

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):

Ileana Daniela Serban (2021). 'The European Union: From a Complex Adaptive System to a Policy Interpreter'. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59:2, 388-403, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13095>

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THE EUROPEAN UNION FROM A COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEM TO A POLICY INTERPRETER

Abstract:

The current article builds on complexity theory and offers a renewed perspective into European Union actorness in external policies. It does so by looking at the EU as a complex adaptive system and by adding new instances to previous analyses on EU agency. More concretely, the paper critically assesses the idea of the EU being a *policy interpreter* when external actors start to interact following new policy practices. This means looking at how third actors enable EU institutional learning, and, through this, new forms of EU actorness. The argument is illustrated by introducing the case of triangular cooperation as a renewed policy practice helping the EU to fulfil its commitments to aid effectiveness.

Introduction

The current article challenges traditional views on European Union actorness, and assesses the idea of the EU being a policy interpreter. While looking at the EU as an entrepreneur has been the dominant perspective used by previous authors in analyzing the EU relation with third actors (Diez, 2013, Manners, 2002, Parker and Rosamond, 2013, Whitman, 2011, Youngs, 2004), the concept proposed in the current article, *policy interpreter*, captures additional instances of EU actorness in external policies, and acknowledges the role of external actors in EU policy change. This European Union role deals with the EU ways to adapt to changes in the international system promoted by non-EU actors, including developing countries and regions. The article uses examples from recent EU international development policies, and looks at how sensing changes in policy practices which are getting relevant in the international landscape influences the manner in which the EU develops its interpretive abilities.

I argue that we can better understand EU actorness by looking at the European Union as an actor which opens itself to the outside environment and learns from it through feedback loops. It means that policy learning and policy transfer are bidirectional and not unidirectional processes, with all involved actors adjusting their policy practices, and entrepreneurs becoming interpreters. Thus, the article states that feedback loops in EU policy learning need to be reassessed by looking at how the EU adapts due to changes happening outside the EU system of actors.

The argument is developed in the context of previous research in two main strands of the EU literature: theories on EU actorness and theories on policy learning and policy transfer applied to the EU institutional context. While highlighting why these theories have a limited explanatory power when trying to understand the role played by third actors in EU institutional learning, the article proposes complexity theory as a better tuned conceptual framework in dealing with the dynamics of the EU as a policy interpreter. The next two sections deal with these conceptual elements. The subsequent parts briefly apply the theoretical framework to the case of the EU international development policy in order to start understanding how the EU develops interpretative abilities in practice. The paper concludes with a reflection on policy and theoretical implications.

EU actorness and EU institutional learning and policy transfer

The EU actorness literature focuses on defining *what the EU is*, and includes the idea of Europe as a power, being it a normative power (Parker and Rosamond, 2013, Whitman, 2011, Youngs, 2004), an ethical power (Aggestam, 2008), a trade power (Meunier and Nicolaïdis, 2006) or a structural power (Smith, 2016). EU power is related in this context to an understanding of the EU as an entrepreneur, a promoter of region-to-region dialogues and regional integration (Dodge, 2014, Rüland, 2002, Söderbaum and Langenhove, 2005, Söderbaum et al., 2006), a power whose influence is based on the attraction of its norms (Manners, 2002, Manners, 2013), such as democracy, the rule of law and the respect for fundamental rights. These concepts focus on the EU entrepreneurial nature, analyzing it as

something inherent in the EU identity and history, showing how EU norm diffusion has helped in making the EU an example of successful regional integration, a model to be followed by other regions and actors (Cerutti and Lucarelli, 2008, Diez, 2013, Jetschke and Lenz, 2013, Lenz, 2013, Lucarelli and Manners, 2006, Manners, 2002, Manners, 2013, Merlingen, 2007). Scholars opposing such optimistic visions on the EU power, and aiming to show the limitations of these forms of actorness have reflected on the shortcomings of the EU normative power. Onar and Nicolaïdis have argued that Europe should rethink its agency in the non-European world using a decentring agenda in order to acknowledge the influence of colonialism in the EU discourse and adapt EU normative power to the coming century (Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013).

