

The Experience of Member State Officials in EU Committees: A Report on Initial Findings of an Empirical Study

Dr Guenther F. Schaefer, Morten Egeberg, Silvo Korez, Jarle Trondal

Respectively Professor, EIPA; Professor, University of Oslo; Researcher, EIPA; Research Fellow, University of Oslo

1. Introduction

Committees are an essential part of the functioning of modern governance. Some are official, whilst others are unofficial or even ad hoc. They play a crucial role in the daily operation of the European system of governance by providing expertise in policy development and decision-making, linking Member States' governments and administrations with the European level, as well as increasing the acceptance of European laws and programmes in the Member States. In various guises, committees are active at every stage of the European political process – assisting the Commission in drafting legislation, preparing the dossiers on which the Council takes decisions and supervising the implementation of EC law by the Commission. The latter are generally referred to as comitology committees, although the term is sometimes extended to include all committees.

Since 1995, EIPA has organised seminars for Member State officials on the role of committees in the EC political process. In the spring of 1997 we started to distribute a questionnaire¹ to those participants in the seminars who have been involved in one or more committees at EC level. It was designed to get an overview of the experience of Member State officials in EU committees: in what kind and how many committees they were involved, how frequently meetings were taking place, how long they lasted, what languages were used, etc. The major part of the questionnaire focussed on the question of how Member State officials viewed the roles they performed in these committees and how they perceived the roles performed by other participants.

During the first day of the seminar, we asked those participants who had been involved in committees to complete the questionnaire. Participation in the seminars in Maastricht was very uneven between the different Member States: there were very few participants from the southern Member States, but regular participation from those of central Europe, the UK and Ireland. In addition to the seminars in Maastricht, EIPA organised a number of seminars in Member States, particularly in

those that had joined the EU in 1995. Unquestionably this led to a very unbalanced sample. In order to correct this, an effort was made in early 1999 to contact the Permanent Representation of all the Member States from which we had few respondents asking them to help us to get more completed questionnaires from their Member States. This effort was very successful in the case of Belgium and Spain, but did not result in many additional completed questionnaires from the other Member States. The composition of the sample by Member State is summarised in Table 1. The Table also shows the type of ministry the respondents came from, differentiating between the Foreign Ministry, other ministries, agencies and the Member State's permanent representation in Brussels.

Table 1: Composition of the sample by Member State and institutional affiliation

Member State	Ministry or Institution				Total
	Foreign Ministry	Other Ministries	Agencies, etc	Permanent Representation	
Austria		14	3		17
Belgium	2	20	7		29
Denmark	1	5	1		7
Finland	2	17	2		21
France		3	1		4
Germany		7	3	1	11
Greece		1		1	2
Ireland		1		2	4 ^a
Luxembourg	1				1
Netherlands	2	10	1		13
Portugal	5	3	1		9
Spain	55	5		60	
Sweden	2	23	9		34
United Kingdom	1	4	1		6
TOTAL	N	16	163	34	218^a

^{a)} One respondent did not answer the question about institutional affiliation. In this and all following tables N = number of respondents.

The sample cannot claim to be representative either with respect to the Member States included or with respect to the type of committees Member States' officials participated in. From the total sample, 132 respondents participated in expert committees, 134 participated in Council working parties and 76 in comitology committees. Not unexpectedly, 61 respondents participated in at least two types of committee and 31 in all three types.

As with all written questionnaires, there were a considerable number of items missing, because respondents did not complete all of the questions, even though for most of the questions multiple choice answers were provided for. For this reason in the presentations below the number of respondents (N) varies in each table.

The paper reports some initial findings. The first part will summarise some practical aspects:

- time spent on EU matters;
- availability of documentation and interpretation facilities;
- language use.

The second part concentrates on:

- officials' loyalties and identities;
- their role perception when participating in EU committees;
- the question of coordination.

