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THE MICRO-POLITICS OF THE OMC PROCESS: NGO ACTIVITIES AND THE SOCIAL INCLUSION PROCESS IN SWEDEN

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I. INTRODUCTION: EUROPEANIZATION THROUGH SOFT LAW

Most European countries are in the process of reforming their welfare and employment systems. The European Union (EU) tries to influence this reform process through coordination policies that vary according to policy fields (Borrás & Jacobsson 2004). The 'open method of coordination' (OMC), as the coordination procedure was named at the Lisbon summit in 2000, in the policy field of social inclusion, is a truly soft procedure, based on common EU objectives of fairly general character, and monitoring through regular national reporting of progress exposed to peer review in the Social Protection Committee, also based on common indicators. Since 2006, the reporting is done in Strategy reports covering reform of social protection systems as well as social inclusion policies and formulated for a period of three years (earlier it was action plans focussing exclusively on social inclusion and produced very second year). One of us (Jacobsson) has argued elsewhere that the OMC differ from the traditional use of soft law in the EU in several ways:

Table 1: Differences between the OMC and the traditional soft-law

The Open Method of Coordination	The traditional soft law
Intergovernmental approach: the Council and the Commission have a dominant role.	Supranational approach: the Commission and the Court of Justice have a dominant role.
Political monitoring at the highest level	Administrative monitoring
Clear procedures and iterative process	Weak and ad-hoc procedures
Systematic linking across policy areas	No explicit linking of policy areas
Interlinking EU and national public action	No explicit linking of EU/national levels
Seeks the participation of social actors	Does not explicitly seek participation
Aims at enhancing learning processes	No explicit goal of enhancing learning is stated

Source: Borrás & Jacobsson 2004

In this paper, we will address less the policy instruments of the OMC, and instead focus on the domestic use of the OMC in one national context, Sweden. Much current reasoning on the OMC processes tend to look at the policy level and ask questions about policy learning, yet fails to study policy and politics in conjunction. In order to understand the reception of the OMC in a national setting, this paper takes seriously both the institutional context in which the OMC incl. is to be implemented and the micro-politics of the OMC incl. in Sweden, i.e. actor responses and activities and inter-actor relationships. In particular, we look how social NGOs have approached the OMC

on social inclusion as a new opportunity structure to exploit, i.e. as a means to establish contacts with national policy-makers and possibly to challenge the position of certain privileged social NGOs.

The paper demonstrates that while the OMC on social inclusion has had limited direct influence on the policy contents of national reforms, it has been an important catalyst in establishing new patterns of cooperation among social NGOs in the Swedish welfare state. First, we show how the enactment of the OMC on social inclusion has contributed to new forms of institutionalized consultation and co-operation between Ministries and social NGOs. Second, we show how this OMC has contributed to new patterns of co-operation and/or conflict among social NGOs. Third, we look into what factors yet hamper a fuller implementation of the OMC in the Swedish context.

II. THE OMC AND DOMESTIC OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

A growing number of studies have been concerned with the outcomes and mechanisms of Europeanization (Grabbe 2003; Knill and Lehmkuhl 1999; Radaelli 2003; Cowles et al 2003; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). Often the Europeanization literature has a top-down perspective, focusing on the processes by which EU rules and norms are incorporated into domestic policy-making. This presupposes that distinct European practices, institutions, policies or discourses are first developed at the EU level, which, in turn, create pressure for reform or change in structures, processes, and policies at the domestic level. The adaptation pressure varies according to the type of EU rule in question, as well as the degree to which it fits with pre-existing policies and policy-making practices in the member states.

While it does indeed make sense to have a top-down perspective in order to be able to at all speak of Europeanization, it is also important to acknowledge that domestic actors are never just passive receivers and implementers of European rules and norms. European norms and rules are mediated and interpreted in local contexts – it is never a case of direct transfer. Rather, it is a matter of an active translation whereby rules and norms are interpreted and adapted in ways appropriate to the domestic context: ‘changes…are neither purely an adjustment to pressure and demands emanating from

the EU nor solely the result of conscious national strategies or of historical legacies and administrative traditions' (B. Jacobsson et al 2004: 115). The translation element is even more evident in the case of the OMCs, which build on soft regulation and is explicitly supposed to be translated into national policy according to existing structures and traditions, and which is, moreover, procedural rather than substantive in nature. Moreover, political support for the reform process must be mobilized domestically.

Consequently, the OMCs must be studied in context, whereby domestic factors, such as political ideologies and policy paradigms, state traditions and administrative legacies, state capacities and resources, actor constellations and social interests, can mediate national responses to Europeanization as well as affecting what types of policies may be implemented (Cowles et al 2001; Featherstone and Radaelli 2003; B. Jacobsson et al 2004; Jacobsson and West 2007). In this paper, we will conceptualise the domestic context in terms of a *social field*, where we will look at three components, namely the existing a) policy paradigm, b) institutionalized patterns of cooperation and 3) actor constellations (and thus power relationships).

