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# Learning from cultural diversity? The case of European Union-funded transnational projects on employment

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims at analysing inter-cultural learning dynamics on the ground. For this purpose, I investigate dynamics of learning from cultural diversity in European Union-financed transnational projects on employment and vocational training. Taking into account literature on new modes of governance and policy learning, I propose first a framework for the study of learning in a context of cultural diversity. The empirical part of this article serves to illustrate under which circumstances flexible modes of governance (such as the EU-programmes under analysis) lead to different types of learning. In cases of epistemic learning, project managers aimed at the transfer of one-size-fits all solutions and thus, cultural diversity appeared as an obstacle. Flexible governance arrangements in inter-cultural contexts also led to reflective learning (learning from diversity) and ultimately to innovation and empowerment. The understanding of learning from diversity required an in-depth qualitative analysis. Empirical evidence is drawn from document analysis and in-depth semi-structured interviews in France and the Netherlands.

## KEYWORDS

Cultural diversity;  
employment; European  
Union; policy learning;  
transnational cooperation

## 1. Introduction

The reconciliation of a political and economic union with cultural diversity is one of the greatest challenges that Europe is currently facing. More than ever before, cultural differences – inflated by populist movements – appear as a threat to the viability of the European integration project. Culture is not just seen as an obstacle. In the European context, cultural diversity is also perceived as an important resource for societal improvement, including the promotion of innovation and competitiveness (Bodirsky 2012; Burca and Scott 2006).

Cultural diversity has become one of the key words in the European Union's (EU) policy rhetoric and governance, but terms such as identity, culture and inter-culturality often remain unclear and open to discursive manipulation (Lähdesmäki and Wagener 2015). While the analysis of policy discourses remains relevant, to better understand the role of cultural diversity in EU politics, it is also of utmost importance to direct attention to the effects of EU policies on the ground. To grasp the role of cultural diversity on the ground, this article

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investigates learning from diversity within the framework of EU-funded transnational cooperation in the domain of employment.

EU institutions – namely the Commission – have actively been funding transnational projects in this area for around 40 years. Through the transnationality principle, the Commission supports economically transnational communities of practice and joint-projects managed by private entities (voluntary organizations and for-profit groups) and public authorities based on different EU member states. EU-funded transnational projects can be considered as project-based temporary organizations charged with highly complex tasks (Hachmann 2016). As an original and innovative way of multi-national and thus, inter-cultural policy-making, transnational cooperation constitutes an appropriate object of study for the analysis of policy learning in a context of cultural diversity. While implementing EU policies at the national and local level, can cultural diversity be considered as a barrier or as an opportunity in dynamics of policy learning? Is the EU to be considered as uniformizing and monocultural project or does it offer an appropriate framework for governing diversity?

Within the social area, academic studies on dynamics of mutual learning in the EU context have mainly focused on the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) and its effects on social policy and welfare regimes (Barcevicius, Weishaupt, and Zeitlin 2014; Casey and Gold 2006; de la Porte and Pochet 2012; Heidenreich and Zeitlin 2009). The OMC is considered as a tool for mutual learning connecting European and national arenas. EU-funded transnational projects have attracted much less scholarly attention. They have even been referred to as ‘the best kept secret in Brussels’ (Vanhercke and Lelie 2012).

Policy learning in dynamics of transnational cooperation is shown through the detailed analysis of a qualitative case-study: EU-funded transnational projects in the domain of employment. To better understand learning dynamics within two different cultural backgrounds data are retrieved from two member states: France and the Netherlands. Data include primary documentation and 23 in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out with project managers and key national officials in these member states. This article discusses first the increasing interest for learning from cultural diversity in European studies and EU practice, leading to more possibilities to develop learning from diversity on the ground. It proposes then two ideal-types of policy learning that can be applied to the analysis of EU-funded transnational projects. The empirical analysis illustrates under which circumstances EU-funded programmes led to convergence (epistemic learning) or to learning from diversity (reflective learning). When homogeneity was sought, via the transfer of one-size-fits all solutions, cultural diversity was perceived as an insurmountable obstacle. However, cultural diversity also led to learning from diversity, and ultimately to innovation and empowerment.

## **2. The diversity turn in European Governance**

This section shows first how the EU has departed from an understanding of European integration based on harmonization and uniformity to give way to a valorization of cultural diversity as an opportunity to increase competitiveness and innovation. Secondly, attention is turned to policy learning in the EU policy context with a specific emphasis on project-based learning.

## 2.1. *From rule-based harmonization to learning from diversity*

State formation and nation-building were closely related to cultural homogeneity (Kraus and Sciortino 2014). While usually celebrating diversity in abstract terms, the EU has never fully developed an appropriate approach or specified the meaning of diversity in the context of transnational policy building (Kraus 2006). For the purpose of this article, the emphasis is placed on cultural diversity. Most research on cultural diversity focuses on the relationships between a dominant culture and minorities within nation-states. In the EU context, governing diversity also means cultural diversity among EU member states (or national diversity), which is the focus of the present article.