2. Time Requirement for Member State Officials Participation in EU Committees and Availability of Documentation

For Member State officials, participating in EU committees means time, time that is not be available for national concerns. Time spent on EU matters naturally varies with the place in the hierarchy of a respondent, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Time consumed in committee work by position (in %)

		Position			
Working time spent on EU matters		Director-General, Deputy D-G	Head/Deputy of Unit/Division	Head of Section, Senior Advisor, Advisor	Total
15% or less		37	26	24	27
15-50%		43	44	44	44
50% or more		20	30	32	29
TOTAL	%	100	100	100	100
	N	40	27	131	198

As could be expected, the major burden is carried by heads of section, senior advisers and advisers, the middle and lower middle level of Member States' administrations. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents belonged to this group. Surprising, a relatively large proportion (20%) come from the Director-General or Deputy Director-General level.² This can possibly be explained by the fact that it is common practice for the top level of Member States' administrations to attend committee meetings in Brussels on important issues, often accompanied by lower level officials. It may also be taken as an indicator of the importance assigned by Member States' administrations to EC matters. The fact that more than 60% of this top-level group spends almost a day or more of their weekly working time on EC matters supports this conclusion.

Involvement in EU affairs may affect one's attitude to European integration positively or negatively. If a Member State's civil servant spends a lot of his working

time with EU matters, he or she may, for instance, get increasingly fed up with it or conversely develop an increased appreciation of the importance of EU issues for Member State administrations. Table 3 shows that the majority of respondents did not change their attitude towards European integration.

Table 3: Working time consumed in committees and change of attitude (in %)

		Working time consumed		
Change of attitudes		15% or less	15-50%	50% or more
More in favour		24	44	34
Unchanged		67	51	54
Less in favour		9	5	12
TOTAL	%	100	100	100
	N	58	83	59

Only 16 respondents (i.e. 8%) indicated that participation led to a negative view of European integration; 113 out of 200 respondents (i.e. 57%) did not change their attitude and 35% indicated that their participation led them to view European integration from a more positive perspective.

There are significant differences with respect to the frequency and duration of meetings between expert committees, working parties in the Council and comitology committees (see Table 4). Almost half of the expert committees meet only between one and three times a year while 54% of the working parties in the Council meet eight or more times a year, suggesting that involvement in working parties is very time consuming with frequent meetings. About 60% of all types of committee meetings last one day, half-day meetings are rare. However, more than one-third of the expert committees last more than one day.

Table 4: Frequency and duration of meetings in the three types of committees (in %)

Number of meetings per year		EC ^a	CWP ^a	CC ^a
1-3		49	15	36
4-8		30	31	34
8+		21	54	30
TOTAL	%	100	100	100
	N	132	131	76
Duration of meetings				
1/2day		6	11	10
1 day		58	60	65
1 day+		36	29	25
TOTAL	%	100	100	100
	N	131	126	68

^{a)} In this and all the following tables expert committees are abbreviated to EC, Council working parties to CWP, and comitology committees to CC.

Table 5: Officials from small, medium-sized and large Member States participating in all three types of committees

Number of meetings per year	EC			CWP			CC		
	Small	Medium	Large	Small	Medium	Large	Small	Medium	Large
1-3	3	3	5	3	1	1	7	2	2
4-8	8	5	1	4	4	2	3	5	4
8+	6	0	0	10	3	3	7	1	0
TOTAL N	17	8	6	17	8	6	17	8	6

We also found interesting differences with respect to the involvement of Member State officials in EU committees between small, medium-sized and large Member States. We classified Austria, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg and Sweden as small Member States, Belgium, Greece, the Netherlands and Portugal as medium-sized Member States, and France, Germany, Spain and the UK as large ones. Table 5 shows, that the number of meetings attended per year was by far the highest for officials from small Member States. This is particularly the case for expert and comitology committees. In contrast, Council working parties are presumably attended by senior policy officials of large Member States who do not participate in expert and comitology committees but delegate these tasks to more “junior” experts. In small Member States, as a result of the smaller size of their administrations, senior policy officials are at the same time the Member States’ experts.

Finally, it has been frequently reported that documentation for committee meetings arrives only shortly before the meeting takes place. Table 6 shows that in expert committees and comitology committees in well over 50% of the cases, documentation is in the hands of the participant a week or more before the meeting takes place. The situation in Council working parties is quite different. Two-thirds of the respondents reported that documentation arrives only a day or two before the meeting. This suggests that the pace of work in Council is the most intense and that Member State officials are often confronted with documentation at the very last minute. In the case of comitology committees, 14% reported that documentation is only available at the time of the meeting. These are probably committees in the agricultural sector, which meet weekly or bi-weekly.