In order to study what happens when the OMC incl. is to be implemented in a specific domestic context, an analytical framework is required that allows us to study the institutional context and the active responses to Europeanization pressures in conjunction. It is important not to conceptualize domestic action merely as adaptation to pressures from the EU level. EU-level processes may imply both opportunities and constraints for domestic actors, who may also work pro-actively to change EU-level opportunity structures. Our analytical framework must allow the double focus on institutional context and opportunity structures *and* actor incentives and activities (cf. Fligstein 2001). In our view, the OMC is likely to exert an impact mainly by changing domestic opportunity structures and by allowing or encouraging various types of actor relationships and dynamics nationally and sub-nationally (see also Jacobsson 2005; Jacobsson and Vifell 2007). The OMC:

- may function to shift resources and alter the power balance between different players;
- It may empower actors by providing them with an opportunity for voice and participation in public policy-making;

- It may foster new alliances between actors and strengthen them as pressure groups;
- It may foster new practices of cooperation, coordination and networking;
- It may provide fuel in national debate and provide 'ammunition' to certain interests in their arguments for policy change and thus provide support for and justification of domestic reform (Radaelli, 2003);
- It may 'infuse' the national policy debate with new knowledge and ideas, such as policy concepts, causal beliefs, links between policy areas and thus change the ways actors conceive of problems and solutions, a discursive or cognitive type of impact (Jacobsson, 2004), that, again, may empower certain interests on expense of others;
- It may provide policy actors with a new arsenal of policy instruments.

Thus far, we know relatively little about the actor-related processes around the OMC on social inclusion: What kinds of resources are embedded in the OMC process for the different actors involved? The dynamics that arise among actors, for instance, among various voluntary organizations are underplayed in the analyses of the OMCs. Civil society is not homogenous, neither in its interests nor in its responses to the OMC. Few studies have focused on relationships of cooperation and/or competition between NGOs or on relationships between government actors and NGOs (however, on the participation of civil society in the OMC process in Germany, see Friedrich 2006, also Kröger 2006; on Britain see Armstrong 2005, 2006).

III. THE OMC ON SOCIAL INCLUSION IN THE SWEDISH WELFARE STATE

The Swedish context, in which the OMC incl. is to be implemented, can be understood in terms of a *social field*, with institutionalized ideas about appropriate policy, institutionalized rules of the game and patterns of cooperation and a set of actor relationships.

In terms of policy paradigm, the Swedish welfare state is characterized by a strong connection between welfare and work and also by the principle of universalism. Comparative research has demonstrated that the European employment strategy fits

very well with this Social-Democratic welfare regime (Jacobsson 2005; López-Santana 2006). The translation of the OMC on social inclusion into the Swedish policy context has, however, encountered several barriers and met, at least initially, with less enthusiasm. The EU's focus on social exclusion and in particular the development of particular programmes to combat social exclusion (the EU's anti-poverty programmes and more lately the OMC on social inclusion) has been met with a certain skepticism among Swedish social policy analysts (Axelsson 2005; Halleröd 2003) as well as policy-makers. For instance, Axelsson (2005) has argued that EU social policy is doubly selective: social rights are granted individuals in their position as workers and based on supranational legislation, while selective programmes are developed for special groups based on deemed needs rather than on citizenship rights and achieved by political coordination rather than legislation. EU social inclusion policy is seen to be formulated in a selective manner, with special policies for special groups deemed needy, which is seen as a (potential) deviation from the universalistic principles of the Swedish welfare state. The Swedish welfare state has very little of means-tested social policy, the only exception being social assistance proper. Instead of constructing special programmes for certain vulnerable groups the aim should be to include everybody in the general welfare policy system (Halleröd 2003: 5). The Swedish strategy report puts it, "Universal welfare is the foundation for social protection and social inclusion" (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2006: 7).

The Swedish skepticism against selective policies is based both on the conviction that such policies are not very effective in alleviating poverty and that they tend to stigmatize groups. In contrast, universal welfare is considered more effective but is also a way of securing support for the welfare state among broader strata of the population, since everyone gains from the welfare state, not just certain groups. However, this self-image tends to deny patterns of social exclusion and marginalization that actually exist in the Swedish welfare state. For instance, for groups who do not have a stable and permanent position in the labour market, the Swedish welfare state tends to be less universal and generous. Since they are not qualified for the unemployment benefit they are instead directed to the selective social assistance system. Hence, in times of rising unemployment levels (as in the 1990s) the selective character of the Swedish welfare state tends to increase (ref). Regarding social services, recent studies indicate that it has

become more difficult to get access to public services and these are increasingly directed at those considered as the most in need (ref).

If we look into institutionalized patterns of cooperation in the Swedish welfare state, it is notable that while the Swedish welfare state rests securely in a corporatist tradition, in the sense that policy reforms include consensus building between the government and the social partners (organizations of employers and employees), this has to a much lesser extent been the case for the government in relation to NGOs, citizen groups or voluntary organizations (Rothstein 1992). When making social policy, the Swedish welfare state has rarely included organizations representing poor, marginalized or excluded groups. Social partners, along with a few large social NGOs, have been selected to represent the greater society in discussions with the national ministries. One obvious reason is that poverty has not been a high-profile issue in Sweden. Although social redistribution and economic equality are important political aims, fighting poverty has not been identified as a separate issue requiring a specific arsenal of anti-poverty measures. Swedish social policy rather rests upon the assumption that poverty is a residual problem best combated through active employment-promoting policies combined with an encompassing system of social benefits.