While not sharing the same vision on the desirability of the EU entrepreneurial behaviour, these previous theories do have a common epistemological ground in terms of understanding and defining the EU as an entrepreneur: the EU is seen in this context as an actor that promotes its norms to other regions and countries and aims to consolidate its power of influence even when facing opposition or processes through which its norms are localized in order to fit local realities (Acharya, 2004, Björkdahl and Elgström, 2015). Yet, the current article addresses a shared weakness of these concepts: the EU is not only a proponent of norms, it is also exposed to norms and policy practices developed by third actors that enable EU institutional learning, and, through this, new forms of EU actorness. The unidirectional simplified policy process described in previous analyses obscures the dynamics of EU institutional learning in relation to third actors. It is in this context that we need to define how we can understand the EU as an interpreter: the EU adapts to interactions with third actors, to norms developed by *others*, which are fed back in the EU

processes and give rise to new EU policy practices. The argument highlights the importance of a more complete image of EU actorness, and in this sense adds to the concepts introduced by previous authors a renewed perspective, accounting for ways in which other international actors (other regions and non-EU countries) can simultaneously enable EU policy change, bringing in new instances of EU actorness. This novel perspective accounts for a broader vision on the EU international presence, and analyzes how an additional role such as policy interpreter reinforces EU agency. Being a policy interpreter becomes in the current study a reaction to policy practices being proposed by third actors, and a way to keep EU relevance as an international actor, by developing interpretative abilities and renewing European policy practices.

Policy practices are defined in this context as general principles that guide the policies in a certain area, having stability over time and being shared by the different political forces. They are similar to norms, however seen as ‘policy ideas’, being situated at the foreground of the policy process (Orbie et al., 2016). While being more than just abstract world views (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993), policy practices are seen in the current article as both resistant to change in particular cases, and open to change quickly in other cases, since they are conditioned by the adaptability of the EU as a complex system. This will be further nuanced in the subsequent parts of the article, yet it is important to highlight how this conceptualization is different from how policy practices have been traditionally understood. While Orbis (2016) takes a similar view on the dynamic nature of policy ideas, he also states that policy ideas tend to be always open to rapid changes. The current article aims to nuance this, and show how policy practices are developed in a complex adaptive system, whose elements interact in a non-linear, and, as such, unpredictable way.

Policy transfer in the EU context is a second strand of the European Union literature that is connected to the conceptual framework of the current article. While authors working on applying policy learning and transfer theories to the EU do focus on institutional learning within the European Union (Börzel and Risse, 2012, Bulmer et al., 2007, Bulmer and Padgett, 2004, Heinelt and Münch, 2018, Musiałkowska and Dąbrowski, 2018, Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004), the sources of institutional innovation are always internal, and Member States are considered as both rivals and inspiration sources for EU institutional changes (Bulmer *et. al.*, 2007). This vision adds bi-directionality and retrieves the missing dynamic process of institutional learning that is not present in the way EU actorness theories envisage the EU process of spreading its norms and policy practices. However, even if it contemplates change within the EU institutional settings, this conceptualization of the EU agency in the ‘student’ seat is still weak in accounting for the influence of external actors in EU institutional learning. The adaptive nature of the EU is limited to its own internal resources (i.e., its Member States), and, therefore, these theories do not account for sources coming from actors that are not part of the EU system. Similar to theories on EU actorness, the literature on EU policy transfer does not account for the interdependence of learning between the European Union and those actors it engages with. The very limited attempts to conceptualize external sources in EU policy learning relate to the case of the EU dialogue with China on regional policy (Musiałkowska and Dąbrowski, 2018). The authors consider the hypothesis that China might have a useful experience on rapid urbanization from which the EU might be willing to learn. However, no convincing argument is developed and no conceptual framework is deployed in order to make sense of the EU institutional dynamics when using third actors experience in starting to use new policy practices and becoming the target rather than the source of new policy practices.

Thus, the literature on EU policy transfer still looks at the EU as an entity able to adapt only to internal dynamics, such as policy transfer from its Member States, and even such cases are seen as exceptions rather than the rule in EU diffusion processes. The EU tends to be seen as source for institutional change and policy transfer to candidate countries, its Neighbourhood and actors in other parts of the world (Börzel and Risse, 2012). Yet, we should look into why and how the EU is more complex and adaptive than shown in these previous analyses. While consolidating its international presence, it gets to interact with other countries and regional organizations, whose policy practices can be significantly different from those of the EU and can offer important lessons–learnt based on tacit knowledge and lived experience (Stone et al., 2020). This dynamic is different from those described by the EU actorness literature and adds to the EU transfer literature a conceptual approach dealing with external sources for EU policy learning.

