

# Improving territorial cohesion: the role of stakeholders in OMC and cohesion policy

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## **Abstract**

Since the 1990s the political agenda of the European Union has been increasingly characterized by efforts to strengthen its democratic legitimacy, while at the same time, criticism regarding its democratic deficit have intensified. This has taken place in particular through the promotion of different programmes and tools aimed at involving civil society in the decision making process, both at European and local level, and in different policy sectors.

This literature review deals with a large body of articles, books and reports that have been produced over the last decade on the involvement of stakeholders and citizens in decision making processes, especially in Programmes concerning socio-economic dialogue, poverty and social exclusion at European Level, and social and territorial cohesion and – more recently – social innovation at regional and urban level. It is structured as follows. The first section deals with the different theories and approaches related to stakeholders' and citizens' involvement in the decision making process. The second section focuses on how this concept has been developed in the European Agenda over the last two decades, especially in the framework of the most important programmes dealing with socio-economic dialogue, social policy, social exclusion and poverty. The third section analyses these changes focusing on EU programmes affecting the local level of decision making, the role of social innovation in defining new scenarios for citizens' involvement in policy making on programmes, and initiatives addressing social cohesion, poverty and social inclusion. Finally some conclusive remarks on the main challenges of Stakeholders' Involvement in European participatory practices based on the academic literature developed on the issue are presented.

**Keywords:** Social participation; Social innovation; Stakeholders; Neo-Corporativism; Associative democracy; Deliberative democracy; Participatory democracy

**JEL codes:** L3, Z13 and Z18

# 1 Introduction

Since the 1990s the political agenda of the European Union has been increasingly characterized by efforts to strengthen its democratic legitimacy, while at the same time, criticism regarding its democratic deficit have intensified. This has taken place in particular through the promotion of different programmes and tools aimed at involving civil society in the decision making process (ideally in all stages: agenda setting, knowledge and data production, policy evaluation, and the strict ‘decision-making’ about policies), both at European and local level, and in different policy sectors (Greenwood, 1997; Smismans, 2006; Kohler-Koch, 2012; Kutay, 2014). To this end, the Commission argued for the need to open up the policy-making process in order to get more citizens and organisations involved in shaping and delivering EU policy. Increasing the involvement of civil society in EU policy making, it was suggested, could enhance not just input legitimacy but output legitimacy as well – by “improving the quality, effectiveness and simplicity” of EU policies (2001a: 20).

The call for participation has indeed been broad (especially in the fields of environmental policies, arts and culture, media, health and medicine, etc.), but it has been particularly pronounced and highly visible in the social sphere, probably because of the existence of strong and well-organized civil society organizations in this field. Additionally, especially while coping with social goals, participatory arrangements have been considered as tools potentially advancing three important values of democratic governance: effectiveness, legitimacy, and social justice (Fung, 2015). Of these three values, the strongest driver of participatory innovation has been the claim to enhance both input and output legitimacy (Scharpf, 1999) injecting forms of direct participation into the policy-making process. A second value has been to increase the effectiveness of governance arrangements by attempting to design problem-solving oriented arrangements. Finally, participatory governance reforms were supposed to mitigate injustice in two distinct ways: shifting the balance of influence away from dominant elite, and as an indirect consequence, be of benefit to the other two governance values. As we will argue in this paper, EU engagement in these participatory arrangements has been characterized by strong trade-offs and tensions among the dimensions of democratic governance identified by Fung (2015).

In order to analyse these tensions, this literature review deals with a large body of articles, books and reports that have been produced over the last decade on the involvement of stakeholders and citizens in decision making processes, especially in Programmes concerning socio-economic dialogue, poverty and social exclusion at European Level (Section 2), and social and territorial cohesion and – more recently – social innovation at regional and urban level (Section 3). These contributions are indeed helpful to identify, on the one hand, weaknesses and strengths of these arrangements implemented at different territorial levels and, on the other hand, a particular shift in the types of participatory arrangements adopted over the last three decades.

From this point of view, it is important to distinguish – both theoretically and empirically – between the involvement of lay citizens, representatives of civil society groups, and technical experts in public participation processes. In fact, the analysis of this aspect (who is involved) is crucial to understand the potential effects of these processes on effectiveness, legitimacy and social justice. In particular we will reflect on some implications of this aspect in designing stakeholders' and citizens' decision making processes at the EU level, with a specific focus (Section 3) on the relations between the concepts of social participation and social innovation delivered via EU programmes at the local level. In fact, following Moulaerts' definition (2005), social innovation has three basic components, in part

overlapping with the concept of social participation: (a) the satisfaction of basic social needs (content dimension); (b) the transformation of social relations (process dimension) and; (c) empowerment and socio-politic mobilisation (linking the process and content dimensions) (Moulaert et al., 2005).