Not only has the OMC incl. challenged the Swedish self-understanding by making poverty and social exclusion a political issue, it has also challenged the institutionalized patterns of consultation. The OMC on social inclusion was a novelty in the Swedish policy context, and, as will be showed in the following sections, new forms of cooperation needed to be established. The Ministry for Social Affairs has from the start been responsible for the production of the NAP on social inclusion. Other ministries are consulted as well as state agencies concerned, such as the National Board of Health and Welfare. The social partners are consulted through the regular social partner consultation, which meets at the Ministry for Social Affairs about every second month. However, the social partners, though, give priority to the action plan on employment. However, for the social NGOs, the OMC process on social inclusion has been an important resource and catalyst in establishing new patterns of cooperation among social NGOs in the Swedish welfare state.

The social partners, used to having a privileged access to policy-making, tend to emphasize that in contrast to NGOs they are *partners*, able to assume responsibility in implementation, and not just being "a participant". The trade unions also tend to question the representativeness of the NGOs, arguing that they only represent themselves, while the trade unions, besides having a very high degree of membership (about 85 %), also have internal democratic structures for representation. Moreover, the trade unions tend to see themselves as representative of all the relevant interests, at least as far as labour market policy is concerned. The NGOs, on their side, argue that the trade unions fail to represent people outside of – and sometimes far from – the labour market, such as the long-term ill, immigrants or disabled people, who have difficulties in entering the labour market, or homeless people. By requiring the participation of NGOs, the OMC incl. has challenged the existing actor relationships and structures of consultation.

IV. MOBILIZATION OF NEW ACTOR CONSTELLATIONS

The following sections will analyze how the OMC on social inclusion functioned as a catalyst for mobilizing new forms of cooperation among social NGOs in Sweden. The mobilization efforts among social NGOs started before the formal OMC process was set up in a national context. Swedish experiences on the social inclusion strategy illustrate what commonly has been referred to as 'the boomerang effect' of NGO-activities (Keck & Sikkink 1998). This notion refers to the fact that NGOs might go beyond national governments and political structures, seek support by their affiliation or membership in trans-national networks or organizations, and then – as the boomerang effect – bring acquired knowledge back into a national context.

In the spring and summer of 2000, representatives from Swedish social NGOs were exploring what opportunities the OMC process would provide and how they could best take advantage of them nationally. Representatives from social NGOs, who had knowledge of the development of the OMC process at the EU level, provided other Swedish social NGOs with information and experience on the detailed content and implications of the process. They were represented in EU-based networks and forums, such as the European anti-poverty network, the European Disability Forum and the Euro-Diaconia and the OMC process on social inclusion was a debated subject in these

networks and forums. One person from the national Swedish co-operative had a central position in EU institutions, i.e. as a representative in the European Economic and Social Committee, an EU advisory body. These contacts and positions enabled the NGO representatives to clarify their strategies, develop their capacities, and direct their efforts to mobilize partners at an early stage. As a way of strengthening NGO capacities, this person invited other social NGOs to form a national network on social exclusion. The network was called 'the Network Against Social Exclusion' (Network). The OMC process was clearly a catalyst for the mobilization of the network.

This development is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the Network consists of social NGOs and voluntary organizations, representing marginal citizens with limited resources for full social participation in society. Some of these organizations provide services while others express a voice. Several member organizations are large, in terms of members and resources, and have a central position in Swedish social policy. Others are small, with few members and limited resources. In our view, the Network constitutes an innovation since it is the first network gathering a majority of social NGOs working in the field of social welfare and social exclusion in Sweden. The Network has established itself as one collective actor for a spectrum of national organizations that previously worked individually or with different agendas. It has gathered organizations belonging to the Swedish movement of people with impairments, religious organizations and communities, user organizations, client organizations, social economy organizations, immigrant organizations and ethnic associations. The workers union and the white-collars union were both invited to participate in the Network, but both declined.

Second, the Network members hold key positions in their respective organizations (general secretaries, chairpersons or senior advisers). Despite the Network lacking substantial economic resources, it gathers top spokespersons from a large number of social NGOs, which naturally has given the Network a fairly high status among social NGOs. Choosing a network model, these top spokespersons do not have to comply with formal or long-term obligations, instead use the Network as a general framework for interaction and communication. This proved to be an important strategy in mobilizing a network, yet also difficult to handle. Members have pointed out the Network's weak

legitimacy, as not being a 'democratic' organization with formal standards and clear membership regulations.