The tension between unity and diversity has been a prominent feature of the first years of the European integration process. Integration through harmonization was perceived as the pursuit of uniformity and thus, it was opposed to national diversity. The first European Communities operated as relatively centralized, homogeneous decision-making entities following the classical Community Method, representing the paradigm of one-directional integration through uniformity and harmonization (Burca and Scott 2006). During the 1980s and 1990s there was a gradual departure from this traditional zero-sum understanding of unity and diversity. Since then, the EU has progressively embraced different degrees of differentiation and flexibility aiming at the accommodation of diversity including both constitutional changes and provisions specific to single policy areas.

Traditional theories of European integration have not offered specific analytical frameworks for the study of policy-making in a context where cultural diversity prevails. The core assumption of inter-governmentalism is that European integration does not challenge the autonomy of nation-states (Moravcsik 1998) and within this framework there was no need for the conceptualization of diversity. On the other hand, neo-functionalism could be interpreted as a means towards the suppression of diversity. Transnational exchanges and mobility ultimately would lead to the emergence of a *we-feeling* among different peoples, considered as a necessary condition for a successful united polity (Deutsch et al. 1968). Within this mind-set, cultural diversity has sometimes been considered as an obstacle to policy-making or to further integration. For example, national diversity was bound to lead to deadlock or to modest policy change unless escape routes produced institutional innovation (Heritier 1999). In practice, institutional innovation often led to the preservation of diversity. For example, transnational cooperation was first perceived as a neo-functionalist device to convey a European dimension to development and social awareness raising projects (Sanchez Salgado 2014). Rather than contributing to a uniform European dimension, transnational cooperation has been implemented in a flexible way often leading to learning from diversity, as it will be shown in this article.

Neo-functionalism's emphasis on the need for a *we-feeling* has also inspired EU's work on promoting a coherent cultural identity among its citizens, reflected mainly on EU education, youth and cultural policies. Attempts at establishing EU identity also reflect a tension between diversity and unity. On the one hand, the EU emphasizes intercultural dialogue, and the need to talk through differences and to develop mutual empathy. At the same time, the EU does not accept all forms of difference: worthy diversity needs to be promoted while problematic differences (e.g. differences associated with human rights violations or refusing the intercultural ideal model) need to be managed and policed (Bodirsky 2012). European cultural politics is thus a risky endeavour, since it can be a means to impose a normative

construction of the 'good citizen'. The promotion of intercultural dialogue can also become a uniformizing and monocultural project (Lähdesmäki and Wagener 2015).

The governance turn in European studies created a new opportunity for the valorization of cultural diversity. The first governance theory trying to reconcile unity and diversity in European politics was multi-level governance (Hooghe 1996). This trend towards reconciliation has been further developed within literature on new modes of governance. Recent studies on the OMC are particularly relevant since many of them deal with the question of mutual learning (de la Porte and Pochet 2012; Zeitlin and Philippe 2005). The OMC is thought to promote mutual learning among member states through policy tools such as exchanges of good practices or contextualized benchmarking. Experimentalist governance or deliberative polyarchy emphasizes the need to learn from diversity and it is even presented as a 'machine for learning from diversity (Sabel and Zeitlin 2008: 276)'.

The OMC's capacity to promote learning from diversity has been highly contested. Existing evidence establishing a causal linkage between policy learning via the OMC and policy change is considered weak (de la Porte and Pochet 2012). The OMC would not satisfy the requirements for a learning-friendly environment (Kröger 2009) and would only allow for a superficial exchange of ideas. Mutual learning could also be problematic because people that learn are not those for whom the learning is expected (Greer and Vanhercke 2010). While many authors consider that broad provisions have little effects, a few studies, focusing on a nuanced and more faceted account of the impact of Europe (Graziano, Jacquot, and Palier 2011; Hamel and Vanhercke 2009), have more optimistic view. Horizontal exchanges may not lead to the agreement on one-size-fits all good practice, but they can have many other interesting effects, such as a mirror effect,<sup>1</sup> learning ahead of failure and cold-showering resulting from comparison and peer pressure (Hamel and Vanhercke 2009). A system of governance characterized by broad and non-binding provisions (such as the OMC and EU-funded programmes) has thus been considered to be conducive to dynamics of mutual learning (which is considered here as equivalent to learning from cultural diversity).

## ***2.2. EU project-based learning and cultural diversity***

Along with the governance turn in the 2000, learning has become a major theme on the EU academic and political agenda (Zito and Schout 2009). However, there is still a mismatch between the extent to which learning instruments are applied in the EU and the understanding of learning in complex multi-level systems. The study of policy learning processes is not an easy task since learning is difficult to define, isolate and measure. Learning can be perceived as a cumulative process of acquiring new knowledge and up-dating old beliefs (Dunlop and Radaelli 2013; Hall 1993) or as a struggle for power, in which a hegemonic coalition of actors tries to impose a dominating set of concepts and practices (Nedeergard 2006). The following dimensions appear to be relevant for the study of learning: the tractability of the problem, the role of expertise, the quality and type of learning and the role of context (Dunlop and Radaelli 2013).