This literature review is structured as follows. The first section deals with the different theories and approaches related to stakeholders' and citizens' involvement in the decision making process. The second section focuses on how this concept has been developed in the European Agenda over the last two decades, especially in the framework of the most important programmes dealing with socio-economic dialogue, social policy, social exclusion and poverty. The third section analyses these changes focusing on EU programmes affecting the local level of decision making, the role of social innovation in defining new scenarios for citizens' involvement in policy making on programmes, and initiatives addressing social cohesion, poverty and social inclusion. Finally some conclusive remarks on the main challenges of Stakeholders' Involvement in European participatory practices based on the academic literature developed on the issue are presented.

## **2 Involving whom? Organised groups, citizens, stakeholders, and experts in decision making processes**

Identifying the types of actors involved in so called 'participatory decision making processes' is central in comprehending the potential of enhancing effectiveness, legitimacy and social justice (Fung, 2015). This is a very clear concern in the different theoretical approaches to participation developed in the last decades. On the contrary, the exact criteria for participant selection in EU and local decision making processes have often remained unclear, on the one side given the large variety of forms of participation activated (in terms of geographical scale, time frame of selection, method by which public input is gathered, extent to which this input may be binding for policy decisions), but on the other side also due by a lack of transparency of the procedures (Kroger, 2008; Smismans, 2008).

In order to clear up this ambiguity, we differentiate theoretical approaches (Ideal types of participation) oriented to: 1) the involvement of 'lay citizens' (Participatory Democracy); 2) the involvement of representatives of specific interest groups (Neo-Corporativism and Associative Democracy), and; 3) the involvement of 'stakeholders' and 'technical expertise' (Deliberative Democracy).

1) The involvement of lay citizens. As far as the approaches oriented to the involvement of ordinary citizens in the decision making process are concerned, the most relevant one can be considered the so called 'Participatory Democracy' model (Pateman, 1970; 2010). Indeed, Participatory Democracy is often used as a catchword, referring to the majority of approaches that in different ways bring non-elected citizens together in the decision-making process. The roots of this approach go back to the 1960s, when scholars were keen to develop alternative models of political participation able to overcome the limits of low working class's and other minorities' representation in the institutional political system (Pateman, 1970). The traditional mechanisms of representative government were supposed to be linked to direct democratic procedures, where non-elected inhabitants had de facto decision-making powers, although de jure the final political decision remained in the hands of elected representatives (Bacqué, 2005). Within this approach, citizen participation is seen not so much as a means to an end but as part of the end. It is seen as a way of self-development for individuals, and the creation of a society in which individuals can develop to their full potential (Held, 2004) and, policy

making takes place in a continuous interaction between citizens and the state. However, during the 1980s, 'participation' became part of mainstream practices promoted by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international agencies, not least by the World Bank (1996). An example of this approach is participatory budgeting, an initiative that has been spreading around the globe since its conception in Brazil (Novy and Leubolt, 2005). However, contemporary support for participation comes also from governments, official bodies, and NGOs, unlikely for participation in the 1960s, when it was mainly supported by social movements (Leubold *et al.*, 2008).

2) The involvement of representatives of groups. Shifting to approaches directed at the involvement of group representatives, we can consider the different implications of the theoretical approaches proposed by Neo-corporatism (Schmitter, 2007) and Associative Democracy (Hirst, 2000; Cohen and Rogers, 1992). The main difference is related to the level of representativeness of the organised groups involved in the decision making process.

The distinctive trait of the neo-corporatist model is that the government plays a strong role by surrounding itself with representatives of organised interests (trade unions and employers' associations) establishing a broad consultation with 'those who matter' (Schmitter, 2007). The aim is to achieve social compromise through the mediation of interests, values, and demands for recognition by the various factions in society. It is highly formalised, has real decision-making authority and confers decision-making powers to social partners. The institutionalised process of negotiations between representatives of these key sectors is referred to as intermediation or maintenance of (social) stability in the economic system.

A different approach is proposed by Hirst (2000) in his theory of Associative Democracy. In this theory democratic renewal is achieved by enhancing the role of 'voluntary and democratically self-governing associations' in both welfare and economic governance. Associationism is seen as engendering solidarity and trust, striking a balance between cooperation and competition (Cohen and Rogers, 1992). Within this framework, democratic renewal through associationism takes place through the reform of the welfare state. Hirst is particularly critical of the provision of welfare and social services by large-scale hierarchical bureaucracies – or worse – by quasi-public agencies or hierarchically managed business corporations (following privatisation and deregulation). He argues that such forms of provision have led to a low level of accountability to citizens, and for this reason he argues for an alternative pattern for the governance of welfare, namely welfare provision by a plurality of self-governing associations. According to Hirst (2000), a plurality of associations would accommodate the plural communities (with different values and demands) that we find in contemporary societies, providing members with both the power of voice and, significantly, exit (Hirschman, 1970).

Finally, by analysing the differences between the approaches of Neo-Corporatism and Associative Democracy, we can distinguish between an 'acting for' and a 'standing for' dimension of representativeness (Pitkin, 1972). 'Acting for' refers to how the representative is authorised (ex-ante) to act on behalf of, and is accountable (ex-post) to the represented (Pitkin, 1972: 11). The 'standing for' dimension of representation relates to composition rather than to action, and functions as a map, as an accurate representation of a variety of interests in society (Pitkin, 1972).