Table 6: Availability of documentation for the committee meetings (in %)

Documentation arrival	EC	CWP	CC
week before	64	20	55
day or two before	32	70	31
at time of arrival	4	10	14
TOTAL	100	100	100
%	110	132	71
N			

These committees are dealing largely with routine matters where preparation is not required by participants. The results suggest that the situation may not be as bad as it is often pictured: more than 85% of the participants have the relevant documentation in their hands before they arrive in the meeting room.

3. Availability of Interpretation Facilities and Language Use in Committees

Participating in EU committees means communication. Today there are 11 official languages. Communication, both formally in meetings and informally during coffee breaks, lunches and in the hallways, is an essential part of participating effectively in these meetings. The communication and language problems will increase significantly with enlargement.

Even today it is practically impossible to provide simultaneous translation facilities from all official languages into all others in all committee meetings. Common practice is often to translate from seven, eight or nine languages into three or four as Table 7 shows. Participants may, with few exceptions, speak their own language, but they have to understand French, English, German or perhaps Spanish or Italian in order to follow the discussions. In some cases the committee may work in only two or three languages with simultaneous translation only between these languages and respondents reported a few cases where committees work in only one language. Table 7 also shows significant differences between the different types of committees. In Council working parties, where communication is obviously most important as final decisions are prepared here, full interpreting facilities were available in almost 60% of the meetings. In expert committees and comitology committees 57% and 68% reported interpreting facilities from seven or nine into three or four languages. Working in only two or three languages is found most frequently in expert and comitology committees. Expert groups sometimes work in only one language, but only in one in 20 cases. Interpretation

Table 7: Availability of interpreting facilities in committee meetings (in %)

Interpreting facilities	EC	CWP	CC
translation from all into all languages	17	59	17
from 7 to 9 languages into 3 or 4 languages	56	37	68
only 2 or 3 languages	20	3	15
work only in one language	5	1	0
TOTAL	100	100	100
%	118	132	71
N			

facilities are clearly most important in Council working parties, however even today, in 40% of all Council working party meetings full interpretation facilities are not available.

Successful negotiations and discussions in committees do not depend solely on what happens in the committee room, but also on what happens during coffee breaks and in discussions in the hallways and that is closely related to the capability of participants to communicate in languages other than their own. Not surprisingly we found a relatively high competence in foreign languages among those participating in committees (self-assessment of respondents), particularly in English, as Table 8 shows. 90% of committee members who are not native English speakers are able to communicate somehow in English (189 out of 208), and more than 80% can speak English well or very well. French capabilities are not as widely spread. However, in the sample there were still 150 out of about 190 committee members who are not native French speakers who somehow can manage to get along in French if necessary. The numbers are much lower for German. We differentiated between Germanic, Latin and other native language groups whereby Germanic languages include German, English, Dutch and the Scandinavian languages except Finnish. Latin languages include French, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian. Greek and Finnish were categorised as other languages together with the languages of a few respondents whose native language is not one of the community official languages. What is surprising is the fact that the English competence (“good” and “very good”) of native speakers of Latin languages is much higher than the French competence of native Germanic language speakers. English is clearly the most frequently used language in Brussels and it can be expected that this will further increase with enlargement. At least for our sample English has clearly become the first foreign language of Member State officials participating in Committee Meetings.³

It can be expected that this development will reinforce

Table 8: English, French and German capabilities by native language groups (in %)

Language capabilities		Native Language Groups			Total	
		Germanic	Latin	Other	N	%
English	very good and good	98	78	100	167	88
	can manage	2	22	0	22	12
	Total	100	100	100		100
	N	86	81	22	189	
French	very good and good	51	60	69	84	56
	can manage	49	40	31	65	44
	Total	100	100	100		100
	N	71	65	13	149	
German	very good and good	41	25	14	19	35
	can manage	59	75	86	35	65
	Total	100	100	100		100
	N	39	8	7	54	