The assumption made in the EU policy transfer literature on the EU being less prone to seek institutional solutions and novel policy practices in its outside environment (Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004), and becoming instead a massive transfer platform (Radaelli, 2000) makes it hard to use this theoretical approach for conceptualizing the EU as a policy interpreter. Such reconceptualization needs a theoretical approach allowing an analysis of the adaptive nature of the EU. In this context, looking at the EU as a complex adaptive system can make sense of both EU agency and EU policy learning. The next section argues why complexity theory is a particularly relevant and enabling framework, and presents the main elements of the EU as a complex adaptive system, looking at how this theoretical perspective unlocks new instances of EU agency and policy learning. Conceptualizing the EU as a *policy interpreter* means focusing on how institutional learning happens as a

consequence of iterative adaptation (Geyer and Rihani, 2010), in which reiterative feedback loops (Lehmann, 2018) initiate and hone the adaptation process. Thus, feedback loops are placed at the core of a self-organizing process through which complex entities change as an outcome of a multi-stage policy learning dynamic. Complexity theory provides a bridging point between the EU actorness literature and the literature on EU policy transfer and learning, offering at the same time the theoretical lenses for understanding the interdependence of learning between the EU and the actors it engages with.

The EU from a complex adaptive system to a policy interpreter

During the last few decades, complexity theory has proved to be a particularly useful tool for conceptualizing change in different social sciences areas, including public policy (Geyer and Rihani, 2010), organizational studies (Dooley, 1997), International Relations (Lehmann, 2011) and politics (Jervis, 2012). One of the key concepts of complexity theory has been complex adaptive systems, a concept explaining how different actors can come with completely different responses to similar challenges and how this determines the success of institutional adaptation, contingent on interpreting correctly the self-organization patterns of the system (Lehmann, 2012).

These conceptual developments have not been ignored by studies on EU actorness, which have exploited them mainly for pointing out the challenges and contradictions faced when accepting the EU complex nature. The theoretical frameworks developed by Geyer and Rihani (2010) and Lehmann (2018) are particularly useful for defining what a complex

adaptive system is, and for understanding its main elements in relation to the EU. A complex adaptive system is formed by multiple elements that interact in non-linear ways. While operating far from equilibrium, this interaction is determined by feedback loops. Both the system and its elements are open to their environment and uncertainty is a constant (Eoyang and Holladay, 2013). Since the process is not a linear one, the idea of the EU being a complex adaptive system means accepting a certain degree of ‘incompressibility’ (Coveney and Highfield, 1995, p. 37). This facet of EU actorness makes it a living organism, since ‘different interpretations, diverse interests, uncertain responses, clumsy adaptations, learning and mistakes are what keep a system healthy and evolving’ (Geyer, 2003, p. 30). The idea that the evolution of the EU could and should be understood from the perspective of the complex adaptive systems theory has been used to explain how better policy solutions can be proposed to key crises which have been faced recently, like the migration pressures and the economic turmoil, but also for understanding how misinterpreting the nature of its crises can make the EU a poorly equipped international actor when facing and addressing complex problems (Lehmann, 2018).

These previous ways of deploying complexity theory more generally and the idea of the EU being a complex adaptive system more particularly are useful for understanding why we should consider complexity as a framework for analyzing the EU. Yet, while encompassing the potential for a more balanced way of both conceptualizing EU institutional learning in relation to third actors, and understanding how this affects EU actorness, a higher emphasis is needed on EU agency as a complex adaptive system. If in the literature on EU actorness and EU policy transfer all concepts are built around the ways in which the EU power is projected and its norms and policy practices are spread, in these previous attempts to

feature the EU as a complex entity, its agency is not fully fledged due to the limitations in explaining the actual ‘adaptive’ part in the EU complexity. Thus, while building on these previous ways of understanding the EU as a complex system, I argue for a more balanced approach, accounting better for the EU agency as a complex adaptive actor.