Policy learning in the EU context is intimately connected to governance (Radaelli and Dunlop 2013). Given their inter-cultural component, EU-funded transnational programmes – along with the OMC – are policy instruments in which learning from cultural diversity should be the most expected. While the OMC is a tool of governance based on common objectives and indicators, aiming at the coordination of social policies; EU-funded

transnational programmes are policy incentives to implement EU objectives. They support transnational communities of practice and joint-projects managed by social organizations (voluntary organizations, public authorities but also for profit organizations) based on different EU member states.

In the social area, transnational programming became systematic during the 1990s with the launch of the Community Initiatives ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT and reached its peak with the EQUAL programme (2000–2006). All these initiatives – financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) – funded innovative transnational projects aimed at tackling discrimination and disadvantage in the labour market (European Commission 2011). The transnational component of these projects should facilitate the exchange of information, experiences and good practices (European Commission 2016). EU-funded programmes tend to endorse a ‘culture for competitiveness approach’, in which cultural diversity is used to support innovation and competitiveness and will eventually lead to economic growth and more jobs (Bodirsky 2012). A culture for competitiveness approach supports dynamism, innovation and creativity, prioritizing the self-reliant, entrepreneurial individual that is able to use culture for the creation of economic value.

Project-based learning within transnational cooperation has not been the subject of much research and thus, conclusions have remained so far at a fairly general level (Hachmann 2008). Studies of policy learning within EU transnational cooperation discuss primarily the field of regional policy and programmes such as INTERREG and URBAN (Böhme 2005; Colomb 2007; Hachmann 2016). Regarding the social policy area, the few studies adopting a micro-level dimension of the ESF focus on the EU impact and conclude that it occurs through mechanisms such as conditionality, a leverage effect or mutual learning (Sanchez Salgado 2013; Verschraegen, Vanhercke, and Verpoorten 2011). Both institutional facilitating factors and actor’s agency seem to play a crucial role. One of the main research questions inspiring academic studies in this area is the link between individual learning and organizational learning on the one hand, and between organizational learning and policy change on the other hand (Colomb 2007; Guentner and Harding 2015). According to existing research, organizational learning and institutional change would not result automatically from transnational exchanges, but would require specific circumstances such as the presence of individuals in positions of power capable of bringing about change (Guentner and Harding 2015). The study of project-based learning within a Europeanization framework has also led to a focus on harmonization and convergence (Hachmann 2011) while not much is known about project-based learning from inter-cultural diversity. More often than not, linguistic and cultural differences, as well as different working styles and methods are seen as an obstacle to learning in transnational projects (Böhme 2005; Hachmann 2008).

### ***2.3. Learning from cultural diversity: analytical framework and methodology***

On the basis of previous conceptualizations and efforts at measurement (Dunlop and Radaelli 2013), I apply two main types of project-based learning for the analysis of flexible modes of governance: epistemic learning emphasizing convergence (unity) and reflective learning emphasizing diversity (see Table 1). It is important to keep in mind that Table 1 introduces ideal-types. Rather than sharply distinct forms of learning, the empirical reality consists of a continuum between convergence and the preservation of cultural diversity. In many situations, convergence and the preservation of diversity coexist.



**Table 1.** Ideal-types of learning in a context of cultural diversity.

Type of learning	Absence of learning (coercion)	Epistemic learning (thin or adaptive)	Reflective learning (thick learning)
Type of Governance arrangements	Compulsory (specific) EU guidelines	Broad non-binding EU guidelines	
Mechanisms	Top-down implementation	Horizontal transfer of one-size-fits all solution	Exchange experiences Exchange people (mobility) Complementary work
Role of Expertise	EU acts as expert	Leader acts as expert Epistemic community	Symmetrical relations Expertise is equally distributed
Tractability of the problem	High	High or low	Low
Effects	Harmonization Convergence Deviance	Convergence	Diversity

As hinted in Table 1, the type of learning is closely related to the type of governance arrangement. Flexible modes of governance such as transnational EU-funded projects are adaptable enough to enable both epistemic and reflective learning. During many years transnational cooperation was primarily expected to lead to the horizontal transfer of one-size-fit all solutions, where epistemic learning prevails. While not particularly encouraged by the Commission, transnational cooperation also led to reflective learning through mechanisms, such as exchange of information and experiences, complementary work and mobility.

Within the epistemic tradition, knowledge is mobilized by a limited set of experts who narrow discussions with the aim of reaching policy solutions (Dunlop and Radaelli 2013). In instances of epistemic learning there is a project manager with clear objectives, assuming a leadership position and with sufficient capacity to transfer one-size-fits all solutions. The transfer of the one-size-fits all solution is expected to contribute to reaching the goals of the transnational programme.

While learning and strategic action are often presented separately (Graziano, Jacquot, and Palier 2011; Verschraegen, Vanhercke, and Verpoorten 2011), project leaders often promote epistemic learning to pursue their own goals, such as expanding their activities or acquiring an international dimension. One-size-fits all solutions can be more easily attained in cases where the tractability of the problem is high. In this case, the type of learning is also adaptive (single-loop) since specific knowledge is expected to be transferable and adapted across different contexts. Such horizontal transfer of knowledge may lead to convergence around some core-values or to situations of resistance or deviance.

