand, perceptions of effectiveness are necessarily tied to how appropriate behaviour is defined. The present section identifies criteria of effectiveness based on an examination of critical remarks made by interviewees. This strategy was chosen because critical observations can more specifically highlight which factors are perceived to be necessary for the effective functioning of the SPC. As the previous sub-section showed, most critical remarks made about the operation of the SPC can be linked to the policy forum function of the committee. Since the political forum function of the SPC was rarely criticised, it is more difficult to establish criteria of effectiveness related to this definition. Nevertheless, conclusions are drawn also in this case.

Factors listed by interviewees as influencing the depth of discussions are often connected to the large number of committee representatives. Group size is a well-known factor influencing the quality of discussions (see Bailer, Hertz and Leuffen 2009). After the 2004 enlargement of the EU, the number of delegates almost doubled in the SPC. Although the SPC established new rules of procedure (Horvath 2008), discussions are often seen as still not going smoothly with 27 member states on board. On the one hand, new rules limiting discussion time encourage passivity. On the other hand, a few interviewees claimed that the new rules are not applied rigorously enough and that "everybody is still talking" (Interview SPC/PR3, September 2007), which results in long and often repetitive meetings where delegates hope that "not everybody will speak" (Interview SPC3, September 2007). As a result – and also due to the packed agenda of the SPC – interviewees often complained about the problem that only formal or procedural issues are discussed in the SPC (e.g. the wording of documents) and not important policy matters.

This large number of committee representatives is also often linked to the high turnover rate in SPC membership, which has important consequences. Most importantly, discussions become more difficult since several members do not know about previous agreements (Horvath 2008). In addition, because "personal contacts are very important" in the committee, members states with a changing representation have more difficulties to get their points across (Interview SPC/PR2, September 2007). This high turnover rate is especially a problem in the case of SPC representatives from newer member states, mostly due to the small size of their countries and the fewer resources available (Horvath 2008).

In relation to the political forum function of the SPC, concerns are less connected to the organisation of interactions within the SPC. Instead, a few interviewees referred to problems related to the nature of interactions between the SPC and other relevant committees such as the

Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Economic Policy Committee (EPC). The interaction between the SPC and the other two committees became particularly important after the re-launching of the Lisbon Strategy in 2005, which refocused the strategy on jobs and growth. Especially since then, the SPC regularly produces joint opinions with the EMCO, and sometimes – though much less frequently – with the EPC. Interviewees argued that these inter-committee interactions are not symmetric and that the SPC is weaker than the other two committees. As a result, joint opinions are said to reflect more the opinions of the other committees, which makes it impossible for the SPC to express a "strong opinion" on social policy issues (Interview SPC8, January 2008). If SPC members feel that their opinion is not taken into account, it is less likely that they find it important to push forward certain issues and to find consensual solutions, which then can weaken political commitments and also the SPC.

To sum up, the above organisational issues influence the work of the SPC regardless of its assumed functions. Nevertheless, the problem of the large number of committee members is perceived to be more relevant for the policy forum function of the SPC, since this function involves more the presence of in-depth policy discussions. Political decisions might be made even with the presence of a large number of members or with a heavy agenda. Changing membership can be disadvantageous from both perspectives: If new members do not respect previous decisions, it might cause problems in reaching a consensus. Finally, the political importance of the SPC vis-à-vis other committees is more important assuming the political function of the SPC, since this function is inherently linked to the weight of SPC decisions in the political coordination process.

4.3. Sources of effective participation: Actors' individual and organisational resources

Relationships between actors and power distributions can influence the effective participation of committee representatives. Therefore, it is essential to examine how resources are perceived to be distributed within the SPC and to link such perceptions with the main functions of the committee.

The first and most obvious resource in SPC meetings is the ability to intervene in discussions, which can be related to both individual factors and those linked to the organisation of discussions. While several interviewees argued that "there is no real barrier to contribution" (Interview SPC2, March 2006), others listed a number of factors that indeed influence who can be part of SPC discussions. Some interviewees linked such an ability to intervene to the personality of delegates and made statements like "maybe there are some individuals who feel a bit inhibited and it is very hard to get over that" (Interview SPC2, March 2006). However, most participants made a connection between the frequency of contributions and other, mostly institutionally coded factors. One of these factors is certainly that members with less experience in attending such meetings are less likely to participate actively (see also de la Porte, Natali and Pochet 2009). Accordingly, newcomers to the SPC – for example, delegates from newer member states – are usually described as being relatively passive in SPC meetings.