Third, what further distinguishes this Network from other forms of associations, alliances and coalitions of social NGOs in Sweden, is the role that EU policies play. In short time, these NGOs successfully mobilized a Network giving the fourth objective of the OMC process on social inclusion high priority, i.e. the objective of 'mobilizing all relevant parties'. Hence, in an opportunity structure perspective, the OMC was a significant factor into building new alliances between actors and strengthen them as pressure groups. However, not only was the OMC process of great significance for establishing the Network, it is also the first grouping using EU policies to put pressure on the national government. Since its start in 2000, the Network have had a threefold aim: i) to explore the possibilities of the OMC process on social inclusion; ii) to form a network capable of speaking to the Swedish government with one voice; and iii) to become the one recognized actor for co-operating with the government in writing NAPs on social inclusion.

This means that the OMC on social inclusion constitutes the 'common discourse', 'common framing of claims' and 'conception of problems' which the Network needs to keep together. However, the Network has remained largely unnoticed in the public sphere. Most likely this is due to its network character, the diversity of organizations participating and the fact that the Network mainly works with EU related issues., which tend to be low-profile issues in Sweden Moreover, the Network has had some internal difficulties to develop a detailed program that goes beyond the OMC process. Even though internal working groups have tried to come up with some more detailed aims and objectives, this remains a largely unresolved issue in the Network.

The policy positions of the Network are probably best expressed in relation to the points that it delivered to the government in relation to the recent NAPs and Strategy report. In general the Network presented their vision as a society based on solidarity and social justice, combined with strong universal welfare policies. The Network focused on the most vulnerable in the Swedish society (poor, socially excluded, homeless, drug addicts, immigrants etcetera) and claimed that these have a right to a decent standard of living, equal treatment, access to welfare services such as care, education and housing, based

on their needs and on equal terms. With regard to the Network's demands, its positions can be grouped into three different themes: First, the Network demanded the Swedish government to take a more holistic perspective on issues of social exclusion, and the Network identified the NAP as a device to encourage more coordinated public efforts (for instance between Ministries, but also in relation to the social partners). Second, the Network demanded the government to more directly include users and citizens in vulnerable positions in the decision-making process. Third, the Network demanded the government to develop partnership agreements with the social NGO sector, in terms of clarifying resources, agendas and advice.

Arguably, the Network tends to avoid domestic policy issues, as members have different opinions and this would cause too much disturbance. Even when Network members have similar opinion on certain issues, these have rarely been clarified in any greater detail. As expressed by one member of the Network: '… if we get too much into details, the Network will fall apart' (interview, Kaj Forsberg). The Network's internal 'policy program' also relates to the special role social NGOs have in the Swedish welfare state. Despite social NGOs ambition to make their voice heard in debate and influence public policy, they do not want to be reduced to executors or instruments of public policy. They are very much in favor of universal welfare state arrangements, and they are extremely cautious not to take over what they consider the responsibility of the welfare state. This is always a delicate balance and, according to our interviews, a matter of constant internal debate in the Network.

V. CONTENTION OVER CONSULTATION

The Network has engaged in several strategies and activities in relation to the NAP process on social inclusion. The following section analyses these activities, which started already in late 2000. At this stage, it was apparent that officials from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs did not know much about the OMC process, nor did they show any great interest. Although social NGOs invited representatives from the Ministry to discuss the EU initiatives, invitations were turned down. The first years with the OMC process on social inclusion gave the Network limited opportunities to influence the process, and it can mainly be characterized as a contentious period.

The Swedish government defined the NAP as a state-of-the-art document that would not describe future actions or welfare reform (Jacobsson 2005; Johansson 2007). Only a few people at the Ministry were involved in writing the NAP, which meant that the Swedish government kept the NAP under very tight control and circumvented social NGO claims for inclusion in policy-making. The Ministry considered it only necessary to inform the Network before and after the NAP, expressing clearly that the Network could not expect to influence the NAP. In the view of the Ministry, action plans in response to the EU processes, i.e. the NAPs, by necessity have a different status than domestic action plans, since the latter are preceded by a much more throughout preparation and are passing the 'ordinary way', i.e. preceded by public investigations and followed up by government bills which provide funding. EU-related action plans by necessity get the status of state-of-the-art reports. This remains the government position: Policy is not made in OMC process and its NAPs or strategy reports. These reports are precisely reports of policy made in the traditional channels (interview, Ministry of Social Affairs, May 2007).

The Swedish government also questioned the contacts between national social NGOs and European networks. Government officials questioned whether the Network represented EU networks – such as the EAPN or similar – or marginalized groups in Sweden. According to Ministry officials, it was not possible to have a dual representation. In principle, government officials had a point. Some umbrella networks, operating in Brussels, are more or less completely funded by the European Commission. For the Commission, having close contacts with social NGOs can be important tools to influence other EU institutions, and – indirectly – exercise pressure on reluctant governments to come to agreement (Bauer 2002). By referring to civil society, the Commission seeks to legitimize its own proposals.

