

How learning from cultural diversity could upgrade EU transnational projects



One of the key problems at the heart of the European integration process is how to bring diverse states with different languages, cultures and histories together in shared projects. But as [Rosa Sanchez Salgado](#) highlights, the cultural diversity that exists between EU member states can also be a positive resource to draw on. Based on findings from recent research on EU transnational projects, she explains why cultural diversity can be a source for social improvement, policy learning and innovation.



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Cultural diversity is one of the greatest challenges that the European Union is currently facing. Cultural differences increasingly appear as a threat to the European integration process and within this new context, it is often forgotten that cultural diversity is a source for social improvement, including policy learning and innovation.

Cultural diversity has indeed led to instances of quality learning within the framework of [European Social Fund \(ESF\)](#) transnational projects. [EU transnational projects](#) are joint projects managed by local authorities and private entities (NGOs and business) based on different member states. In the domain of employment, these projects aim to tackle disadvantage and discrimination in the labour market.

While the transnational component of ESF projects is aimed at facilitating the exchange of information and experiences, policy leaders and officials have mostly placed the emphasis on the transfer of good practices from one member state to another. In this case, a group of experts (the project leaders) proposes to transfer one-size-fits-all policy tools or solutions to different national contexts.

This policy transfer tends to work when there is agreement on policy solutions, or when there is consensus that convergence is desirable such as in the case of gender equality. However, it tends to have little success in cases of complex problems such as, for example, the transfer of a model to promote business creation. Such a model would have to be adapted to the administrative rules and requirements of every member state. While discussing the transfer of good practices, ESF project managers have often commented that even relatively simple tools could not be transferred because it was observed that they would not work.

An excessive focus on top-down unidirectional learning gives the impression that ESF transnational cooperation is not effective. Cultural diversity among member states is also perceived as an obstacle. But what if this failure was only a question of perception? Is transnational cooperation really ineffective or are policy officials just focusing on the wrong type of learning?

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

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

Source: Adapted from the author's [accompanying journal article](#)

With a different conception of learning such as reflective and mutual learning, ESF transnational cooperation could appear to be more effective. Cultural diversity would be seen as an opportunity for policy learning and change. Reflective learning takes place among equals engaged in the exchange of information, complementary work and mobility, and they are disposed to learn from the context itself. This type of learning is specially adapted to the case of complex problems that exclude the possibility of a single solution. [The analysis of ESF funded projects](#) shows that learning from diversity has often led to positive developments at the individual level (cultural awareness and empowerment), at the organisational level (internationalisation) and at the political level (policy change).

Individual learning has so far concerned project managers and participants in mobility programmes. Cultural awareness included several aspects such as contextual awareness (how the context affects your own work or situation) or relativisation (acknowledgment of the existence of multiple truths). For participants in mobility programmes, learning from diversity also led to empowerment. The inter-cultural dimension of transnational cooperation contributed to the suspension of social and economic differences, promoting the inclusion of discriminated groups. This type of *situational effect* can indeed make excluded individuals feel worthy and increase their self-esteem. While individual learning from diversity is promising, it is not always bound to happen and it requires adequate support (preferably inter-cultural experts). Not all individuals were equally open to learning from diversity, and in the absence of professional support, recently acquired autonomy could be used in problematic ways.

Learning from diversity also led to organisational and policy learning. Transnational cooperation increased the visibility of social organisations in the media, introduced reflection on organisational practices, and contributed to the internationalisation of social organisations (e.g. multi-lingual websites or products, regular transnational contacts). While businesses are currently highly transnationalised and thus, reap the benefits of transnationalisation, the ESF is far from contributing to the transnationalisation of the social sector to its full potential. This is partly explained by the fact that organisational learning from diversity and the transnationalisation of the social sector is not a specific goal of ESF transnational programmes.

At the political level, learning from diversity served as an eye-opener, revealing or clarifying the causes of overlooked problems in social work. It also created a critical space for discussion with public authorities. For instance, engaging in transnational cooperation gave the Dutch organisation [Vhto](#) evidence to prove that girls are not naturally more insecure than boys, as teachers and policy-makers in the Netherlands would often argue. The organisation could claim that in Sweden girls are not insecure and thus, girls' insecurity was cultural and not a natural condition. With this new evidence, they could introduce changes in policy-making, including the dedication of more funds for the promotion of girls' involvement in science and technology.

A transnational ESF project also opens a critical space where it is possible to criticise current practices and public policies. Social workers commented that there are many things they did not like regarding their national employment services but they felt they could not talk about them. A transnational project made it possible to engage in such a critical discussion.

While the transfer of knowledge and good practices is desirable in many instances, it is important to keep in mind that in some other instances, learning from diversity is more appropriate than unworkable attempts at uniformity. With a broader conception of policy learning, including learning from diversity and its potential positive effects, it is possible to be more optimistic about the effectiveness of ESF transnational cooperation. This conclusion can probably be more generally applied to reflective modes of governance including [experimentalist governance](#). In the current ESF scheme, [learning from diversity seems to be occurring rather spontaneously](#), and thus, it is not developed to its full potential. With economic support and professional guidance, learning from diversity would bring interesting developments to ESF transnational cooperation.

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Note: For more information, the author's [accompanying journal article](#). This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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