The idea of complex adaptive systems being defined by feedback loops can be a starting point for conceptualizing this more dynamic nature of the EU actorness. If we think about complex adaptive systems as ‘both self-organizing and learning’ entities (Dooley, 1997, p. 77), whose elements are open to their environment (Lehmann, 2018), it means that any configuration becomes eventually unstable and change can be motivated by three different processes: agents sense information in their relevant environment in order to detect any changes that are needed (*sensing*); based on their own information processing schemas, actors start learning about the nature of the changes and the urgency of institutional adaptation (*interpreting*); and, while they interact by cooperating or competing with other actors present in the same environment, they also start adapting their institutional practices (*adapting*). The non-linearity of the system leads us to conclude that the sensing, interpretation and adapting stages do not always happen in this order. The adaptation process can determine changes in the interpretation schemas, making possible the emergence of new tools that allow a more adapted process of sensing the environment (adapted from Dooley, 1997, pp. 76–85). The three elements of this non-linear process (*sensing*, *interpreting* and *adapting*) include one additional link, the one between the interpreting abilities, and the (possible) resulting adapting efforts. Following the adapting efforts, and depending on how profound the changes of policy practices are, they can lead to a circular process by challenging the instruments used for interpreting the environment.

How do these additional elements from complexity theory help us to better conceptualize the EU as a policy interpreter? In this sense, the importance of information processing schemas needs to be spelled out in more details. An information processing schema is similar to a particular pair of lenses used to ‘read’ a specific context, assuming that the use of different lenses would translate in a (slightly) different reading of the same context. To explain how this is possible, we need to account for the subcomponents of these schemas, called building blocks (Dooley, 1997, p. 85). While the schemas are the actual instrument in the process of reading, the building blocks are the rules that are used in order to read.

When the adaption process challenges an existing interpretation, it is not only the schema that needs to be replaced, but also its building blocks, which are used to assess the fitness of the existing schemas (Dooley, 1997, Kiesler and Sproull, 1982). To exemplify this, we can consider an EU schema which has been used for decades: the idea that deploying European experts in developing countries can help institutional strengthening and the replication of best practices (Allison, 2015). This is based on a building block according to which European best practices are the appropriate way to strengthen institutions and bring in the needed changes elsewhere. When the different European institutions in charge with discussing and planning international aid and development policies (the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European External Action Service and its delegations) learn that developing countries are interested in adapting best practices from their peers instead of European actors, the EU as a whole starts changing its building blocks and new building blocks emerge: best practices from new donors are in specific cases the preferred way to build change and institutional adaptation, and the EU may not count on

the experience needed in some of these developing countries, whose context is significantly different from the European one. Based on this, a new schema is built and European actors start getting involved in projects in which horizontal cooperation is at the core. Or, at least, it should work in this way if the system would be a linear one. Yet, the changes are less linear and more complex as the article will argue in its next sections.

Transposing the idea of schemas and their building blocks and acknowledging their importance is not only crucial for better fledging the adaptive nature of the EU as a complex system, but also for thinking about EU actorness and EU institutional learning. While by using these terms we can start conceptualizing EU interpretative abilities, we still need to make a clear distinction between two types of changes that can occur with schemas: first order and second order. First order changes happen when new information is adapted in order to fit existing schemas, and only minor changes occur. This is routinely in any organization, and as such does not involve relevant changes in building blocks. Differently from first order changes, second order changes mean that existing schemas interpret, incorporate and adapt to contradicting information. Therefore, the new emerging schema needs to be fitted through new building blocks (Argyris and Schon, 1978, Dooley, 1997). The importance of and differences between these two types of changes will help us in highlighting if EU responses are adequate and if adapted policy practices are being produced. It is through this second order change of interpretative schemas that we can highlight on one side the full influence of external actors, and on the other side changes in recurrent practices due to contradictions sensed in the outside environment. The first order changes only involve superficial adaptation, while the second order involve more profound interpretation, adaptation and replacement of building blocks.

These elements can be the basis for explaining and conceptualizing the way in which we can think about the EU as a policy interpreter. We have a three-stage process through which EU agents sense changes, interpret them and adapt to new contexts. When contradictions are detected between EU policy practices and practices elsewhere, and changes are needed, new practices need to emerge. This three-stage process is reinforced in a circular way meaning that while new practices emerge as a consequence of the adaptation part, the existing interpretation schemas may also need to change in order to make the future reading of the environment adapted to the new practices. This is further complicated when the type of schema change that needs to happen is a second order change, involving changes in its building blocks.

