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**The role of civil society  
in promoting decent  
work: Lessons from  
innovative partnerships  
in Ireland, New Zealand  
and South Africa**

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International Institute for Labour Studies Geneva

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## **Foreword**

The workshop on “*Promoting Decent Work: The Role of Civil Society*” was organized by the Institute as part of the ILO contribution to the Geneva 2000 Forum, held in June 2000 in parallel with the Social Summit plus Five. Its main purpose was to discuss the potential contribution of civil society organizations in creating opportunities for decent work for women and men everywhere. In particular, the workshop aimed to explore the potential of dialogue and new working alliances for decent work between associations of civil society and the traditional social partners in the world of work - governments, employers’ organizations and trade unions.

The assumption behind the workshop was two-fold. First, to respond to the aspiration of people to obtain decent work demanded a collective endeavour by many actors: by international organizations, national governments, business and workers, as well as by all the social actors in civil society. In other words, it required all the agents of change to be involved in innovative economic and social initiatives, based on shared values and objectives and tailored to specific national and local situations. Second, the growth in the numbers and influence of civil society associations in recent years was opening up new and mutually rewarding avenues for collaboration with ILO constituents. Effective and accountable civic associations could well work together with governments and employers’ and workers’ organizations in promoting rights at work, fostering job creation, and enhancing social protection. Their contribution could be particularly valuable in such areas as the informal sector, gender, child labour and the socially excluded, where they could be powerful drivers of programmes for decent work in terms of advocacy; social organization; voice; and the delivery of services. In doing so, they could help to broaden and strengthen social dialogue, and to further democratic participation.

This discussion paper brings together the presentations made at one of the two panel discussions organized at the workshop. The panel, titled *Lessons from Innovative Partnerships*, looked at examples of working partnerships in three countries at various levels of development in different regions. In each case, the occasion for partnership arose out of specific circumstances: a serious unemployment crisis in Ireland; a process of decentralization in the delivery of social services in New Zealand; and a complex and difficult transition to a more open and democratic society in South Africa. In each case, partnerships also evolved within a specific institutional envelope: centrally designed and structured in the case of South Africa and, to a lesser extent, Ireland; on a more *ad hoc* and spontaneous basis in New Zealand. In spite of these differences, each case bears witness to the benefits of inclusive arrangements for dialogue, social policy formulation and action - e.g. greater capability to work out innovative solutions, less coordination failures, and more cohesive community responses to social problems. Each example also points to common problems: complex consultation processes; conflicts arising between and within groups; and unresolved issues of representativeness.

The case studies collected in this paper document practical and creative approaches to promote decent work agenda. They open up a new important ground for discussion, but do not attempt any conclusive analysis. Further in-depth research is needed to fully evaluate the impact of these new kinds of alliances, and draw policy lessons and suggestions for the ILO and its constituents.

Aurelio Parisotto  
IILS

## **1 The case of Ireland**

**Patricia O'Donovan<sup>1</sup>**

The current phase of national partnership agreements commenced in 1987, at a time when Ireland was experiencing a very deep economic crisis. Very serious unemployment, high inflation, very heavy debt - effectively Ireland was seen as a failed economy within the European Union. So it was in an environment of crisis that this experiment came into being. At that time, the people who came together were the traditional social partners; the trade unions, employers, farmers and Government. I know that in many countries, farmers would not generally fall into the category of a traditional social partner. But in the Irish context, agriculture is a very significant part of the economy. This is not so much in terms of the number of people employed or working directly in agriculture, but more in terms of its contribution to growth, domestic product and to the economy itself. And farmers have traditionally had a very strong voice in Irish economic life, and are strongly organized. They don't function in the same way as the other social partners within this framework. They were present in the system which tried to deal with the economic crisis which we faced in 1987, and they remain within that system.

Trade unions, which I represent, were a party to this process from the very outset. Trade unions traditionally saw themselves as also representing the social interest within these negotiations. We carried with us, not just a responsibility for economic issues and the living standards of workers, but also for issues of unemployment and the social wage, issues such as health and education. We also represented the interests of women, people with disabilities, older people as well as broader issues around economic and social disadvantage.