Learning from cultural diversity is understood as reflective or mutual learning. Defined as deep and complex (thick) learning in which actors explore their fundamental preferences and identities in a process of deliberation among equals. In organizational learning theory, this type of learning would be defined as (double-loop) generative (requires new ways of looking at the world) or triple-loop learning (learning experience making the best use of diversity). In instances of reflective learning, expertise is a resource equally distributed among the actors involved. Solutions applicable to one context are not expected to be applicable to other contexts, but there exists a disposition towards learning from the context itself. Comparison and mobility bring about positive effects such as cultural awareness and empowerment, and thus, cultural diversity is seen as an opportunity, rather than as an obstacle.



Learning from diversity is considered to be more likely in complex policy problems characterized by low tractability, where one-size-fits all solutions are rarely available. Despite the 'culture for competitiveness' approach highlighted in EU-funded programmes, not all project managers act as entrepreneurial individuals moved by the quest for economic value. In the absence of one-size-fits all solution, policy transfer is not the main dynamics at work, but rather mechanisms such as the exchange of information and experience, complementary work and mobility.

Given its limited scope, this article does not cover governance through uniformity and harmonization (Table 1, column 1). In this case the Commission aims at promoting certain principles that are sufficiently specified such as gender mainstreaming or life-long learning and creates monitoring mechanisms and institutional support (such as technical assistance) for this purpose (Sanchez Salgado 2013). In this situation, best suited for less complex problems (high tractability), the EU acts as the expert body. This type of learning is expected to be adaptive or single-loop, in the sense that learning implies the adaptation of single measures to changing external conditions. Since the requirements of the Commission are compulsory, there is a certain element of coercion and in some instances, coercion is considered to be opposed to learning (Radaelli 2009). Governance through top-down harmonization often leads to convergence across a few EU values. However, the degree of convergence is often challenged by national contexts, and cultural diversity is thus perceived as a source of differential adaptation or deviance.

The understanding of transnational learning requires an in-depth analysis (Colomb 2007), especially if it occurs in the absence of specific guidelines and takes place at multiple levels. A superficial analysis would lead to findings such as that the exchange of good practices is the main outcome of transnational projects. After an in-depth analysis taking primary documentation and interviews into account, it appears that there are distinct understandings of good practices.

While current research on EU transnational projects focuses primarily on EU programmes directly implemented by the Commission (top-down research design), this article focuses on EU-funded programmes implemented at the national and local level (horizontal research design). The present article thus analyses EU projects designed by the Commission and implemented by member states, such as the transnational dimension of the European Social Fund (ESF) or EQUAL. The goals of these programmes include boosting the adaptability of workers (developing new skills and new ways of working), improving access to employment for young people and less-skilled job seekers, and helping people from disadvantaged groups to get jobs (social inclusion).

By focusing on cases where horizontal learning is most likely, the data aims at illustrating dynamics of learning from cultural diversity and exploring the combination of factors that bring out this type of learning. The emphasis is placed on internal validity and on the relevance of context. To this purpose several pieces of evidence are combined in a way that they provide a causal account and render alternative explanations less plausible. This fine-grained understanding of learning could serve as conceptual basis for quantitative research aimed at determining the explanatory power of learning from diversity as an isolated variable.

The unit of analysis are national and local organizations engaged in transnational cooperation in the social area. The organizations analysed participated in a variety of programmes managed by member states including the transnational ESF and EQUAL. To better grasp the role of context and national factors, the organizations investigated were based in two

different EU member states: the Netherlands and France. The two member states under analysis have both similar characteristics (e.g. level of economic development, centralization) and dissimilar characteristics (e.g. type of relationships between civil society and public authorities). The selection of these member states has not been done in a logic of strategic comparison but rather in a logic of replication. Whenever the two cases confirm the analytical framework replication may be claimed (Yin 2003).

Data came from a document analysis (from 2010 to 2015) and from 23 semi-structured interviews. In France, I contacted all organizations participating in the transnational dimension of the ESF (2007–2014), and in the Netherlands all organizations participating in the EQUAL programme (2000–2006).<sup>2</sup> The organizations investigated were those whose representatives agreed to give an interview (14 out of 24 in France and 6 out of 12 in the Netherlands). Key players often interpreted differently the same concepts. It was also uncertain to which extent one single individual could speak for an organization. For all these reasons, interview data was systematically triangulated with information from the websites of the EU-funded projects and from the websites from the projects that were mentioned by the representatives from the organizations under analysis. The document analysis included all relevant policy documents, organizational websites and reports. Interviews were also conducted with key national officials (2 in France and 1 in the Netherlands).

### **3. Epistemic learning: cultural diversity as an obstacle**

The empirical part of this article serves to illustrate dynamics of epistemic and reflective learning in EU-funded programmes presented in Table 1 (columns 2 and 3). As indicated, EU-funded programmes propose a ‘culture for competitiveness’ approach where the transfer of good practices is one of the main goals. Project managers were confronted with the choice of adapting policy goals and tools to new contexts and considering cultural diversity as an obstacle engaging in dynamics of epistemic learning (this section), or of engaging in sharing and comparing (reflective learning) considering cultural diversity as an opportunity (next section).