The government's position challenged the Network, which, from 2001 until 2003, developed several strategies for involvement in discussing, writing and implementing the NAPs. The Network wanted to be full partner in the formulation of the NAP, arguing that this kind of partnership was an explicit objective of the OMC incl. The Network established different task forces to decide what issues to bring forward and how best to influence the OMC process. It argued that the Swedish government presented an inadequate picture of the Swedish welfare state, by failing to describe Swedish social policy from the perspective of social NGOs and voluntary organizations,

and thereby implying that social policy was operated only by the state and public policy actors. To demonstrate both its criticism and its willingness to be partners and participants, the Network produced a 20-page alternative action plan, discussing its view of the EU objectives, which was delivered to the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs in April 2001. By presenting an alternative plan, the Network substantiated its claim that the Swedish government did not fulfill the common EU objectives to which it had agreed.

In a comment to the NAP 2003, the Network stated its support for the OMC and argued that a clearer framework for consultation was needed to actively engage authorities and voluntary organizations both in the shaping and the implementation of the action plan and both at local and national levels. It also pleaded for a user perspective and bottom-up perspective and for cross-sectoral coordination and a holistic policy perspective. To further challenge the attitude of the national government, several of the NGOs in the Network integrated the NAP into their own activities, e.g. developing informational material based on the NAP.

Throughout these years the Network did not involve itself in other activities. Its main activity was to gain recognition in relation to the OMC include. and to influence the NAP. The tension between the government and the Network was hence over the scope and ambition of the OMC process: whether to understand it as one of limited importance for national policy-making or as one involving local, national and supranational actors. The Network, for its part, believed that the process was and should be out of the hands of national governments, as they had signed the Amsterdam treaty and taken part in developing the Lisbon and Nice conclusions. The Network also used its contacts and affiliations with EU-related networks to push the OMC process beyond the complete control of the Swedish government. Members of the Network have afterwards commented upon this period of the Network's activities as somewhat naïve, in terms of its aspirations to actually be a partner of the government in completing the NAP (authors' interviews).

VI. TOWARDS A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR CONSULTATION

Previous patterns of (non-)consultation between the Network and the government changed in autumn 2003, when the government decided to initiate a forum for information exchange and consultations with user organizations, i.e. a 'user committee on social and welfare issues', with the special aim of highlighting the perspective of poor and socially excluded people. Above all, the committee would strengthen user involvement and influence related to outlining and implementing the NAPs on poverty and social exclusion. The background of this committee was not directly related to the activities of the Network. Naturally its criticism and activities played an important role, yet more important was the change of Ministers, as the new Minister of Social Affairs (Morgan Johansson, another Social Democrat) was much more interested in developed new forms of consultation, above all for groups holding a marginalized or even socially excluded position in the society. Another important background factor was a general trend in the Swedish welfare state, as politicians and public authorities to an increasing extent have aimed at including users and citizens in discussions on their welfare.

The committee has no formal power to make decisions. The formal aims of the committee are to share knowledge, constitute a forum for discussions and analyses regarding the possibilities and challenges for extended user involvement, and bring together organizations to seminars and conferences etcetera (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2004). For the Minister, the committee constituted an environment in which he could test ideas, initiate discussions and get information from the NGO sector.

The establishment of the user committee represented substantial progress for the Network, since it gained access to a forum in which top politicians and public officials participated. The Minister chaired the committee, accompanied by his senior political adviser. The Director General of the National Board of Health and Welfare and higher officials from the Swedish association of local authorities also participated. The Network was offered the position to be the actor to nominate representatives to the newly establish committee. What previously had been a Network mainly involved in EU related affairs and ambitions to influence a single document, now turned into a Network with a highly privileged position in relation to domestic affairs. Hence, to be a

member of the Network potentially meant to have a direct contact to the government and the Minister of Social Affairs.

These new opportunities caused some tensions within the Network, and above all concerning who/what organizations would be elected to the new committee. These discussions also included what organization members of the committee would represent. Communication with members of the Network reveals that some individuals claimed to have a dual role, in terms of on the one hand representing the Network, and on the other hand representing their individual organization. The complex nomination and election procedure that followed demonstrates that this relationship between the committee and the Network is ambiguous, and obviously concerns disagreements over substantial resources. In this procedure, Network members had the opportunity to nominate delegates, yet only delegates fulfilling criteria, such as having the ability and strength to express the voice of users and their organizations against the Ministry in a critical and constructive manner; experience of working in organizations with socially and economically vulnerable (at grass-root level); contribute to the committee's role as strengthening user involvement in the completion of the NAP. Illustrative for the stressed situation, the Network decided that the committee should have a similar composition, including representatives from church organizations; disability organizations; social economy organizations; immigrant organizations; organizations for homeless people; and the client movement umbrella organization. The committee also had to represent 'excluded women' and 'excluded immigrants', and on top of that the Ministry required an equal gender profile (Minutes Network meeting 28th of August, 2003). Despite lengthy discussions and ambitions to come to an agreement, the Network could not come up with ten delegations. Instead it put forward 11 people as its representatives, later accepted by the Ministry.