3) The involvement of 'Stakeholders' and Experts. Probably the most influential approach in terms of theories focusing on public participation in the decision making process has been that of Deliberative Democracy. The deliberative model of democracy, influenced by social constructivism, is based on the idea of reciprocal justification via reasoned arguments among individuals which consider themselves

as free and equal (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008). Here there is a clear tension between an elitist understanding of deliberation and participation of all – including the non-expert. Actually this tension has been at the core of democracy from Ancient Greece onwards and in the application of the majority rule. In 2006 John Dryzek wrote that deliberative democracy constituted the most active area of political theory in its entirety (not just democratic theory). Not only because of the extremely large and rapidly growing literature on this topic, both theoretical and empirical, but also because of its influence that has spread far outside universities. The last 10–15 years have seen a burgeoning of practical experimentation and mid-level theorising, encompassing diverse forms of deliberative public engagement (Elster, 1998). It calls for a strong change in responsibilities and competences and emphasizes the involvement of citizens (defined as stakeholders) and 'scientific experts' in decision making processes, although recognising their differing roles. When dealing with citizens, they are usually selected from members of the broad public within a jurisdiction or affected by a particular decision. They can be randomly recruited using sampling tools or through public invitations and networks; or found through deliberate outreach to groups otherwise difficult to access; or included by using a mix of recruiting methods (Gastil and Levine, 2005). In this model, citizens are considered as 'stakeholders', individuals with specific interests in an issue or decision. The goal, though, is to represent the diversity of the relevant public in a deliberative process. Experts also play a relevant (and controversial) role in this model. They should help to develop background material, answer questions that arise during the discussion and respond to conclusions and themes reported out of the process (Pellizzoni, 2003). The main interest of deliberative democracy approaches is centred on the process of deliberation among participants in the new arenas. For the most part, "democracy" in the wider society and political system is outside of their purview and it is largely taken for granted as an institutional background of the forums. In the deliberative democracy model the balance between the dimensions of effectiveness, legitimation and social justice is more on the side of effectiveness defined in terms of quality of the process of argumentation among participants and of the final deliberation (Elster, 1998).

In the next sections of this literature review, we will analyse the shifts among these different patterns of participation in the recent EU approach to decision making processes. Specifically at EU level the literature review shows a gradual shift from a Neo-Corporatist model (until the 1990s), to an approach closer to Associative Democracy (during the 2000) and, more recently, to a sort of "deliberative approach", which is used to justify the increasing involvement of "Technical Expertise".

	<b>Neo-corporatism</b>	<b>Associative Democracy</b>	<b>Deliberative Democracy</b>	<b>Participatory Democracy</b>
<b>Territorial Frame (Top-down Bottom-up)</b>	Mainly Top-down (Centralised)	Top-down/bottom up	Mainly supported by Subnational Institutions	Mainly bottom-up but sustained by Subnational Institutions
<b>Participants</b>	Organized Interest (Unions, Employers' Organizations) Public Institutions	Associations, NGOs, Organized Interests, Public Institutions	Stakeholders (Citizens-randomly selected; associations; NGOs) Technical Expertise	Potentially the whole Community (lay Citizens, associations, NGOs, Social Parts, Organized Interested)
<b>Governing Logic</b>	Brokering or mediating among competing interests	Inclusionary negotiation	Discursive argumentation	Inclusive negotiation; Discursive argumentation

### 3 Post-Maastricht Stakeholders' Involvement

#### 3.1 The Neo-Corporatist approach

During the last three decades the political agenda of the European Union has been strongly characterised by efforts to strengthen its democratic legitimacy (Kohler-Koch, 2012). Indeed, from its birth, the EU has been suffering from a democratic deficit (Kohler-Koch, 2012) due to its own institutional architecture and the erosion of national sovereignty and representative democracy organised through political parties at the national level. Steps towards European integration rarely included formal democratic processes (namely, "input democracy" as a result of participation by the people) and largely relied on "output legitimacy" (effectiveness of the EU's policy outcomes for the people) (Scharpf, 1970) in order to compensate its democratic deficit. In fact, the dilemma between system effectiveness and democratic legitimacy was a formative theme in early debates over European integration. It was assumed that there is a trade-off between effectiveness and democracy, implying a "Faustian bargain".

While the proponents of a federal future for the EU repeatedly emphasized the importance of familiar democratic institutions, the pragmatists stressed the immediate need for effective and efficient policy-making (Kohler-Koch, 2012; Kutay, 2014).

In order to strengthen its democratic legitimacy, while pushing for effective policy-making, the European Union promoted different programmes and tools to involve citizens in several policy areas. The willingness to "bring the Union closer to its citizens", characterised the "participatory turn" often "branding" programmes and initiatives in the framework of different policy areas and settings (Maiani, 2011). This expression – that changed in meaning over time – was used in the period when the

Maastricht Treaty was ratified (1992) and associated with deep public disaffection with the European construct.