In order to reinforce the process of applying the current framework to the EU case, we also need to reflect on failure and on how partial or incomplete adaptation would look like. If interpretation schemas are not fully adapted, the adaption process cannot produce real changes, but we rather start witnessing institutional decoupling (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2017) and institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Institutional decoupling means that actors adopt new practices without replacing old ones even if new practices are in contradiction with old practices. Institutional isomorphism happens mainly because of predominant uncertainty, a constant element for complex adaptive systems, and produces mimetic adaptation, in which the practices that were successfully tested elsewhere are adopted (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004). This is closely related to institutional decoupling, meaning that in many cases, these new practices can contradict existing ones, and since the adoption of new practices is only due to perceived success, no profound changes such as

the emergence of new building blocks are encouraged. New policy practices can emerge, however they are not accompanied by second order changes in interpretative schemas.

The next section looks at EU development and aid policy practices as an example of a policy field which is subject to interdependent interaction between the EU and other actors. Thus, the objective is to highlight how changes initiated by third actors determine renewed practices on the EU side. The way in which this will be illustrated in relation to its international development and aid policies will aim at featuring the EU as showing agency in the policy adaptation process, however in different ways than those contemplated by the EU actorness and the EU policy transfer literatures. The three stages adapted from complexity theory (*sensing, interpreting, adapting*) and the idea of challenging existing schemas and building blocks can be used in order to capture these more nuanced EU actorness instances related to EU institutional learning when the outside environment changes due to new practices being used by external actors.

The case of the EU international development policy

This section sets the stage and places the EU within the international development landscape by highlighting the core debate around which change was urged in its policy practices. The subsequent section reflects on the link between sensing, interpreting and adapting while accounting for the relevance of changes in EU interpretative schemas and the replacement of building blocks.

EU international development is a particularly relevant policy area for analysing the adaptive instance of the EU actorness leading to institutional learning. This is mainly because of some intrinsic features of international development. As highlighted by Geyer and Rihani (2010, p. 137), ‘complexity views development as an uncertain, open-ended, and long-term process driven by a large number of interactions that generate self-organized stable patterns¹ capable of adaptation’. As one of the main features of complex adaptive systems, different levels represented by multiple types of international development actors interact in non-linear ways, exchange information through feedback loops and create uncertainty concerning the future configuration of the system as well as the outcomes of the different initiatives aiming for changes and improvements (Eoyang and Holladay, 2013, Geyer, 2003).

It is thus primordial that the EU acknowledges the complexity of the issues that it faces when getting involved in international development initiatives and policies. Previous authors have already underlined the negative outcomes when the EU looks at its challenges and crises in a linear way, trying to solve them through a Newtonian perspective, in which we can easily get from point A to point B just by using the ‘correct’ resources (Lehmann, 2018). On the contrary, the majority of the issues faced by the EU in international development are complex rather than simple. We can exemplify this by looking at how EU policies have considered for several decades the interaction with third countries in a linear way. This meant the European Commission proposed projects to be implemented in regions and countries willing to emulate the European success and to place regional integration at the core of their development ambitions. Yet, real cases such as the unsuccessful negotiations with the Andean Community for a region-to-region agreement have shown

¹ Patterns are synonym here with policy practices.

that when the EU fails to sense, interpret and adapt its policy practices in order to be able to make use of the information which is flowing from its counterparts, it is sticking with a liner perspective on policy making, which is deemed to failure.

Dealing with problems in a complex system is normally a challenge, yet it can also be an opportunity, meaning that solutions can come from elsewhere, taking on the EU side the effort to interpret and adapt in order to fully exploit the advantages of these newly proposed policy practices. As it is the case for complex systems, the newly proposed solutions can come from any actor in the system, here including the emerging and developing countries, countries that used to be or continue being beneficiaries of EU aid policies.