Since the committee started it has met 4 times a year. In contrast to the Network, the committee has only discussed 'domestic issues', and for instance arranged a set of seminars; two seminars in 2005 on homelessness and on the encounter between people and power; two seminars in 2006 on homelessness and social enterprises. Interviews with members of the committee/Network state that they are generally pleased with the committee and the role of the Minister, who showed personal interest in issues of user involvement. They even described the committee as a possible model for how to

implement the NAP locally, i.e. to build local partnerships between public agencies and citizens' organizations. Equally important, they state that the committee probably would not have been set up, had it not been for the OMC process.

However, members of the committee also expressed some unresolved ambiguities. Instead of an end to the Network having arguments and struggles with the Ministry over influence and participation, these initially took place within the committee. While the forum was formally presented as one of consultation and information exchange, Network members said that they had limited influence on the agenda. In the first year, the delegation held meetings, concentrating on topics of interest to the Minister. When the government invited external experts to meetings, NGOs were not allowed to invite their own. The agenda for meetings was distributed only a few days in advance, restricting Network to limited preparation and the Minister tended to leave the meetings early.

The government's behavior in this context draws attention to the disadvantaged role of social NGOs in public policy-making. Some members of the committee even called it 'a hostage situation', in which they mainly functioned as 'experts' on the user perspective, answering questions from the Minister when asked. From its point of view, the government needed the committee to fulfill EU objectives. Other members of the committee believed that these problems merely resulted from the committee having just been established and not yet having found its procedure or form. They expressed a pragmatic approach, arguing that social NGOs had to accept some difficulties when working closely with public authorities, as a necessity for gaining additional influence. Moreover, some Network members criticized the Network itself for focusing only on establishing contacts with the government and failing to develop an agenda for further action. However, communication with members of the Network indicates that some of the unresolved ambiguities tend to be worked out. They express that recent meetings, hearings and seminars have resulted in new working methods, and greater opportunities for NGOs to present their views and opinions.

We argue that the introduction of the user committee represents an institutionalization of participation and cooperation between the government and social NGOs. The OMC process has been an obvious catalyst for encouraging this and providing social NGOs

working with issues of poverty and social exclusion an access point to the Ministry, previously mainly a privilege of social partners. One can also observe a division of labour between the Network and the committee, as the government discusses domestic issues with the user committee, while consulting the Network regarding the NAP on social inclusion. Each forum possesses resources of different kinds for NGOs to exploit, and to fight over internally. The Strategy report for social protection and social inclusion (completed in summer 2006) confirmed this division: the Network was presented as the actor taking part in the completion of the Report, and only the Network presented its claims in the annex to the Report (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2006).

Following public elections in autumn 2006, a non-socialist government headed by Fredrik Reinfelt replaced the former Social-democratic government. The non-socialist parties in Sweden by tradition are more favourable to collaboration with the voluntary sector in the field of welfare policy. The new government chose to submit its own strategy report in autumn 2006, which replaced the former government's report which was already accepted by the EU. The new government has reinforced the 'welfare through work' policy line, by strengthening the incentives to work in the unemployment insurance as well as the tax system (changes opposed by the Social Democrats now in opposition). The new government has also addressed a number of issues related to social exlusion: It has developed a strategy against homelessness, and adressed issues related to violence against women, exposed children, and drug addicts.

VII. COOPERATION AND COMPETITION AMONG SOCIAL NGOs

The development of the OMC on social inclusion in a national context has demonstrated that the process itself embeds resources for social NGOs to exploit. These resources include access to arenas for cooperation and dialogue between social NGOs and access to institutionalized patterns of consultation between NGOs and the government. However, these resources have not only given birth to new patterns of cooperation, but

also competition and struggles between NGOs. Hence, social NGO sector is not homogenous, neither in its interests nor in its responses to the OMC.

Analysing the OMC process from a political opportunity structure perspective, it is apparent that it has proven a challenge for social NGOs to cooperate and 'speak in one voice'. In the Swedish case, the government expected a unified social NGO sector, which it could consult at time to time. For the government, this was highly convenient as it did not have to deal with a variety of organizations, in terms of analyzing multiple views and opinions. In that respect, the formation of the Network made it easier for the government to 'fulfil' the objective to mobilize all relevant actors. The situation has been somewhat more ambiguous for the Network. It has continuously aimed to be as all-encompassing as possible. Fewer participating organizations would mean that the Network no longer could claim to be the single actor, which the government can expect to represent 'all' relevant organizations working in the field. Until to day, the Network has generally succeeded in its ambitions, as few organizations have left the Network. However, acting as uniform actor has proven to be a difficult task for the Network. Organizations tend to have different views on the Network's role vis-à-vis the government. Some members have argued for a more radical and claims-making position in relation to the government, expressing the view that social NGOs have a role of criticizing the public policy. Other members have expressed a more consensus oriented opinion regarding its contacts with the government. Arguably, this is why the Network have aimed to remain an informal network, with no formal rights or obligations for members and operating with internal deliberation and dialogue as its main internal decision-making procedure. Together with the wide variety of participating organizations, the Network's ambition to form an actor 'speaking in one voice' stands in sharp contrast to the fragmented profile of the voluntary sector.