According to some authors, “closeness to citizens” was originally interpreted as the Union’s ability to meet the citizens’ needs and expectations by delivering effective policies (Maiani, 2011). The specific approach to policy making characteristic of the first period of the European Agenda has been the adoption of Neo-Corporatist negotiations, emphasizing the role of Employers' organisations and trade unions in industrial and socio-economic concertation. In this period, the academic literature also used to focus on ‘interest representation’, providing precise descriptions of how different interest groups were organising themselves in the EU context (Greenwood, 1997).

An example of the Neo-corporatist approach to decision-making in relation to socio-economic aspects is the creation of the Social Dialogue Procedure (SDP) in 1992, which required the Commission to consult the European social partners on all legislative proposals in the socio-economic field and allowed them to sign European collective agreements. For an organisation to be recognised as a partner in the European social dialogue implies the need to be organised at EU level and, at the same time, to be representative of several EU Member States, while their national members must be recognised as social partners in their respective countries (EU, 2014). The level of representativeness of organised interests is indeed quite high in this process. Since the 1990s, the main aim of the SDP has been to enable the European Commission to facilitate social dialogue, once the European-level employer and trade union organisations decide to start up an official dialogue process. Within this bipartite dialogue, the European Commission acts as facilitator and mediator, while in tripartite social dialogue, employers’ and workers’ representatives meet together with representatives of the EU institutions before the Commission submits a proposal in some socio-economic field.

During the 1990s, the cross-industry social dialogue resulted in three agreements implemented by Council Directives on: a) parental leave (1995); b) part-time work (1997) and c) fixed-term contracts (1999). In contrast, the social partners failed to agree (on negotiations) concerning four other initiatives – the European works councils, the burden of proof in cases of discrimination, sexual harassment in the workplace and the information and consultation of employees – by the end of the 1990s. As a consequence, the respective Directives were passed via the normal EU legislative procedure instead. In sum, the 1990s not only saw the establishment of a new mode of governance – cross-industry social dialogue – but also a number of social policy directives.

In a nutshell, the SDP has represented an important milestone in the development of a more inclusive style of government for the EU. Through the Social Dialogue Procedure, organised labour and employer associations have been given the authority to participate directly in the creation of EU social policy. Thus, while the Union’s social policy competencies have remained limited, the SDP nonetheless represents an innovation in European policy-making. This new mode of governance can be seen as the first step in a series of procedural answers to intergovernmental blockades to EU social policy (Schafer and Leiber, 2009). However, its history shows a strong dependence on “the shadow of hierarchy” (Smismans, 2008). Actually, after the Maastricht Treaty introduced the SDP, all initial agreements emerged only on the initiative of the Commission, and to ensure the effectiveness of their implementation the social partners always requested the Council to adopt a directive.

In recent years, social dialogue has also shifted from being cross-industry to becoming more sectoral (Dufresne and Pochet, 2006). At present, it takes place in 36 different sectors dealing mainly with industry-specific questions at a European level. Sectoral social dialogue committees regularly focus on

training, working time and conditions, health and safety, sustainable development, and free movement of workers. These committees have adopted several hundred joint texts including Joint Opinions and Agreements, Guidelines and Codes of Conduct. Pochet (2007) analysed 281 texts adopted between 1997 and 2006. While the sectoral social partner committees are very active, a mere 2 percent of all documents contain binding agreements. Most other documents do not commit the social partners to take action or remain, as the Commission criticises, excessively vague (CEC 2004: 14). Other authors conclude that the softening and the sectoralisation of European social dialogue turn it into “an alternative channel for lobbying” rather than resembling corporatist patterns of decision-making (de Boer et al. 2005: 62). To sum up, although SDP has created higher levels of representativeness of the actors involved in the arena, it has been defined as “a not-too-effective governance tool” (Smismans, 2008) in cases where social dialogue initiatives were not backed by an adequate response by EU institutions.

### **3.2 The "Third Sector's Season"**

Since the late 1990s, beside Union and Employer Organisations, also social and welfare associations (the so called Third Sector; Etzioni, 1973) have become central actors in the decision making processes concerning social and economic issues at the EU level. This was a direct effect of a new approach to participation developed by EU institutions. According to Maiani (2011), in this period the concept of “becoming more close to citizens” was especially interpreted by making the Union itself more intelligible and transparent through the rationalisation of its institutional structure and decision-making processes. This tendency was expressed in a systematic way in the White Paper on Governance (2001): built on a longstanding practice of special interest group consultations, its main focus has remained oriented to the involvement of organised groups instead of (ordinary) citizen participation, but with a focus on civil society organisations defined as “important intermediaries between Europe and its citizens” (EU, 2001: 11).

This approach is also recognisable in the Lisbon Treaty: in accordance with Article 11, EU Institutions have a joint responsibility to ensure that organised civil society, which embodies the aspirations and interests of EU citizens, is actively involved in the formulation of EU policies and processes. A long-lasting commitment of all EU institutions to engage in a permanent and structured dialogue with organised civil society (i.e. EAPN and FEANTSA) at EU level since the Lisbon Treaty has been considered essential and has been institutionalised.