As part of the international development complex system, the EU has participated in the last two decades in a global exercise trying to reflect on how to better adapt policy practices in order to cope with international development challenges (Besada and Kindornay, 2013). In this context, the aid effectiveness agenda has captured the official discourse, being framed in the Paris Declaration (2005), the Accra Agenda (2008) and the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (2011). The recognition that traditional development approaches have failed in delivering on their promises (Hoogvelt, 2001) has raised calls for adapting existing policy practices in order to carry out development at the most appropriate level, being inclusive in terms of actors and encouraging beneficiary country's ownership (OECD, 2012). This has surpassed the governmental arena, to include actors such as NGOs (for example, Global Integrity), the academic debate (Andrews et al., 2017) and think tanks experts (for example, from the Center for Global Development). The interactions between these different international actors have resulted in different

proposals concerning how the complex nature of international development can be tackled in a better way. In this context, the top-down approaches in international development have been challenged by the emergence of new international development policy practices as a result of a constant reconfiguration due to interactions between developing actors, which used to be the recipients of aid policies, but more recently have become donors on their own (Gray and Gills, 2016). This is through South–South cooperation, allowing middle-income and developing countries to share ‘knowledge, skills, expertise and resources to meet their development goals through concerted efforts’ (UNOSSC, 2019, online).

In this context, traditional donors, such as the European Union, have continued to interact with their counterparts, the other traditional donors, but they have also started a dialogue with new ones. As a consequence, changes in policy practices have occurred. The emergence of triangular cooperation can be viewed in this context as a response to the need for new policy practices allowing existing and emerging donors to work together, pooling resources and expertise in order to support a demand driven approach. This means the country that will benefit from this cooperation is the one asking for support (Interview, Latin American Embassy, Brussels, 2015; Interview, Latin American Embassy, Madrid, 2018), while inverting the normal workflow used in traditional development. Such traditional workflow would start with the donor proposing target countries and types of projects to be implemented instead of waiting for the developing country to identify its own needs. The main proponents of triangular cooperation at the international level have been both existing donors, mainly Japan, and emerging donors, such as Latin American countries, and here we can refer mainly to Brazil, Chile, Argentina and Mexico (Interviews, Latin American Embassies, Brussels, 2017). However, once the practice has been successfully used, it has

extended to include also actors from Africa, such as South Africa and Nigeria, and Asia, such as China, Thailand and Indonesia (Interviews, Latin American Embassies, Tokyo, 2019).

Yet, the interpretation that has been given to these changes in international development practices has not meant immediate change on the EU side. This is why we need to acknowledge how the link between sensing, interpreting and adapting has been determined by second order changes in EU interpretative schemas and the replacement of building blocks. The next section aims to analyze this link by using process tracing, based on official documents and semi-structured interviews, held in Brussels, Madrid and Tokyo between 2015 and 2019.

From sensing and interpreting changes to finally adapting policy practices

The European Commission has been the main proponent of changes in EU international development policy practices and the actor sensing changes in policy practices in the outside environment, aiming to interpret their relevance and encourage active adaption on the EU side. Thus, the European Union, based on the Commission's proposals, has started its venture of adapting its policy practices to this international agenda by making use of the *partnership* concept. While sensing changes within the OECD framework, the European Commission interpreted the partnership idea as a European Union (co-)entrepreneurial response to the Paris agenda (together with other OECD actors). In the words of Del Biondo, 'partnership has often been associated with ownership, the idea that recipient countries take the lead in the formulation of development strategies. Partnership-based development

also entails that development programmes are targeting recipient needs rather than donor self-interest' (2016, p. 1238). This approach, which came to be institutionalized in the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, is a clear attempt to put the 'new' policy ideas at work, meaning to start using a new policy practice. 48 per cent of the 10th European Development Fund went to budget support, the adapted policy practice used to show 'mutual trust' between the EU and its African partners, as highlighted by the Development Commissioner Louis Michel (Michel, 2008, p. 3).

However, at a closer look, the European Commission efforts translated in institutional decoupling since the idea of partnership was contradicted by the existence of political and economic conditionality in the Partnership Agreement (Crawford, 2003). While the presence of a Governance Incentive Tranche (European Commission, 2006) meant that positive incentives were provided to those successfully implementing good governance measures, and thus the European Commission provided carrots and not sticks (differently from the US for example), these policy practices only involved first order changes in interpretative schemas. The EU continued using policy practices very much informed by the Structural Adjustment Programmes that were at the core of its development initiatives since previous decades (Barnes and Brown, 2011). The sensing process did not lead to an interpretation encouraging the emergence of an adapted set of policy practices reinforced through renewed policy initiatives, and limited the adaptive efforts of the EU, translating only in very limited changes in its interpretative schemas.