Nevertheless, taking part in the OMC process implies that social NGOs gain access to processes and discussions, constituting resources for them to explore and exploit in their pursuit to strengthen the position of their members (Marks & McAdam 1996). The OMC process provides them with possibilities to acquire resources, knowledge and contacts to be used in national as well as international contexts. We have identified how national social NGOs consider the both the OMC process and the Network to embed important resources, in terms of having the position to represent the NGO sector

regarding consultations on the NAP inclusion, nominating delegates to the user committee and constituting an important arena for knowledge sharing. Moreover, in interviews with members of the Network, they express that participation provides them with insight into EU policy, and contacts with organizations with different backgrounds.

However, NGO actions in relation to EU policies require economic resources, linguistic skills and knowledge about policies and policy-making. Organizations that have a clear EU profile (and competence) tend to have a central position in the Network (Grabner 1993). They have contacts with European networks or organizations and can get hold of general information for instance the status of NAPs in other member states or how NGOs have tried to influence their respective government. Interviews also illustrate that member of the Network experience barriers. Some find it difficult to understand what relevance EU policies have for the national policy context. Similarly, others expressed that it takes years to fully understand the complex and technical language of EU policies in general and the OMC process in particular. Difficulties to understand English language or the technical and bureaucratically language of EU documents make it difficult for NGO activists to comprehend what consequences EU policies might have for their organization and their daily work.

Resources might also be reasons for internal competition and struggles. The Network has had difficulties in reaching an agreement regarding what organizations that would represent the Network (and the social NGO sector) in the user committee, i.e. some organizations emphasized that they represented a special interest/group that could not be left out from discussions on poverty, social exclusion and marginality. Observations at meetings further demonstrate that organizations adopt a dual position in contacts with the Minister (and partly also in the Network), as both representatives of the Network and their individual organizations. These mixed interest patterns illustrates how members of the Network have their own agendas, aiming to use the OMC/ NAP for their organizations' own purposes. This could already be observed at the time when the Network started, as some members not only aimed to influence social inclusion policy and establish consultation procedures with the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, but also wanted to influence employment and labour market policy and the related Ministries. Here the Network became a platform for the ambition to try to break the monopoly of social partners on employment issues.

Hence, we cannot reduce the OMC process merely to dynamics between the government and NGOs; instead it is obvious that social NGOs develop the OMC process for their own purposes. Since the start of the OMC process, Swedish organizations have used the NAP for internal workshops and education programmes. The Network is currently producing extensive information material on the NAP social inclusion. A website is also under construction, marketing the Network and providing information to NGOs on the OMC/NAP processes.

X. CONCLUSION: NEW RESOURCES FOR NATIONAL SOCIAL NGOs

This paper has studied the micro-politics of the OMC incl. in Sweden in the context of the existing social field. We have seen how a new collective actor, a network of social NGOs, has used the OMC as a resource to challenge the existing structures of consultation as well as dominant problem perceptions, yet with rather limited results in terms of concrete policy impact. Here we will summarize the main findings.

A. The persistence of a policy paradigm

In policy terms, the OMC incl. has meant little new. The strategy report itself is of limited policy relevance. As in other countries, it is more of a report of measures taken than a forward-looking action plan (see Kröger 2006 on Germany and France), which in the Swedish case is the deliberate choice from the side of the ministry and possibly also in line with the EU intention in moving from a NAP to a strategy report integrating all social coordination processes.

The reports have not introduced neither new policy thinking nor many new concrete initiatives. The traditional way of combatting poverty is reinforced: a universal social security system and active labour market policy (the activation or 'primacy of work' principle). It has the firm belief of the Social Democratic governments as well as that of many Swedish welfare policy experts that the model of universal welfare is the best way of combating social exclusion (Halleröd 2003). The persistence of this policy paradigm is striking. However, this does *not* mean that the Social Democratic governments have not taken the work against social exclusion seriously. Besides pursuing the universal

welfare principle and the work principle, special groups have received special attention. Increased resources have been allocated to support people in vulnerable situations, such as drug abusers, mentally disabled persons, homeless people, people under threat of honour-related violence and newly released prisoners. In the strategy report for 2006-2008, three priority groups were identified: long-term unemployed, older people and people of foreign background, which tend to have difficulties in becoming integrated in the labour market in Sweden. The following policy priorities were set: 1) promote work or and education and training for everyone, 2) increase integration, 3) ensure good housing and fight homelessness, 4) strengthen groups in particular vulnerable situations (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2006). The non-socialist government that entered into office in 2006 has also identified long-term unemployed, drug abusers, mentally disabled persons, homeless people, people under threat of domestic violence as special target groups. Possibly, this government will be more open to selective programmes – it is less closely identified with the existing welfare state – but it it too early to draw any conclusions on this.