In 1987, the trade union side carried with it an agenda on all of these issues and sought commitments from employers and from Government as to how they could be addressed. During that period, unemployment continued to rise reaching 17 per cent in the early 1990s. This gave rise to the emergence within Irish society of new groups organizing themselves around unemployment and poverty. These groups wanted to have their voices heard on issues of poverty, exclusion and unemployment.

On the trade union side, our initial reaction was to say that we represented these interests. These issues are at the heart of the role of trade unions. We represent poor people, and people who are socially excluded. During that time, many of those organizations would have come to us directly to talk to us and ask us to raise their agenda within the national negotiations. But, over time, these organizations made it quite clear that they wanted to speak for themselves. They believed that they could bring to these discussions their direct experiences, greater richness and more knowledge.

### ***National Economic and Social Forum***

In response to pressure from these groups, the Government decided to establish what it called a National Economic and Social Forum in 1993 with a particular brief to look at areas of social policy, exclusion and unemployment. This was the first formal structure, established with

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<sup>1</sup> Deputy General Secretary, Irish Congress of Trade Unions; Member of the ILO's Governing Body

government support and resources, which involved a wider range of social actors, notably civil society organizations which were categorized as the 'voluntary and community sector.' So, for the first time, government, trade unions and employers were sitting round a table, trying to address these issues together with these other groups. This process was separate and distinct from the national level partnership negotiations. The establishment of the Forum was a political response to the pressures from these groups which the trade union movement supported.

Inevitably, one of the key demands to emerge over time from the Forum was that the community and voluntary sector should be involved in the national social partnership process itself. So, when negotiations on a further national social partnership agreement took place in 1997, the formal negotiating process involved this 'new' social partner for the first time. So there was a transition phase between the situation which involved the traditional partners only and the move to the formal involvement of this new partner. In the National Economic and Social Forum the different partners got to know each other and learned to work together on issues of common concern. That made it easier for all the partners to accept in 1997 that the civil society representatives should be involved in the negotiation process at national level.

### ***Who are the Social Partners?***

The national social partnership is not a hierarchical structure. We all sit round the table on an equal basis. The Government is represented as employer with the employer representatives but also chairs and facilitates the negotiations. Government is there in its capacity as a partner, but also as a facilitator. My organization, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, as the sole national trade union organization represents workers. The farmers and the employers are represented by their respective national organizations. The voluntary and community sector is represented by a number of organizations representing unemployed people, youth, women, anti-poverty groups, "travellers", older people and people with disabilities. There are other smaller organizations, but these are the main groups within civil society represented by this new partner.

### ***How does it work in practice?***

This is a very general description of a process which is fairly complex in practice. All the partners are involved on an equal basis in the preparatory and consultative process leading to the national agreements and we all contribute and participate equally in the process. In the direct negotiations where we bargain on issues, all the partners are involved with economic and social issues such as health policy, education, investment in infrastructure and agreeing the overall macroeconomic framework. When it comes to negotiations on pay and other workplace related issues, these are negotiated bilaterally between employers and worker representatives. These latter negotiations do not involve the community and voluntary sector or the farmers. The Government is involved as an employer. So this is an inclusive process and the only areas which are reserved for traditional style collective bargaining between employers and workers are issues directly related to the workplace.