Andris Piebalgs, the next Development Commissioner, continued its institution's efforts to lead the use of partnership as an adequate policy practice and in this sense released two important documents in 2011, the *Agenda for Change* and a Communication on *Budget*

Support (European Commission, 2011b, European Commission, 2011a). However, at the same time, a complex debate was opened within the EU by the Arab Spring, questioning how budget support can provide the financial means for dictatorial regimes to remain in power (Del Biondo, 2016). While not proposing a policy practice on their own, the external actors (the African countries) did contribute to weaken the adapting efforts of the European Commission, making the use of budget support a questionable policy initiative, and, therefore, compromising the EU commitment to horizontal cooperation. This encouraged a second stage of sensing, interpreting and adapting policy practices from the EU side through a reiterative feedback loop helping to self-organize.

The response came this time from a different range of actors. During this same period in which the European Commission was trying to hone its use of partnership, other actors such as Latin American countries, but also some Asian and African countries were proposing and managing to successfully introduce triangular cooperation as a policy practice. This policy practice is intended to facilitate the horizontal dialogue between old and new donors (Interview, European Parliament, Brussels, 2016; Interview, Regional Forum, Madrid, 2018). While both partnership and triangular cooperation share the idea of ownership from the beneficiaries, they are epistemologically different. As defined by Latin American countries (but also Japan), triangular cooperation is an ambitious policy practice involving mutual learning between all involved actors, including the provider of aid (Interviews, JICA, Tokyo, 2019). The interpretation stage following the sensing of this policy practice would involve replacing a long-standing building block in aid and development: the vision that traditional donors only get involved in order to help others (developing countries) to learn best practices, promote good governance and eradicate poverty. An alternative to this building

block informed by triangular cooperation would be that traditional donors, including the EU, get involved in international development to also learn how to improve their presence as a donor, and are open to grasping valuable lessons from developing countries that used to be recipients of their aid programmes.

Hence, such difference can be considered as one of the key reasons for the resistance in changing the related building block. From the perspective of the EU, triangular cooperation is an outside policy practice proposed within and consolidated through frameworks in which developing countries are the main proponents (with the only exception of Japan), with the Latin American countries and regional organizations as key actors in this debate (Interview, Latin American Embassy, Brussels, 2015; Interview, Latin American Embassy, Madrid, 2018; Interview, Regional Forum, Madrid, 2018) and no active involvement from the EU side. Few EU Member States have tested before the EU triangular cooperation as a suitable way of working with new donors. In this sense, Germany is one example, however its experience with these forms of horizontal cooperation is rather still very incipient and presented in quite paternalistic ways when thinking about triangular cooperation as yet another way of familiarizing ‘non–DAC donors with quality and sustainability standards for aid provision’ (Lengfelder, 2015, p. 16). This is different from the mutual learning ambitions of triangular cooperation as described by regional organizations such as the Ibero–American Secretariat (SEGIB, 2018).

When partnership as a policy practice started showing its weaknesses and triangular cooperation its strengths, an additional opportunity emerged for the EU to improve its adapting efforts and its interpretative abilities: the negotiation and approval within the United Nations framework of the new post–2015 international development agenda, more

specifically the Sustainable Development Goals. This international agenda puts at the core of its efforts the idea of both developed and developing countries building their journey to a more sustainable future (Interview, DG DEVCO, Brussels, 2016; Interview, EEAS, Brussels, 2016). It means making the implicit assumption that the EU and its Member States, together with other developed countries, are seen also as ‘students’, that is interpretive and adaptive actors, instead of continuing being exclusively ‘teachers’ or providers of knowledge. Closely related to this international agenda, the second European Development Consensus proposed by the European Commission in 2017 talks about ‘innovative engagement with more advanced developing countries’ and about ‘partnerships [which] will promote the exchange of best practices, technical assistance and knowledge sharing [...] [by] work[ing] with these countries to promote South–South and triangular cooperation consistent with development effectiveness principles’ (European Commission, 2017, p. 20).