Another important factor that is referred to in explaining the passivity of some delegates is the insufficient human resources and "administrative capacity" (Interview COM, November 2007) in national ministries, again especially in newer member countries. As a Commission official argued, contributions are very much "dependent on the type of resources the member states put in into the room" (Interview COM, December 2007). Several delegates complained about the unavailability of enough staff dealing with European issues in national ministries. Consequently, representatives are overloaded with work and have difficulties in preparing for the meetings sufficiently well. Such problems are also linked to the small size of several member states, which makes it even more difficult to have enough people working on related issues.

A related problem is the lack of instructions given to SPC delegates, which makes it difficult

for them to intervene in discussions. Many interviewees perceived SPC delegates as being representatives of ministers, ministries, governments or states. In case delegates perceive their own role in categories of representation, it implies that they do not see themselves as deciding on their own what to say and when in SPC meetings. Instead, they act upon a ministerial, governmental or national mandate, which mandate is regarded as a resource.

Besides the above resources that influence the access to the dialogue, there are also other differences between delegates with the consequence that certain interventions are more influential. The main individual resource mentioned by participants that can influence whether an opinion is fully respected is expertise or knowledge (see also Tallberg 2008). An expert is "someone who is knowledgeable about the area and knows what they are talking about" and whose "contribution is a value" (Interview SPC12, March 2006). Furthermore, an expert is a person who can present convincing arguments. In connection with expertise, several delegates mentioned again the disadvantages of small member states having fewer resources. As the argument goes, small member states are not able to send their best experts to SPC meetings, or sometimes they are not able to send anybody at all, which certainly hinders their effective participation in committee meetings.

The expertise of SPC members is influenced by their official rank in their ministry for two main reasons. First, senior officials are usually more experienced and have more expertise in a given policy area, while "young colleagues lack the necessary knowledge to think about solutions to existing problems" (Interview SPC8, January 2008). Second, senior representatives are closer to the minister. Because of their expertise and status, senior officials can engage more in discussions and can be more flexible in agreeing on a consensual decision. In contrast, junior members usually have to wait until they consult their colleagues in the capital, which makes it difficult for them to participate in discussions effectively. Regarding seniority, there is again an observed difference between older and newer member states (Horvath 2008). While SPC representatives from older member states are most often senior civil servants, those who come from newer member states are usually younger and less influential. One reason behind this difference is the lack of language skills of senior officials in newer member states (see also de la Porte, Natali and Pochet 2009).

Another commonly mentioned source of more effective participation was the size of the country of the delegate. Certainly, many interviewees argued that there is no distinction made between delegates on the basis of their home country. For example, one of the interviewees argued that "from my experience I cannot say that there is a difference made whether little Luxembourg is saying something, or a huge country like Germany" (Interview SPC14, March 2006). Nevertheless, some interviewees articulated the opinion that the size of the country does indeed influence how much weight a delegate's opinion has in the debate. In the majority of relevant cases, however, this was regarded as an indirect resource linked to better administrative capacities. Yet, some participants thought that some representatives were more listened to "because their country is more powerful" (Interview SPC3, September 2007).

An additional resource or source of respect that was mentioned during the interviews is the ability to reach a compromise or offer consensual solutions to problems. In this context, newer member states are again seen to be in a disadvantaged position: "Due to the different, non-democratic history, we fall behind the old fifteen in the ability to establish consensual solutions, which has been practiced by old member states for forty years" (Interview SPC15, July 2007). Other participants discussed this resource of being able to reach a consensus in connection to the role of the chair of the SPC (on the role of chairs, see Tallberg 2008). As one of the delegates noted about the previous chairman of the SPC, he is listened to because "he practices as a voice of compromise suggesting ways to go about" (Interview SPC5, March 2006).