The shift towards civil society organizations' involvement can be also recognised in the work of authors emphasizing associations' positive deliberating and decision-making functions. These may produce better, more informed and equitable decisions if included in mainstream policy-making activities (Hirst, 2000; Cohen and Rogers, 1994). Such scholars see voluntary associations, social capital and a vibrant ‘civil society’ as beneficial to democracy and liberty, representing instances of politically excluded segments of the population, and providing access to new public decision-making institutions that might otherwise be off limits (Houtzager and Gurza Lavalle, 2009). This new role for the Third Sector, supported by the EU, has included service delivery activities, but also a set of other roles such as information acquisition, the monitoring of public policies, citizens' education, and linkages between levels of governance beyond the often unsatisfactory institutional linkages mediated by the electoral process and the related governance structures (Brandsen et al. 2005).

This participatory approach has been particularly developed in relation to the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) (De la Porte and Nanz 2004), and it has extended to a broader ‘civil society’ discourse developed by the Union’s institutions over recent years, in particular by the Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee. The OMC has widely been associated to two expectations, namely learning and the involvement of a broad range of actors, with the first increasing effectiveness and the latter decreasing the democratic deficit of the EU (Zeitlin et al., 2005). According to the literature, it is possible to recognise a fairly clear pattern of strengths and weaknesses of OMC as far as stakeholders’ involvement is concerned.

The most important positive aspect is that it has achieved significant progress in improving data, defining commonly agreed indicators and developing a stronger analytical framework so as to better understand and assess the phenomena at stake, encouraging a more rigorous and evidenced-based approach to policy making (Armstrong, 2004). Additionally, it has mobilised a wide range of actors and fostered EU wide networks of people involved in the struggles against poverty. However, the results of the OMC in terms of quality of public participation on issues related to social and economic policies have been criticized by most of the authors (Kroger, 2008). In particular, it remained unclear how representation came about in the first place, who was actually represented in consultation and what mandate these representatives had (Kroger, 2008). European umbrella organisations are organised as confederations and associations of associations, implying structural remoteness from their grassroots constituencies, ideas and preferences (Quittkat, 2013). Although Confederations do not necessarily function badly, this problem of remoteness is also being reinforced in a European context by linguistic, cultural and institutional diversity.

As far as the public visibility is concerned, OMC has been defined as a quasi-invisible process in the media and among citizens (Kroger, 2008), in a few words “the government’s best kept secret” (Brandsen et al., 2005). According to Armstrong (2010) the Social OMC has basically remained elite-driven and opaque, limited with regard to its democratic potential. Examples of (ad hoc) public visibility of the OMC have been rare, although several national studies of the OMC/inclusion have highlighted how Social OMC’s institutional visibility varies strongly within and across countries as well as over time. (Jacobsson et al., 2009; Vanhercke, 2010). However, in spite of these variations, an assessment of the awareness and perception of the Social Inclusion Strand of the Social OMC has come to the conclusion that it “is clear from the experts’ analysis that awareness of the social inclusion strand of the Social OMC is limited to a narrow band of actors in most Member States. [...] In most countries there is virtually no media or public awareness of the Social OMC and no political debate about the process. In only a small number of countries does there appear to be much interest within the academic community or significant social partner engagement” (Frazer and Marlier, 2010: 2). According to some authors (Kröger, 2009), key aspects of the process have remained hidden, due to a lack of circulation of information, even for the “inner circle” of “non-accountable bureaucrats” involved in the Social OMC (Zeitlin, 2005: 484).

### **3.3 *The opening of a new season?***

A new shift in the participatory approach adopted by the EU in decision making processes concerning poverty and social inclusion has been introduced with the European Platform against Poverty (EPAP). EPAP is one of seven flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. It is designed to help EU countries to reach the headline target of lifting 20 million people out

of poverty and social exclusion. The platform was launched by the European Commission in 2010 and will remain active until 2020. Its objective is to ensure that social inclusion emerges alongside economic growth, fostering a high-employment economy delivering both social and territorial cohesion throughout Europe. Area 4 of EPAP is explicitly focused on partnership with civil society in order to support more effective implementation of social policy reforms. In the Communication on the Flagship European Platform against Poverty (EU, 2010) the Commission committed itself to "elaborate voluntary guidelines on stakeholders' involvement in the definition and the implementation of policy actions and programmes to address poverty and exclusion, and will promote their implementation at national, regional and local level". Additionally, it has specifically recognized the key role "of people with direct experience of poverty [which] is acknowledged as a paramount objective of inclusion policies, both as a tool for individual empowerment and a governance mechanism".