Table 9: Language use in and around meetings

	language most frequently used in committee meetings	language most frequently used in informal discussions
French	15	19
Spanish	23	7
English	45	70
Other	17	4
TOTAL %	100	100
N	210	202

with enlargement since English has become the first foreign language in all the accession countries. Table 9 underscores this impression that English has become the major language in Brussels in informal communications between Member State officials. French is still important, but German is almost of no relevance. In meetings however, Member State officials prefer to speak their native language, but if they do not, they are more likely to speak English than French.⁴

4. Member State Officials' Loyalties and Identities

National officials attending EU committees spend most of their time and energy in national administrations.⁵ Thus, we might expect their dominant institutional allegiances and identifications to be to their nation state when entering EU committees. However, “membership” in EU committees imposes *additional* obligations on officials, although for most they are of a secondary character. They are exposed to new agendas and actors, and are expected to look for common solutions. Officials participating in Council working parties and in comitology committees may be expected to behave more like government representatives than officials attending Commission expert committees. The main reason for this is the basically negotiating character of the two former EU committees. In the Commission expert committees, on the other hand, participants are expected to behave more like experts. Thus, *professional allegiances and conceptions of sectoral roles* are likely to be fairly strongly displayed.

Table 10 shows that national officials who attend different EU committees express more allegiance towards their own national government institutions than towards the EU committees in which they participate. Thus as expected, supranational loyalties seem to be secondary to national allegiances. However, the extent to which they feel responsibility towards EU level entities is considerable, particularly among Council working party participants.

Also as expected, those in Council working parties tend to assign more weight to their relationship to their own government than those on expert committees, although the difference is not very big. A remarkably large proportion of Council working party participants identify themselves with their own

Table 10: Proportion (in %) of those who to a great extent^a feel allegiance to identify with or feel responsible to the following when participating in committees

	EC	CWP	CC
My own government	65	76	69
My own ministry, department or agency	74	81	60
The requirements of the policy arena in which I am working	58	65	58
My own professional background and expertise	60	65	60
The committee or group in which I participate	39	57	44
TOTAL	N	106	109
			58

^a Values 1 and 2 combined on the following five-point scale: to a very great extent (value 1), to a fairly great extent (2), both/and (3), to a fairly small extent (4), to a very small extent (5).

sector administration, policy arena or professional background. This pattern is probably due to the high degree of functional specialisation that accompanies the basically intergovernmentally arranged Council structure. Hence, a complex repertoire of roles is evoked by national officials attending EU committees, especially by those who participate in Council working parties.

The respondents were further asked to indicate how they perceive the roles of their fellow colleagues within EU committees.

Table 11: Officials' perception of the role of colleagues from other countries when participating in committees (in %)

	EC	CWP	CC
Mainly independent experts	33	11	6
Mixed roles	22	12	20
Mainly government representative	45	77	74
TOTAL	%	100	100
	N	113	122
			66

Table 11 reveals a pattern that is more clearly consistent with our expectations concerning the expert versus the government representative role. National civil servants attending Council working parties and comitology committees tend to perceive other colleagues mainly as government representatives. Expert committee participants, on the other hand, tend to perceive other colleagues as having more mixed roles. Thus, only a minority (i.e. 45%) find their counterparts behave *mainly* as government representatives.

Table 12 presents considerations deemed important amongst officials attending different EU committees.

First, almost no major differences can be observed between officials attending different EU committees as far as the above considerations are concerned. Second, as to the relative priority given to the proposals, statements and arguments of other actors, one

Table 12: Proportion (in %) who will give much consideration^a to proposals, statements and arguments from the following when participating in committees

	EC	CWP	CC
Colleagues and experts from my own Member State	87	84	81
Colleagues from other Member States who have demonstrated considerable expertise on the subject matter at hand	73	70	69
Colleagues from large Member States	38	38	30
Colleagues from Member States from my own region	42	46	48
Colleagues from Member States who share a similar position	61	71	68
Representatives from the Commission	57	60	57
Interest groups and firms I know from my Member State	26	32	44
Interest groups and firms I know or have contact with at the European level	17	11	13
TOTAL	N	113	121
			66

^a Values 1 and 2 combined on the following five-point scale: very much consideration (value 1); a fair deal of consideration (2); both/and (3); fairly little consideration (4); very little consideration (5).