This first section shows that sufficient capacity, strategic action and political support is required to reach substantial forms of convergence within epistemic forms of knowledge. The attention is then turned to examples illustrating the difficulty to reconcile convergence (one-size-fits all solutions) and cultural diversity (context).

#### **3.1. When transfer of good practices leads to convergence: following the leader**

While the exchanges of good practices often led to instances of epistemic learning, substantial dynamics of convergence within flexible modes of governance only occurred in two instances taking both interviews and document analysis into account. This is explained by the complex combination of conditions required for the attainment of convergence within flexible modes of governance. In the first example, convergence through downloading occurred when a project manager decided to use EU objectives aimed to expand her organization’s activities. In the second example, convergence through uploading occurred when a project manager with sufficient capacity could secure political support at the national and EU level to pursue her objectives. Thus, convergence through up-loading and downloading only occurred when project managers in a power position used EU projects strategically. As

expected, epistemic learning was thus closely related to strategic action. Epistemic learning though downloading contributed to the diffusion of EU knowledge and practices. In dynamics of uploading, epistemic learning diffused knowledge or practices promoted by one organization.

EU-funded transnational projects can contribute to the implementation of EU regulations and directives (Hachmann 2011) leading to a process of convergence and uniformization across the whole European Union. The implementation of project EDGAR by *Academie de Creteil* consisted of a top-down transfer of the European principle of key competences. The EU has defined in detail eight key competences that provide a reference framework for education and training policies. Examples of such competences are communication in the mother tongue, mathematical competence and digital competence. As a non-binding recommendation from the European Parliament and Council (2006) this guideline is not necessarily expected to have many effects. However, the principle of key competences was considered by an interview as a 'revolution of French pedagogic practices' and it was also prominent in the website of *Academie de Creteil*.<sup>3</sup>

The interview revealed that the policy downloading of the principle of key competencies occurred when the EU recommendation was strategically used by the project manager to find a common ground for transnational cooperation. The French project manager wanted to pursue her own strategic objectives, namely the development of activities with the introduction of a new training workshop for unemployed people. The European key competences framework conferred the required legitimacy for this project manager to serve as a reference framework for all countries in the project. The link between individual learning and organizational learning was ensured by project managers, whose task was to diffuse the principle of key competences in their own organization and in other organizations in France and beyond. Top-down epistemic learning is explained in this case by the need to find a common ground for transnational cooperation.

Rather than instrumentalizing EU objectives, convergence through policy uploading required a project manager pursuing her own specific policy objectives. The only example of successful policy uploading in the cases under study refers to the French Diversity Charter. In this Charter, French companies made a commitment against discrimination and in favour of diversity. Initiated in 2004 in France, national and regional diversity charters were created in 12 EU countries by 2015. Following this initiative, the Commission decided to support directly a platform for EU-level exchange between organizations promoting and implementing national diversity charters and it has become part of DG Justice's anti-discrimination policy.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the willingness to develop an idea, the main condition for policy uploading was the support from policy officials and business elites at the national and EU level. For example, in Germany the Charter was launched by four large multi-national companies and counted on the support of Angela Merkel. The German national Charter is today funded by companies such as Bayer, Deutsche Bank and Siemens and by the federal government.<sup>5</sup> In many other countries the Diversity Charter is also supported by prominent governmental figures. Given these successes at the national level, the Commission decided to adopt the diversity charters at the EU level.

In spite of this success, it could be argued that the degree of convergence is limited (which corresponds with the notion of thin learning). Due to the resilience of cultural diversity, national diversity charters remain diverse: they focus on different publics and on different types of discriminations. The initial project also aimed at creating the foundations for a

common European approach, but after all these years, there is no Single European Diversity Charter for the enterprises. Giving the lack of consensus on this topic, European charter does not seem to be a very likely outcome in the short term.<sup>6</sup> Thus, as in the case of horizontal learning, convergence has so far only concerned the policy tool (diversity chart) and the means of promotion and diffusion. From the perspective of uniformizing project, cultural diversity can thus be seen as a major obstacle.

### ***3.2. The limits of epistemic learning and convergence in a context of cultural diversity***

Many project managers proposed projects aiming at transferring successful policy from one context to another. When this occurred, a project manager adopted the position of leader/entrepreneur aiming at diffusing a specific policy objective or policy tool, thus contributing to instances of epistemic learning. EU funds contributed to create or reinforce a community of experts who defined a product that was then transferred to organizations and publics not originally involved in the project. While transnational projects contributed to epistemic learning and thus, to a certain degree of convergence, the learning process usually concerned a small number of countries (the ones involved in the project) for an uncertain time-frame. Convergence only involved the transfer of policy tools and was less likely when it comes to substantive convergence. Substantive convergence was difficult beyond the individual and organizational level due to lack of capacity or support. The difficulty to attain higher degrees of convergence was also explained by the resilience of national contexts and within this perspective, cultural diversity can be considered as an obstacle.