After a few years of the EPAP it is possible to propose an assessment of this experience as far the public involvement is concerned. According to Sabato and Vanhercke (2014), during the first years, the "Stakeholder dialogue" was in fact able to reach out to a wide range of stakeholders (the meetings between 2011 and 2014 were attended by up to 100 persons), among them social partners, international organisations (ILO, UNICEF, the Council of Europe and the World Bank), EU institutions (the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and, occasionally, the European Parliament) and Agencies (e.g. EUROFOUND and the Fundamental Rights Agency). It has represented a sort of 'hybrid' form of public participation in which the different types of actors (ideally lay citizens, organized interests, NGOs and technical experts) have been invited to participate, without any recognition of the different level of representativeness of the different actors. However, far from a rhetoric recalling an approach to citizens' involvement quite close to the Participatory Democracy approach, in the "stakeholder dialogue meetings" organised for the EPAP, Sabato and Vanhercke (2014) recognize a more central role played by experts in the decision making process compared to OMC (where, however, Technical Expertise was already present). In fact, the EPAP was able to promote a broader range of stakeholder involvement, overcoming the difficulty – experienced during the OMC – to reach out to actors and institutions outside the EU's 'inner circle' of Social Affairs' actors. However, a crucial aspect has been the strategic role played by stakeholders characterized by a high level of expertise. With the EPAP, the improvement of technical expertise in the stakeholder dialogue meetings has gone hand in hand with a decreasing relevance of the role of more traditional stakeholders, such as EU civil society organisations, and a lower level of attention paid to the involvement of people experiencing poverty. Moreover, the 'broadening' of the dialogue decreased the quality of the exchange, with the European Commission determining the agenda of the meetings and little time devoted to stakeholders' statements.

To sum up, EPAP stakeholder meetings seem "to have been reduced to a largely bureaucratic exercise for exchanging information, which is again a far stretch from the 'shared commitment' which the EPAP was supposed to develop. Additionally at the national level, stakeholder involvement in drafting the relevant documents such as the NRPs has been generally very limited (EAPN 2014; Frazer 2014), especially when compared to the Lisbon period (EAPN 2014)". This fact has been interpreted as the result of a lack of elaboration of 'voluntary guidelines' for stakeholder involvement at the national level and the promotion of their implementation at national, regional and local level, as defined in 2010. In order to overcome these limits, some associations have suggested a European stakeholder forum attached to the Social OMC under the aegis of the European Platform Against Poverty (Frazer, 2014). The forum represents, firstly, a tool for monitoring and assessing national practice and performance,

and secondly for improving mutual learning, both in terms of drawing on bottom-up expertise about policy effectiveness, and of wider dissemination and follow-up of results from OMC peer review activities. Similar fora could be created at the national level in order to facilitate stakeholder participation in the preparation, implementation and assessment of both the domestic multi-annual strategies as well as to ensure that the stakeholder perspective on the domestic strategies is reflected in the European Plans. However, in order to develop a real involvement of citizens and especially of people with direct experience of poverty the local level plays a crucial role.

#### **4 The local level: the citizens' participation level?**

The framework of the EU programmes fostering an arena for stakeholders' involvement and citizens' participation in social policies at local level is quite complex. This is due to the overlapping of sectoral and inter-sectoral initiatives promoting inclusive decision making processes at regional and urban level, with a focus on the participation of citizens and "marginal groups" (at least ideally) in policies for social and territorial cohesion.

As already mentioned, the multilevel-governance structure of the OMC has put lot of emphasis on including local stakeholders, and especially people experiencing social exclusion and poverty. However, when comparing countries, one can observe different levels of stakeholders' involvement (INBAS, 2010) in terms of participation of certain types of stakeholders such as NGOs representing people experiencing poverty, or service providers, or even primary stakeholders such as people experiencing poverty themselves. Direct involvement of people experiencing poverty has been observed in Germany, Spain, Luxembourg, Malta and the United Kingdom. NGOs working with the poorest people, whether being part of the service delivery side or representing their interests, have been generally involved in the NSR process, mainly at the design phase.

As far as the outcomes on the public at large, the media has not played a key role in disseminating information on the social inclusion OMC process. Secondary Stakeholder Experts and academics have been generally involved only at the stage of preparation and evaluation of policies. People experiencing poverty have been involved in some countries but mainly at the design phase and to some extent at the evaluation phase. The public at large has been neither involved nor substantially informed about the Social Inclusion OMC process, or at least the information provided was generally not labelled as European policy. It emerges from the literature that the identification of relevant stakeholders for the social inclusion process seemed to be quite ad hoc in most countries and no example of systematic mapping of potential stakeholders in the relevant fields emerged. Transparent and formal criteria to select stakeholders existed only in some countries: Austria, Ireland, France, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania, and Spain. In the majority of other countries, the selection criteria were informal and based on unpublished guidelines (e.g. administrative practices).

The OMC represented the most important governance tool to foster a culture of participation in most of the EU Countries, but many other overlapping programmes in different policy sectors have been dealing with this issue, often targeting the ambiguous aim of "social cohesion" (especially European Regional and Cohesion Funds) (Eizaguirre et al., 2012). Urban, Interreg III, Leader Plus, Equal, Interact, Urbact are all urban, regional and territorial policies, referring to forms of governance which are usually and explicitly related to the local context, to the territorial milieu and to its networks of actors (Pinson

and Le Galès, 2005). Programmes of local development often incorporated environmental NGOs or third sector organisations in order to respond to an EU-dictated funding need for social participation and in order to acquire legitimacy. In fact, the European Union has played a wide regulative role creating opportunities for new governance arrangements at the local level, involving co-operation between market and civil society actors and developing co-ordination between multiple policy-making scales (Pinson and Le Galès, 2005, Kazepov, 2010).