Finally, since debates are seen as characterised by arguments among different 'discourse coalitions'(4), being part of a powerful discourse coalition is also considered as a resource in the debate. This is especially true in the case of small member states (assuming the importance of country size). As a delegate from a small member state noted:

"As a small country it is useful if you have [allies], because I think if [our country] absolutely disagreed with something, and it was just [our country], I do not feel it would stand a chance. But if you find two or three more countries who agree with you, then you have a good chance" (Interview SPC1, May 2006).

There are said to be two different coalitions of member states within the SPC that usually represent conflicting positions on diverse policy issues along political-ideological lines. On the one hand, one group of countries "would like to see more social Europe, would like to see the Lisbon Strategy much more socially oriented, would like to see that the so-called social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy is much more strengthened" (Interview SPC/PR1, September 2007). On the other hand, there are other member states "who more would like to focus on growth and employment, as in the new revised Lisbon Strategy" (Interview SPC/PR3, September 2007). The balance of power between these discourse coalitions has changed over time, especially after the 2004 enlargement. Certainly evaluations depend on the interviewees' own 'membership' in such coalitions: While those who have gained more influence argue that a 'more balanced' distribution of power helps discussions, those who were in a previously dominant coalition and have been losing power to influence claim that such change hinders discussions.

How can these resources be linked to the perceived functions of the SPC? What are the resources that are evaluated to be important assuming that the SPC has a political forum function? Are these resources different from those shaping effective participation in a policy forum? Briefly, the more important it is to represent a relatively fixed mandate, the less important it becomes to have professional debates in the SPC. In contrast, the ability to present convincing and professionally sound arguments (expertise) is perceived to be important when assuming a policy forum function. Seniority is mentioned both in connection to the political forum function (senior representatives have better connections to the minister, therefore do not need strong mandates) and to the policy forum function (senior members have more knowledge). Consensus-seeking is most often referred to in connection with the importance of promoting the visibility of issues on the European level (political forum function), but in a few cases it is evaluated to be important in connection with the policy forum function as well. Interestingly, belonging to one or the other discourse coalition is not an indication for the commitments or evaluations concerning the political and policy forum functions of the SPC. This also means that promoting the visibility of social issues is perceived to be important for both coalitions. However, the way interviewees define the dividing line between coalitions depends on the perceived function of the SPC. On the one hand, when it comes to substantial policy debates (policy forum), the balance of power between discourse coalitions diverging on the role of social policy is seen as highly important. On the other hand, when the SPC is perceived to be a political forum, such coalitions rather seem to represent the groups of member states with different views on the desired strength of cooperation in social protection and social inclusion.

4.4. Summary: Categories of effectiveness within the SPC ⬆

Table 1 summarises the criteria of effectiveness that can be identified based on the empirical case study. These criteria partly depend on which function of the SPC is envisaged. Thus, the table shows the factors that are needed for the effective functioning of the SPC as a policy or as a political forum.

Table 1

Table 1 also indicates how the empirical analysis can serve as a basis for hypothesis-building. The categories show the main factors that can be hypothesised as necessary conditions of effectiveness given the assumed functions of a given committee or organisation. These criteria are tied to organisations that rely on a consensual form of decision-making. Specifically, in case the main role of a committee is to produce politically important consensual documents, then it will be effective if members are of a senior rank or if they receive strong national

mandates that still make compromised solutions possible. In other words, discourse coalitions are ideally not too strong or are well balanced in a political committee. However, if a committee ought to function as a mutual learning forum, then it can work effectively with fewer members who are experts in the given policy fields, as well as with having fewer agenda items. Ideally, the members can form an epistemic community with not very strong dividing lines between discourse coalitions.

Both in the case of political and policy fora, it is important for the effective functioning of a committee that all members participate equally in the uploading process. Nevertheless, different resources are considered to be important for a political forum and for a policy forum. In addition, while policy downloading is the main goal for a mutual learning forum – and working methods should be designed accordingly – the downloading dimension is secondary in case the primary function of a committee is a political one. As a result, the substantial outcome of committee discussions can be hypothesised to be different in the case of committees with different functions.