consideration seems to be more important than others: officials attending EU committees pay most attention to what their colleagues and experts from their own country have to say. This observation underscores the tendency already indicated in Table 10 and 11 about the national allegiances of committee participants. Participants pay particular attention to the point of view of colleagues from other Member States who have demonstrated considerable expertise on the subject matter. This proportion is remarkably high. Officials give considerably less weight to arguments from colleagues from large Member States, and colleagues from Member States within their own region. The quality of the argument is considered more important than the sheer size and geopolitical position of the Member States they represent. Moreover, the EU Commission is also considered more important than large Member States and Member States within their own region. This may be interpreted as reflecting an element of supranational identification among national officials. Finally, interest groups and firms are deemed considerably less important than colleagues from other Member States. By comparison, however, interest groups and firms from their own country are considered much more important than EU level interest groups and firms. This observation underscores the general tendency apparent in Table 12, namely that national officials attending EU committees pay more heed to national institutions than to supranational institutions.

In sum, what we see is that *arguing*, not only *bargaining*, is a salient feature of the system. The

intergovernmental notion of national actors entering EU arenas with predetermined and fixed preferences has to be significantly modified. Obviously, deliberation is taking place among actors in which interests may be moved or reshaped primarily on the basis of expert knowledge. There is obviously also a good deal of trust in the Commission, as further underpinned by Table 13.

Table 13: National officials' perceptions of commission officials' independence of particular national interests when participating in committees (in %)

		EC	CWP	CC
Mainly independent		81	70	79
Mixed roles		13	18	16
Mainly dependent		6	12	5
TOTAL	%	100	100	100
	N	109	112	63

National officials attending different EU committees seem to agree on the relative independence of Commission officials from particular national interests. Only a very small minority report that Commission officials act more in the interest of the country they come from originally.

Participation in EU committees tends to affect the institutional allegiances and conceptions of roles of participants. Nonetheless civil servants largely retain their national and sectoral identities when attending EU committees. Elements of supranational loyalty do however tend to supplement such pre-existing allegiances to some extent.

5. The Coordination Behaviour of Member State Officials Attending Committees

In the last section we saw how officials attending expert committees probably behave more like experts than they do when attending Council working parties and comitology committees. In contrast, when attending Council working parties and comitology committees, national officials perceive themselves and their colleagues from other Member States more as government representatives. The various perceptions of roles and identities of national government officials attending different EU committees may partly reflect different coordination processes at the national level. One difference that might be expected is between officials attending Commission expert committees on the one hand, and officials participating in Council working parties and comitology committees on the other. Officials attending expert committees are expected to be less subject to national coordination efforts. Officials attending Council working parties and comitology committees, on the other hand, are more likely to participate in meetings with clearly coordinated "positions" from their respective national governments.

Table 14 indicates different modes of policy coordination behaviour amongst EU committee participants. Participants in expert committees seem

less coordinated nationally than officials participating in Council working parties and comitology committees. Officials attending comitology committees seem to be even better coordinated nationally than officials attending Council working parties, though the difference is not very large. By comparison, officials in expert committees tend to take "positions" that are less strongly coordinated back home and "positions" that are in the best interest of the Member States as a group more strongly than Council working party and comitology committee participants. Still, when asked whether national interests or professional considerations are deemed vital when deciding what "positions" to pursue, no major differences are observed between officials participating in different EU committees. Council working party participants seem to pay more heed to national interests than do expert and comitology committee participants. These differences are marginal, however. The most significant observation is that in expert committees, participants have much more leeway to follow "their" own position than in Council working parties or in comitology committees.

Table 14: Proportion (in %) of officials who coordinate their "position" most of the time^a before participating in committee meetings

	EC	CWP	CC
I have to coordinate with the Foreign Office or another central coordinating body	20	47	43
My "position" has in fact been coordinated with all relevant ministries	28	47	53
My "position" has been coordinated with all relevant departments in my own ministry	38	55	59
I have clear instructions about the "position" I should take	28	35	46
I take the "position" I think is in the best interest of my country	63	72	66
I take the "position" I think is best on the basis of my professional expertise	43	43	34
If I have no instructions, or if the question is not important for my country, I take the "position" I think is the best for the Member States as a group	52	46	46
TOTAL	N	110	119
		62	

^a Value 1 on the following three-point scale: always or most of the time (value 1), about half of the time (2), rarely or never (3).