Epistemic communities were more easily formed when convergence concerned a policy tool, as was the case of the Dutch wage indicator. This tool compares wages and raises awareness about the gender pay gap.<sup>7</sup> This project was based on a community of practice bringing together the research community and the internet community.<sup>8</sup> The project manager highlighted how easy it was to understand each other since they shared a common language: statistics. For example, when the existence of multiple languages was a source of error, this error was often spotted and solved because the statistical results were not congruent. Even if this policy tool has been transferred, and thus, there has been learning at the individual and organizational level, there is little evidence of policy change. Countries involved in this project have no clear plans to adopt any common (or similar) measures addressing salary gaps.

A few other organizations also tried to develop common tools and transfer them to other contexts: for example, a software and an educational tool about inter-culturality; a model to promote business creation; the A-flex software for the reduction of psycho-social risks and a template for the promotion of mobility. All these tools were expected to contribute to the objectives of the programme they served (such as promoting adaptability, access to employment or social inclusion). To reach these goals, these policy tools needed to be translated and adapted to specific national contexts, to the detriment of substantive convergence. In some contexts, even relatively simple tools could not be transferred since it was observed that the tool would not work.

In the cases under analysis, most initiatives remained at the horizontal level, mainly for lack of political support at the national level. For example, a French voluntary organization Crysallis aimed at developing a manual to teach European common values and European

citizenship in schools. According to the project manager, political leaders approached by this organization were not very supportive of the idea: 'there was a political problem. We organized a seminar in Bucarest to re-think Europe. Our theme was to introduce Europe in the education systems. This was not accepted. There was a lot of resistance'.<sup>9</sup> In the absence of support, this project did not reach sufficient levels of funding and there is no evidence that the organization at its origin, Crysalis, exists anymore.

#### **4. Reflective learning: cultural diversity as an opportunity**

EU-funded programmes did not always led to the epistemic learning and to the transfer of one-size-fits all solutions (column 2, Table 1). In the absence of transfer of practices, the question whether the transnational/sharing dimension of a transnational process leads to a learning experience can be raised (Böhme 2005). This section shows how flexible modes of governance also led to reflective learning from cultural diversity (column 3, Table 1). Learning from diversity occurred in projects aimed at the preservation of diversity. The mechanisms at work include exchange of information and experiences, mobility and complementary work. The attention is first drawn to the conditions in which reflective learning lead to the valorization of cultural diversity and thus, to learning from diversity itself. Learning from cultural diversity also led to substantial changes, not only at the individual, but also at the organizational and policy levels. There is also evidence that reflective learning has not been developed to its full potential.

##### **4.1. Why learning from diversity? Pre-conditions for learning from cultural diversity**

While this was supposed to be one of the main objectives of EU-funded programmes, many project managers raised the question of the difficulty (or even impossibility) of transferring good practices. The so-called good practices only worked in specific contexts, and thus, their transfer required a complex contextual understanding.

In some cases the exchange of practices was simply not appropriate or possible. The value of policy transfer and convergence depended on factors such as the nature/content of project and on the diversity of national institutional or administrative differences. The nature of many projects excluded the possibility of a single solution, especially when the projects aimed at promoting social inclusion. That is the case, for example, of projects aiming at the integration of migrants. The French voluntary organization *Habitat Cite* established a transnational partnership with several city councils from Romania aiming at the inclusion of Romanian immigrants in the French job market. Since one country is in a position of sender of migrants and the other in a position of recipient convergence is not appropriate. Project managers claimed that there was a transfer of traditional know-how from Romania to France. What they actually meant is that Romanian immigrants possessed traditional crafts unfamiliar in France. The transnational cooperation aimed – among other things – at using this traditional knowledge to foster the inclusion of Romanian immigrants in the French job-market. A second type of transnational projects that are not meant to lead to convergence is mobility projects. These projects consist on organizing study visits for specific populations in other countries, such as agricultural workers, youngsters from the suburbs or drug addicts.

Since convergence and direct transfer of practices were not always feasible, due to institutional and administrative differences at the national level, project managers opted from learning from diversity instead. For example, a Dutch circus could not use the same tools than Finnish circuses to improve circus techniques due to different school systems. In Finland they teach circus techniques to very young children in the afternoon. In the Netherlands this could not be implemented because children were at school at this time. Dutch circuses then tried to implement a different strategy: introduce circus at school time as an activity in the curriculum. This example shows that convergence is a much more complex outcome than it is usually acknowledged. An eventual convergence at the level of objectives (excellence in circus techniques) can only be reached through a diversity of policy tools.

In the above-mentioned transnational partnerships there was no single organization assuming a clear leader position engaged in strategic action. Project managers acted as equals and the complementarity among partners and approaches was revealed. There were many examples in the cases under study where project managers and participants alike realized – following reflective learning – that they had much to learn from each other. For example, the Dutch circuses were good at social inclusion while the Finnish circuses were good at circus techniques. The French association *Amicale du Nid* shared its knowledge about insertion and support techniques to prostitutes while acquiring knowledge about online prostitution and Escort Boys forums from its partner in Poland.