5. Conclusion ⬆

This article set out to explore perceptions of effectiveness within the SPC. It examined how the organisation of interactions is evaluated by participating actors and which resources are seen as affecting who can be an influential actor in SPC discussions, given the policy forum or the political forum function of the committee. This was important to look at because these factors influence what kind of policy issues can be uploaded to the European level and by whom, as well as the potentials of policy downloading.

The analysis in this article showed that it is difficult for the SPC to function effectively as a policy forum due to the large number and high turnover of representatives and the heavy agenda. A potential consequence of the lack of opportunities for SPC delegates to discuss questions in more detail is that the European Commission can become more influential in shaping the European agenda. Concerning the political forum function of the SPC, this is perceived to be endangered by the weak position of the SPC and the policy areas of social protection and social inclusion within the Lisbon Strategy. Nevertheless, some argue that the distinctiveness of the social OMC can also be regarded as an advantage that enables the process to develop its own "identity" (Daly 2006: 476; see also Vanhercke this issue). These possibilities can be further explored by analyses that focus more explicitly on the external conditions of effectiveness.

Regarding the effective participation of SPC members, the analysis revealed that SPC delegates are perceived to have unequal opportunities to influence discussions, especially due to differences in national level factors. Delegates from newer member states are especially seen as being in a disadvantaged position. In this reading, newer SPC delegates might find it more difficult to upload their agenda to the European level.

Based on the case study, potential contradictions can also be highlighted between the effective functioning of the SPC as a political and as a policy forum. These contradictions have to be taken into consideration when evaluating the working methods of a committee. Thus, the main functions of committees and other forum-type organisation have to be made clear before assessing the applicable criteria of effectiveness. For example, while in-depth discussions can be regarded as desirable from a policy learning perspective, they might not be seen as necessary for a political committee to function 'effectively'.

The continuous (re-)constructions of committees' different functions are usually neglected by studies that assume that the OMC and soft modes of governance ought to be 'deliberative' in order to operate effectively (see discussions on deliberative governance, for example Cohen and Sabel 1997; Joerges and Neyer 1997; Mosher and Trubek 2003; Teague 2001; Zeitlin 2005). This article showed that while committee interactions are interpreted to be consensual by almost all participating actors, in-depth discussions are not always seen as 'useful' elements

of the coordination process. Similarly, the consequences of potential contradictions between the different purposes of committee interactions are often disregarded by analyses. Multi-purpose processes imply multiple meanings of effectiveness, which need to be understood in order to be able to analyse policy developments within given organisational and political frameworks.

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Endnotes ⬆

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(1) See the Social Inclusion website of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/social_protection_committee_en.htm (last accessed 30 January 2008).

(2) On the social constuction of reality, see Berger and Luckmann (1966).

(3) The interviews were conducted between March 2006 and January 2008. All interviews are cited by category and the date of the interview. In case more interviews were conducted in the same month, a number is added to the reference (the numbering is random). The categories are the following: SPC: SPC member; SPC/PR: SPC member from permanent representation; COM: Commission official; NGO: NGO representative.

(4) For a conceptualisation of "discourse coalitions", see Hajer (1993).

Table 1: Conditions for effectiveness

Effectiveness criteria: main categories		Policy forum	Political forum
Criteria linked to the organisation of interactions	Group size	*Smaller number of delegates or the presence of issue-specific sub-groups*	Number of delegates irrelevant (all actors should be included)
	Agenda	*Reasonable number of agenda items*	Number of agenda items irrelevant (all items should be concluded)
	Stability of representation	No or low turnover rate	No or low turnover rate
	Position of the committee	Inter-committee relations not necessarily relevant	*Strong SPC*
Criteria linked to the distribution of resources	Experience	Equally experienced delegates	Equally experienced delegates
	Human resources at national level	Sufficient human resources in national ministries	Sufficient human resources in national ministries
	Seniority and mandate	*Senior members and/or experts*	*Senior members and/or strong national mandate*
	Language skills	Good language skills	Good language skills
	Consensus	Consensus-seeking attitude	Consensus-seeking attitude
	Discourse coalitions	*Not strong discourse coalitions ("epistemic community")*	*Well-balanced or not very strong discourse coalitions (compromise should be reached easily)*

The most important and differentiating factors are marked in italics.