The scientific debate around the results of these experiences is by now quite “mature” and it has not only provided descriptions of the procedural characteristics of the multilevel governance model, but has also analysed the underlying objectives, the transformation of decision-making mechanisms (Jessop, 2002; Le Galès, 2002; Brenner, 2004), as well as the consequences for the quality of democracy (Novy et al., 2012; Swyngedouw, 2005) and the role of discourse (Leubolt et al., 2007; Pierre, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2005).

An overall picture of the ‘participatory turn’ at local level is, however, difficult to offer. Empirical research has shown the high heterogeneity of experiences, and the impacts of these actions have largely differed according to the variety of contexts in which they were implemented (Sylver et al., 2010). Generally speaking, these experiences have registered the most positive results in contexts already characterized by strong networks among civil society actors and a political culture already oriented to inclusive decision making processes. However, in large part the results have been modest both in terms of legitimacy and effectiveness, with weak and “Janus faced” (Swyngedouw, 2005) effects in terms of social justice. Many experiences showcased an increasing proximity both in geographical terms and in relation to communication practices between citizens, public administrations and local authorities, implying a low degree of politicisation and a low level of mobilisation – particularly of the working class (Novy et al., 2012). In synthesis, they can be viewed as very ‘light’ versions of participatory democracy, often based on ‘selective listening’ and grounded in informal rules, leaving civil society with only marginal autonomy and dealing just with ‘small things’ that seems far away from the competitive party system. If on the one side the main strength was improving communication between citizens and policymakers, on the other side the weaknesses laid in the essentially arbitrary way in which policymakers ‘selectively listen’ to people’s perspectives, accepting proposals (cherry-picking) in line with their own plans. To sum up, the radical critique of promoting participation in decision-making deals with both the process itself and the outcomes in terms of social justice. According to some scholars (Swyngedouw, 2005) it has hidden inequalities, exclusion and conflict rather than revealing them. Indeed, pre-existing inequality of resources and status and omnipresent power relations has biased public discourse and has produced unequal influence in deliberation. Moreover, when local authorities have promoted civic participation and public–private partnerships, they have often offloaded public responsibilities, cutting expenditure and legitimating the hegemonic status quo (Brenner and Theodore, 2001; Stoecker, 2002; Harnes, 2007; Harvey, 2007).

Some (few) investigations (ESPON, 2013) have also highlighted some positive outcomes in terms of legitimacy and effectiveness of policies fostered through participation. The main thesis is that when the deliberation has produced a consensus about goals, citizen involvement in governance has improved government effectiveness and accountability for producing results. Participants, especially those with local experiential information, have contributed to monitor implementation of consensual goals, deepening participatory democracy and making it more efficient. Additionally, although most

evidence suggests that disadvantaged communities remain on the margins of partnerships and new participatory opportunities, they still allow ‘active subjects’ to influence these new arenas. And the contestation of power — the ever-present possibility of resistance — is potentially empowering (Morison, 2000; Taylor, 2007).

According to Silver et al. (2010) however, the common tendency to argue that participation is either neoliberal governance or an empowering, inclusionary, progressive tool should be more nuanced to deal with context specificities, highlighting diversity of intention, practice, and outcomes that lie behind the application of ‘the same’ concepts.

Nevertheless, an interesting shift is recognisable in EU policies affecting the local level. After two decades characterized by a strong ‘participative turn’, a new emphasis on the concept of social innovation is in part replacing the traditional focus on participatory democracy. Indeed social innovations are supposed to rely on new forms of interaction between the state, private for profit and not-for-profit firms and civil society and on the adoption of a participatory governance style by the institutions. They are described as an “important new field [...] It is about tapping into the ingenuity of charities, associations and social entrepreneurs to find new ways of meeting social needs that are not adequately met by the market or the public sector [...] tackling societal challenges, [and] empower[ing] people and creat[ing] new social relationships and models of collaboration” (European Commission 2010: 21). In this framework, participation seems to shift from a form of “decision making by talking”, towards a form of “decision making by doing”. However, the results of this new shift in terms of empowerment and participation have not been evaluated until now.

## **5 Final remarks**

Participatory arrangements have represented a strategic tool implemented by the EU to strengthen its fragile institutional architecture and to be closer to “its citizens” (Maiani, 2011), by promoting a more inclusive approach to decision making. Participatory arrangements have been considered tools potentially advancing effectiveness, legitimacy and social justice (Fung, 2015). However, starting from the beginning of the EU participatory turn, the scientific literature has highlighted a use of these new policy tools particularly oriented to effectiveness and legitimation of top-down policy-making, rather than helping to develop a more inclusive democratic system, oriented to promote actions empowering the most marginal groups (Novy, 2012). As argued in this literature review paper, over the last two decades this tendency has been characterized by the promotion of inclusive arenas inspired by approaches to inclusive democracy. These are deeply different as far as the representativeness of the actors included in the processes is concerned: from the Neo-Corporatist approach of the SDP, to the promotion of the role of associations and the third sector in the OMC and the more hybrid arena of EPAP the changes were progressively lead by a sort of elitist deliberative form of decision making. Beside the promotion of a weak pattern of participatory democracy at local level, however, this development misses the involvement of a very relevant target for discussing issues related to poverty and exclusion: the most disadvantaged themselves. Interestingly enough, this fluctuation among different approaches, the existence of arenas mixing different actors in terms of representativeness, as well as the co-existence of different arenas at the same or at different territorial levels, has developed without any general reflection by the EU institutions of the implication of the complex balance among the different overall models. Recently, the institutional reaction to some impasses in the participatory turn seems to have led, at the European level, to a more strategic role of some