While learning from each other, the projects under analysis that engaged in learning from diversity did not lead to convergence. Project managers adopted a pick and choose attitude (Guentner and Harding 2015). While acknowledging and understanding what others did, they often decided to do something different or more adapted to their context.

#### **4.2. Learning from diversity at the individual level: cultural awareness and empowerment**

Reflective learning from cultural diversity is often considered to occur at the individual level (Böhme 2005), and can include multiple effects such as the acquisition of inter-cultural or project management skills, cultural awareness and empowerment. For a better understanding of policy learning, it is crucial to identify which actors learn and for which purposes (de la Porte and Pochet 2012). Individual learning from diversity in transnational cooperation concerned primarily project managers and staff involved in the projects, and occurred in all types of transnational projects (including those that aim at convergence or harmonization). In projects aiming at promoting mobility, learning from diversity also reached the beneficiaries and participants.

While some project managers reported the acquisition of project-management skills, what is more specific to learning from diversity is the acquisition of cultural awareness and empowerment. Cultural awareness refers to awareness of one's own culture and national identity. Different project managers emphasized different aspects of cultural awareness such as, for example, contextual awareness (becoming aware of the cultural context affecting their work or becoming aware of their own practices) or relativization (acknowledgement of the existence of multiple cultural truths).

Project leaders and facilitators were more open to cultural awareness and reflective types of learning than beneficiaries. They often already possessed inter-cultural skills before accepting their job. Cultural awareness appeared not to be so straightforward for project



participants and beneficiaries. In some occasions it was even be difficult to convince individuals to go abroad.<sup>10</sup> Cultural awareness depended on individual personality traits and thus, institutional engineering alone does not seem a sufficient condition to reach outcomes from reflective learning. As a project manager points out: 'Some people can simply not understand. We may tell them over and over again "be open" but it does not always work'.<sup>11</sup>

At the level of beneficiaries, learning from diversity also led to empowerment. The inter-cultural component of trans-national cooperation (by placing culture at the centre of the interactions) contributed to the suspension of social and economic differences. Economic and social differences were temporarily blurred (or contained) by cultural differences. This helped empowering individuals and thus, promoting the inclusion of discriminated groups. The international mobility amplified the pursued impact of social inclusion, because of what has been referred to as 'situational effect'.<sup>12</sup> As an example, the average citizen would not pay much attention to the speech of a *national* drug addict, but a drug addict coming from abroad adds some interest to the experience. As for the drug addict, her speech is being translated into a foreign language making her feel important. The project manager insisted: '... as for drugs addicts, it is very important to bring them abroad. It is an amazing decentring! It contributes to the valorization of their knowledge and specific abilities. They travel to talk about their experience and their stories are heard'.<sup>13</sup>

Cultural awareness and reflexivity can be problematic when the learning is done by the wrong people and when the necessary professional support is not provided. The new acquired self-confidence and autonomy may lead to negative side effects:

... during the international experience, national referents are lost. When youngsters are back, they are different. They have much more autonomy and this is a very difficult moment. They can use this new autonomy in the wrong way. For example, they may not come back to our organization and then we learn that they have been involved in illegal activities.<sup>14</sup>

#### **4.3. From individual learning to organizational, policy learning and innovation**

Under certain circumstances, the management and inter-cultural skills acquired at the individual level were transferred to the organizational level or at the policy level. At the organizational level, inter-cultural exchanges contributed to the introduction of changes such as a multi-lingual website, multi-lingual products and an increased organizational visibility. While EU funds contributed to the internationalization of a few social organizations, not many organizations under analysis had fully developed this dimension. For example, the majority of organizations created multi-lingual websites for the EU-funded projects but this is not necessarily reflected in their own website. All in all, inter-cultural skills do not seem developed to their full potential (Sanchez Salgado 2017). As one project entrepreneur points out:

An organization should make some efforts to expose their international character to get the benefits. Our website is still only in Dutch and there is not much information about the trans-national project. Here in the Netherlands business are much more transnationalised than the public sector. There is less transnationalization on topics such as education and training.<sup>15</sup>

European dimension can also increase the visibility of social organizations in the media, and among policy officials and beneficiaries, which also contributes to increase the chances of policy change. The attractiveness of the international dimension depends however on a complex combination of cultural and issue-related factors, and thus, should be established



on a case per case basis. While French project managers tended to emphasize the attractiveness of European projects, only one Dutch project manager considered EU projects to be more attractive than national ones. A Dutch project manager even considered the European dimension to be a hindrance:

In the Netherlands it is very difficult. When you have people from abroad the national media do not want to publish your news. I hate this! The national media do not want to publish your news because they say they are too international or too European.<sup>16</sup>

Mutual learning can also lead to policy change and innovation at the national and local level. The knowledge acquired after the mutual learning experience is then used as a key argument to persuade policy-makers. Mutual learning can also help in creating critical space for discussion at the local and national level.