B. A new collective actor in the social field

If we look at the politics rather than policy side, we can see a number of interesting developments. Although the same is true for Sweden as has been observed in Germany and France, namely that the OMC process is of concern mainly for a few bureaucrats within the national administrations, with a low degree of parliamentarization, it still attracts a lot of interest from NGOs (Friedrich 2005; Kröger 2006). As a direct result of the OMC on social inclusion, a network of social NGOs was mobilized in 2000, and OMC process continues to provide a platform for the network and legitimize its claims for participation in social policy making. The importance of the OMC process as a lever extends beyond exerting impact on the action plans. Armstrong (2005, 2006) has reported that in Britain, the OMC on social inclusion has empowered social NGOs in relation to the government department, and the NGOs there hope that the new working relations will spill over from the NAPincl to domestic policy-making. This is precisely what we have seen in the Swedish case, where the production of the NAP, or strategy report, has meant an avenue for social NGOs to enter in to dialogue with the government officials.

As importantly, in Sweden, the OMC has been a catalyst for changing the organizational landscape in that it has fostered new alliances and forms of cooperation among social NGOs. In a sector that is known to be highly diverse and fragmented, the Network, mobilized in direct response to the OMC, has had the ambition to gather social organizations, and to look, as much as possible, to common interests and speak in one voice in relation to the government. It remains to be seen whether this is the start of more collaboration within the voluntary sector generally. The OMC has at least begun to unite a fragmented sector.

However, we have also shown that some of the groups involved in the Network try to use the platform won to also forward their own agendas. This is not surprising, since the participating organizations have above all a domestic policy agenda, and the OMC and the action plan work become a resource for forwarding domestic agendas. Naturally, this also leads to tensions within the Network.

The informal character of the Network has allowed a broad participation and helped legitimizing its claim to represent 'all relevant interests'. However, the ambition to 'speak in one voice' in practice means seeking the lowest common denominator. The informality and diversity of interests and perspectives means that the Network cannot align behind other than very general goals, unlikely to make much concrete policy impact. It is rather an 'investment' for the future in good working relations with the minister and government.

Moreover, the Network, as it has developed, is dependent on a few key persons' engagement, contacts and knowledge. One of the premises when establishing the Network was that the participants are to have an open mandate from their organizations. While this can be a strength, it can also be a disadvantage in the sense that the OMC process can get a weak 'anchorage' in the respective organizations. This risks making the Nework a 'fragile' actor and possibly weakens its capacity to take part in OMC implementation. The Network as such has no recources but is dependent on the resources of the participating organizations.

Moreover, the voluntary organizations are concerned to retain their independence in relation to the public authorities, and do not wish to be seen as executors of public

policy. Their role in actually *implementing* the policy objectives does not follow automatically from their engagement in the policy-making process. Interestingly, the NGO sector has taken the initiative to formalize the terms of cooperation with public policy-makers, not least municipalities, as to the division of labour between NGOs and public policy bodies. From the side of the NGOs, this has been a way of preventing that the state and the municipalities leave too much welfare responsibility to the voluntary sector, and thus abdicate from public responsibility. It has also been as way to visibilizing and getting recognition for the work actually performed by voluntary organizations in the Swedish welfare state.

C. New institutionalized patterns of cooperation and consultation

Sweden has not had the tradition of involving NGOs and citizens groups in public policy-making, in stark contrast with the participation of social partners. It is fair to argue that the EU has broken the ground for institutionalized partnerships including not only employer and employee interests but also social NGOs, first through the European Social Fund (ESF) and later through the OMC. The EU required participation of social economy organizations in the ESF partnerships, and without that requirement it is open to doubt whether social NGOs would have been included or not. For Swedish social NGOs, the EU has clearly functioned as a lever.

Especially one of the initiators of the Network early realized the importance of trying to influence not only social inclusion policy but also employment policy and labour market policy, and try to break 'the monopoly of the social partners' in that field, as he put it (quoted in Jacobsson 2005). That is, the Network tried to break into the since longly institutionalized social partner consultation that takes place at the Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communications on a regular basis. However, it did not succeed in becoming a regular participant in the consultation at that ministry but only to be invited at special occasions. Neither the ministry nor the social partners recognize the social NGOs as legitimate partners in the dialogue on labour market policy.

In the social field, the NGOs have been more successful and a standing Commission for user participation was set up in 2003, besides the regular consultation at the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. While some social organizations represents strong and well-

organized interests, which already had established channels with the political sphere, sometimes through informal contacts and by their own initiative, sometimes because they were chosen, such as the disability organizations in Sweden, the OMC process has empowered and given voice opportunities for less resource-ful social NGOs and networks, such as representatives of the homeless. The OMC helped to establishing new forms of cooperation among social NGOs, which claim to represent the most marginalized in the Swedish welfare society.

In conclusion, the OMC has served as a resource in the hands of social NGOs, which have made an attempt to de-stabilize and re-negotiate the institutionalized social field, by requesting voice and participation in social policy-making. It has been successful in the field of social policy where no strong competitor exists, while in the field of labour market policy, social partners still stand out as exclusive partners. In policy terms, the OMC incl. is a marginal process in the Swedish welfare state, given the persistance of the existing policy paradigm, which is not seriously challenged even by the Network, and also given the insistence of the governments that the NAP or strategy report is not to be seen as policy-making device but as a report of Swedish policy made elsewhere. The importance of OMC incl. lies in its side-effects on the NGO sector.

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