Finally, the respondents were asked to indicate what contacts they have had before committee meetings.

Officials attending EU committees have contacts more frequently with colleagues from other countries who are in a similar situation or have similar problems than with officials from other countries who are respected for their expertise. This may reflect the dual need for coalition building and in-depth professional knowledge amongst EU committee participants. Furthermore,

Table 15: Proportion (%) of officials who have the following contacts regularly^a before participating in committee meetings

	EC	CWP	CC
With colleagues from other Member States:			
– whom I respect for their expertise	20	21	15
– who have a lot of influence in the committee	8	10	13
– who are in a similar situation or have similar problems	33	35	34
With Commission officials	22	21	26
With national or European interest representatives	7	13	18
With MEPs I know	0	1	2
With members of my national parliament who are specialist in my area of work	0	2	2
TOTAL	N	111	123
		66	

^a Value 1 on the following three-point scale: almost before every meeting, regularly (value 1), sometimes, when I think it could be useful (2), hardly ever (3).

Commission officials are contacted by 23% of the officials (mean score). Contacts with MEPs, with national parliamentarians and with national or European interest representatives are much less frequent, or of practically no importance. These observations are largely consistent with the results presented in Table 12. Finally, no major differences can be observed between participants in expert, comitology committees or Council working parties. The most significant difference is that comitology committee participants seem to have contacts with national or European interest representatives more frequently than expert committee participants and Council working party participants.

6. Summary

With respect to practical aspects we can conclude the following:

- Many national officials spend a considerable amount of time and energy on EU committee work. In fact almost one-third of our respondents use at least half of their working hours on preparation, coordination and participation.
- Council working parties are more demanding in this respect than other committees. Officials from small Member States seem to attend meetings more frequently than their counterparts from larger countries. This may be due to the smaller size of their administrations.
- Documentation is available earlier in Commission expert committees and comitology committees than in Council working parties where it commonly arrives only a day or two before meetings. Only a small minority receives documentation at the time of arrival in the meeting room.
- Interpreting facilities are more available in Council working parties than in other committees. For

example, in the Council 59% report that all languages are translated into all languages while this holds for only 17% in other committees.

- English is by far the most frequently used language in formal as well as in informal meetings.

As could be expected, given the primary institutional affiliation of national officials, national allegiances are more clearly expressed than supranational identities. However, a considerable proportion *also* feels loyalty to the committee(s) in which they participate. A clear majority expresses considerable trust in the Commission in the sense that they acknowledge its independence from particular national interests. Commission officials are among their most important interlocutors. Sheer intergovernmentalism is also transcended in the sense that the quality of the argument seems more important than the kind of country the speaker originates from. The multiple identities evoked by our respondents also point beyond a pure intergovernmental logic. In all kinds of committees they identify themselves heavily with sectoral and functional administrations and policy arenas. The government representative role is most clearly expressed in the Council and comitology settings. It is also in these settings that their positions and mandates are most clearly coordinated and directed from back home.

NOTES

- ¹ The questionnaire was jointly developed by Morten Egeberg and Jarle Trondal from the University of Oslo and Guenther F. Schaefer and the “comitology team” at EIPA. By the end of 1999, 232 questionnaires had been completed. Of these, eight were Norwegians, and in six cases it was impossible to identify clearly the Member State which the respondent represented. We excluded these from the analysis that will be summarised in this article which is thus based on 218 completed questionnaires.
- ² It could be argued that this may be the result of the sample. The top level of a Member State’s administration can not usually be expected to attend three-day seminars. Therefore, this top level may well be over presented in our sample since it usually constitutes less than 20% of a Member State’s administration.
- ³ It could be argued that this result reflects the imbalance of our sample. In the Latin language group, France and Italy are under represented, as is the United Kingdom and Germany in the Germanic language group. However, in the sample the two native language groups were of about the same size (95 Latin and 100 Germanic) representing roughly the actual distribution between the two groups in the population.
- ⁴ It is interesting that 20% of the Spanish respondents use another language than their mother tongue in meetings. It is also interesting that while 45% of respondents use English in meetings only 10% of the sample are English native speakers.
- ⁵ Almost 30% of the respondents reported, however that they spent 50% or more of their working time on EU matters. See Table 2. □