According to a few project managers, transnational cooperation created a space for reflective learning on organizational practices. Many social organizations under study were working in the same way for 50 years or more. Caught in their daily routine, these organizations had not much time to reflect on their own work. Transnational cooperation offered precisely the opportunity to introduce reflection on their work and practices, as expected by the mirror effect (Hamel and Vanhercke 2009). Comparison also served as an eye-opener, revealing overlooked problems in social work. A project manager pointed out that becoming aware of some deficiencies in other countries made her (and her organization) discover that the same problems occurred in France.<sup>17</sup>

This new acquired knowledge was then used as an argument before professionals, interest groups, public authorities and/or civil servants. Many organizations under analysis have regular contacts with public officials, even at the ministerial level. They provide regular advice on their domain of activity and participate in regular consultation procedures. Public authorities and the media are systematically invited to join the seminars presenting the results of the projects. For example, the *Landelijk expertisebureau meisjes/vrouwen en beta techniek* (Vhto) used their experience in transnational cooperation to argue that gender differences were not a natural phenomenon:

Comparing with other countries we realized that girl's insecurity was a problem linked to our national context and that we could find a solution for it. Before, teachers and policy makers would argue that girls are naturally more insecure. Now that we work with some countries like Sweden where girls are not insecure, we have concrete proof to claim that girl's insecurity is cultural and not natural.<sup>18</sup>

Once it was clear that girls' insecurity was not a natural condition, Vhto convinced the Dutch government to dedicate more funds to promote girls involvement in sciences and technology.<sup>19</sup>

The transnational experience also opened the possibility to criticise openly current practices or public policies. As a project manager told

we can say many more things than if we stay at the national level. In France if we are working with the employment services and we do not like what they do we cannot talk about it. In a transnational project we can have a critical approach to national practices.<sup>20</sup>

Transnational projects thus contributed to the opening of a critical space.

## 5. Conclusion

This article explored different types of learning in a context of cultural diversity and for this, it analysed EU-funded transnational projects on the ground. Both instances of epistemic and reflective learning were presented, arguing that, depending on the type of learning encouraged, cultural diversity can be both perceived as a blessing and as a curse.

While flexible modes of governance can accommodate epistemic and reflective learning alike, the European Commission tended to place the emphasis on the transfer of good practices (epistemic learning) while the mechanisms for the development of reflective learning have never been sufficiently developed in the existing transnationality guidelines.

The present article shows the difficulties of transferring one-size-fits all solutions. While epistemic learning led to the transfer of good practices to new organizations and publics, for convergence to occur, a substantial amount of factors needed to be present such as leadership and/or sufficient economic and political support. Substantive convergence was also limited by national and local context, and thus, cultural diversity among EU national states was perceived as an obstacle. Since more often than not these factors are not present, many projects do not reach the stated aims and thus placing the emphasis on epistemic learning and convergence leads to the conclusion that policy learning within flexible modes of governance is weak.

This article showed that under certain circumstances (e.g. the nature of the project, administrative and institutional differences, projects aiming at social inclusion) reflective learning from diversity was more appropriate than unworkable attempts at transferring good practices. The mechanisms leading to reflective learning, such as the exchange of experiences and information, exchanges of people and complementary work led to cultural awareness and empowerment at the individual level. In these instances, cultural diversity was seen as an opportunity leading to organizational innovation and policy change. When reflective learning is taken into account, it is possible to be more optimistic about the effects of flexible modes of governance. Given the emphasis on the transfer of good practices during the programing period analyzed, reflective learning only occurred spontaneously and thus it was not developed to its full potential. As a consequence, the public sector in the EU is considerably less transnationalized than the business sector.

Following these conclusions, the EU could revise its transnationality guidelines to better develop and encourage the exchange of information and experiences, as well as complementary work. Further development of reflective learning would also contribute to the development of learning from diversity to its full potential, while presenting diversity as an opportunity (and not only as an obstacle).

## Notes

1. The mirror effect refers to the fact that comparison requires presenting the national system to others, which gives a clearer vision of one's policy practices.
2. The Netherlands did not fund any transnational projects during the period 2007–2014. This is why the previous programme (EQUAL 2000–2006) was used for the selection of the interviewees.
3. Interview with a project manager, 2010, Creteil.
4. The diversity charters are mentioned in DG Justice website as part of its way of fighting discrimination. More information on: [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/diversity/charters/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/diversity/charters/index_en.htm), consulted on the 22nd July 2015.

5. More information available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/diversity/charters/germany\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/diversity/charters/germany_en.htm), consulted on the 4th August 2015.
6. <http://www.diversity-charter.com>, consulted on the 15 July 2015.
7. <http://www.wageindicator.org/main>, consulted on the 15 July 2015.
8. Interview with a project manager, 2010, Paris.
9. Interview with a project manager, 2010, Paris.
10. Interview with a project manager, Amsterdam, 2010.
11. Interview with a project manager, Paris, 2010.
12. Interview with a project manager, Paris, 2010.
13. Interview with a project manager, Paris, 2010.
14. Interview with a project manager, Paris, 2010.
15. Interview with a project manager, Amsterdam, 2010.
16. Interview with a project manager, Amsterdam, 2010.
17. Interview with a project manager, Paris, 2010.
18. Interview with a project manager, Amsterdam 2010.
19. Interview with a project manager, Amsterdam 2010.
20. Interview with a project manager, Paris, 2010.

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