One of the most recent initiatives starting to show the deployment of this policy practice by the European Commission is the creation of a Regional Facility for Development in Transition for Latin America and the Caribbean, building on best practices mainly from Chile, Uruguay, Colombia, Costa Rica and Argentina (Adelante, 2019). Even if the added-value of the programme is yet to be assessed (the first regional meetings started in 2018), the organizational chart of the different programmes shows that while using the EU financial support, there is a direct exchange of best practices between the different Latin American actors. What is still to be defined is the differentiated EU role in this division of work, with the current distribution of tasks showing that the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Delegations remain absent actors, outsiders (Adelante, 2019). This also means that the second order change in the EU international

development building blocks is still to be fully completed. However, these new programmes show the most concrete commitment made by the European Commission since it first mentioned triangular cooperation in its documents more than a decade ago (Interview, DG DEVCO, Brussels, 2017).

The adapting effort by making concrete use of triangular cooperation has already started, but the full replacement of the building block concerning the role of the EU as an adaptive actor in addition to a provider of knowledge is still to be completed. Institutional isomorphism is largely present, with the European Commission starting to use triangular cooperation because it proved to be a successful way to deliver on promises related to ownership and effectiveness (Interview, European Parliament, Brussels, 2017; Interview, Regional Forum, Madrid, 2018). This shows the non-linearity of the process, as well as the complexity of the EU system when sensing changes without being able to fully adapt due to interpretation schemas not fully fitted through the emergence of new building blocks.

Conclusions

Using the case of triangular cooperation and the EU attempts to sense changes in international development practices, interpret them and adapt, we can conclude on the importance of complexity as an analytical framework for analyzing the EU complexity. As shown by previous authors, the non-linearity of the EU process is indeed a crucial factor for understanding the EU policy process (Lehmann, 2011, Lehmann, 2018). Yet, in light of the empirical argument developed in the current article, we can suggest that this is not always a

limitation, but also an opportunity for scanning the international policy practices in order to sense new relevant ones, interpret them and adapt, even when the existing building blocks that create institutional isomorphism are still to be replaced. The external actors, such as Latin American countries and regional organizations, have offered an alternative practice to the European Commission in order to fulfil its aid commitments. The feedback loops through which these emerging donors will continue feeding the European Commission, the EEAS and the Delegations as part of the recent triangular cooperation policy initiatives are to be seen as a relevant source for fine-tuning the EU interpretative abilities as an international donor.

The empirical analysis has also important implications for how institutional learning happens within the EU when accounting for the influence of external actors. The complexity of the EU system and of its adapting efforts involves different stages of institutional decoupling and isomorphism (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2017, DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), justifying why changes in terms of adaptation are easier than second order changes in interpretation schemas. Yet, external actors can play a key role in making these changes possible. In the case of the attempts made by the European Commission to adapt its policy practices to horizontal cooperation, the use of partnership has been an initial stage in which the existing interpretation schemas have been used. Partnership as a policy practice preserves the EU entrepreneurial abilities, and reproduces the policy practices created in institutional frameworks within which the EU has contributed with policy ideas (OECD) (Barnes and Brown, 2011, Del Biondo, 2016). It means the EU as an actor is resistant to change (Copeland and James, 2014) when change requires new policy practices. However, when partnership as a policy practice showed its limitations, feedback loops from the

emerging donors enabled the EU to start using triangular cooperation as a new policy practice, being deployed for the first time in concrete policy initiatives. While these new policy initiatives help the EU in fulfilling its commitments to horizontal cooperation, they are still to consolidate EU interpretative abilities.

Acknowledging the complex adaptive nature of the EU has important policy making consequences, as well as implications for related theoretical strands. Institutions such as the European Commission have the opportunity to lead the way towards adapting to new practices and help the Member States in order to navigate the complexity of the new policy practices. From the point of view of external actors, developing and middle-income countries, it is important to notice that it takes entrepreneurial power in order to get the EU involved in the use of new policy practices. The *other* needs to be an entrepreneur in order to make possible an interpretative and adapting instance on the EU side, and the case of the Latin American countries is a key example in the triangular cooperation context. A tipping point is when other EU policy practices have shown their limitations and weaknesses, as explained through the empirical argument. In terms of the literature on EU actorness and the literature on EU policy transfer and learning, the article showed the relevance of an emerging EU instance, i.e., the EU as a policy interpreter, and conceptualized how policy practices travel both ways between the EU and its partners, including developing countries. These are important additions for a more complete understanding of the EU as an international actor, and future research could use other policy areas for expanding our understanding on the EU interpretative abilities.

Acknowledgments: The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and to the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for the postdoctoral fellowship at Waseda University.

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