“technical expertise” involved in deliberative decision making processes. This is happening in the social policy sector, but it is also a trend recognised in the general literature about decision making process at EU level (Joerges, 1999; Smismans, 2012). In general, with regard to representation, it remains unclear how representation comes about, in particular who is actually entitled to participate, who actually participates and what mandate these representatives have. In addition, critical ideas and interests seem even more to not be part of the consultation process, mainly because they have withdrawn from participation due to disappointment (Kroger, 2008).

In a nutshell, the very large part of the literature, comes to the conclusion that the empirical reality of different participatory arrangements is at odds with the related EU-discourse, and it does not live up to the expectations that the institutional discourse have raised. The overall assessment strongly questions both the gap between the official EU-civil society discourse and its implementation, and the democratic theories that have invested hope in the involvement of civil society in decision making to fill the gap between the EU and its citizens. According to Kohler Koch (2012), the greatest obstacles to democratic participation are embedded in the general institutional framework conditions of the EU. Actually, the EU system seems designed to reach compromise solutions rather than consensus building. This explains the technocratic framing of policy proposals and the reluctance to accept that policy-making is about hard choices concerning competing values, tastes, and interests. Accordingly, EU consultations look even more as exercises in information gathering. A perceived consequence of this uneven representation is a privileged space within the Commission for neo-liberal policies over other policies (Kroger, 2008: 31). In line with this trend, many newly emerging network governance arrangements tend to favour short-term output efficiency at the expense of long-term democratic legitimacy and socio-economic sustainability undermining the legitimacy of European integration (Leubolt et al., 2007; Peters & Pierre, 2004).

A more ambiguous shift is recognisable in the programs affecting decision making processes at local level. After two decades characterized by a strong participation turn, a new emphasis on the concept of social innovation is in part replacing the traditional focus on participatory democracy. Within this framework, social innovations are considered as an effective and fresh "paradigm" in order to “bring the Union closer to its citizens”, still fostering legitimacy, effectiveness and social justice. As far as legitimacy is concerned, civil society organizations supported by these programs are supposed to be important “intermediaries between Europe and its citizens”. Effectiveness is supposed to be reinforced through the implementation of innovative - and less expensive- services at local level, better dealing with social exclusion and poverty. Finally, Social Justice is supposed to be the result of the inclusion in the decision making and the empowerment of the population targeted by these programmes.

The results of this new shift in terms of empowerment and participation has not been evaluated until now. However, we can recognise at least two main criticalities in terms of legitimacy and outcomes in terms of social justice. First, the top-down selection of the “innovators” may amplify the underrepresentation of critical ideas, not functional to the reproduction – at local level – of the rhetoric characterizing the EU discourse on social policies contrasting poverty. Second, in a context characterized by economic crisis, austerity and increased pressure on the welfare states, the risk is that this “new” concept, replacing the abused rhetoric of participation, may be used as a new tool of legitimation of policies with uncertain outcomes in redistributive terms and social justice.

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## **ImPRovE: Poverty Reduction in Europe. Social Policy and Innovation**

Poverty Reduction in Europe: Social Policy and Innovation (ImPRovE) is an international research project that brings together ten outstanding research institutes and a broad network of researchers in a concerted effort to study poverty, social policy and social innovation in Europe. The ImPRovE project aims to improve the basis for evidence-based policy making in Europe, both in the short and in the long term. In the short term, this is done by carrying out research that is directly relevant for policymakers. At the same time however, ImPRovE invests in improving the long-term capacity for evidence-based policy making by upgrading the available research infrastructure, by combining both applied and fundamental research, and by optimising the information flow of research results to relevant policy makers and the civil society at large.

The two central questions driving the ImPRovE project are:

How can social cohesion be achieved in Europe?

How can social innovation complement, reinforce and modify macro-level policies and vice versa?

The project runs from March 2012 till February 2016 and receives EU research support to the amount of Euro 2.7 million under the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. The output of ImPRovE will include over 55 research papers, about 16 policy briefs and at least 3 scientific books. The ImPRovE Consortium will organise two international conferences (Spring 2014 and Winter 2015). In addition, ImPRovE will develop a new database of local projects of social innovation in Europe, cross-national comparable reference budgets for 6 countries (Belgium, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Spain) and will strongly expand the available policy scenarios in the European microsimulation model EUROMOD.

More detailed information is available on the website <http://improve-research.eu>.

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