### ***What is the process?***

I would describe the process as much more than bargaining in the traditional sense. We don't just go and bargain with each other, with Government or with employers. It's more than that. It has been described as a search for a wider consensus addressing the different trade-offs *between* and *within* interest groups. This is one of the most complex aspects of this new arrangement. Particularly within the community and voluntary sector which is much more diverse than the other groups, they have to do their own trade-offs between themselves so that they can come to the table and act as a cohesive group. In the trade union movement, we make trade-offs all the time between different groups and categories of workers. It is part of our job as negotiators to constantly renegotiate the priorities of different groups and individuals. The community and voluntary sector seems to find this a more difficult task as many of these organizations are what could be described as 'single-issue' or one-dimensional organizations. They do not always see

the opportunity or need for trading within their own group. The other point about the process is that it is not necessary to have a consensus before you go into it. The consensus comes out of the process itself which adopts a problem-solving approach. Every group comes to the table with its own agenda and priorities, contributes to finding solutions and the consensus arises there. Sometimes, the different groups are so far apart at the start of the process that there is very little engagement and the process itself has to be used to build the consensus. Professor Rory O'Donnell<sup>2</sup>, who has written extensively about the Irish experiment, describes the approach as follows:

“They all have to explain, give reasons and take responsibility for their decisions and strategies to each other, to their members and to the general public.”

There is a much more discursive approach to these discussions as a result of the inclusion of the civil society organisations. Trade unions cannot come along in the traditional trade union style and say this is what we want, and if we don't get it, we have other ways of getting it! We have to spend more time and effort explaining and understanding the issues and building a consensus through that process with the other partners.

### ***Underlying Principles***

One underlying principle which governs this process is the acceptance of *interdependence* between all the different groups. This is sometimes difficult for the trade union movement to acknowledge vis-à-vis employers. We clearly depend on their support and co-operation to improve the conditions and pay of workers. Also, the trade union movement often feels that it does not depend on the community and voluntary sector for anything. But we now understand and accept that we depend on it to build a broad consensus in society and to gain support for our policies and strategies.

Another principle which underlies the process is *greater respect*. This has to evolve and come through the process itself as we learn to respect the different perspectives we bring to the table.

The final underlying principle is *higher levels of trust*. The question of trust is of course linked to the question of respect. It takes time to build trust and it's absolutely critical to creating a willingness to share power and influence.

Sharing power and influence is a real challenge for the trade union movement in the context of broadening involvement to include the civil society organisations in this type of national partnership. There can be a feeling that by including others, our own power and influence is diluted. Our experience in Ireland has been the opposite – broadening involvement has strengthened trade union power and influence.

I will conclude by summarising with what I consider to be the main benefits of this approach and refer to some of the challenges.

### ***Benefits of the Approach***

1. This approach to 'managing our affairs' has enabled us to build a common understanding of the joint-problems. There is a genuine sense of this even if we do not always find agreement on the solutions.
2. It widens and deepens the consensus within society and enables a much more cohesive response to the challenges.

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<sup>2</sup>

O'Donnell Rory A Framework for Partnership - Enriching Strategic Consensus through Participation', National Economic and Social Forum, Report No.16, December, 1997

3. The capacity for innovation is enhanced. This process enables new ideas to emerge. One of the real contributions from the civil society organisations is their practical and creative experience which contributes to finding new solutions to old problems.
4. This greater sharing of experience and best practice has produced a new model of action which is significant in the context of bringing economic and social objectives together.
5. While there are real issues around the whole question of participative democracy and how it sits alongside representative democracy in our societies, the broadening of the partnership process to include the civil society organisations has contributed enormously to creating an environment of wider and deeper participation.

### **Challenges**

As the process evolves, it becomes more complex. Very different groups with very different objectives and experiences have to try to come together. To make it happen requires a major commitment of time and resources by *all* the parties. It cannot be created overnight and it cannot be carried by one or some of the partners.

The question of the “representativeness” of the various groups involved in the community and voluntary sector organisations is frequently raised. Trade unions feel quite strongly about this because we have very clear representative structures from the shop floor where workers elect their shop stewards right through the system to an elected regional, national and international leadership. Trade union representatives often ask these questions: Who do they represent? Who are they reporting back to? Where do they get their mandate from? It would be easy to brush this issue to one side and say that it is not a problem. But it is an important question and civil society organisations which see themselves as representative organisations need to look at it. To be representative does not necessarily require a structure like a trade union election structure, true, but there has to be some transparency and accountability for policy and decision-making in these organisations.

I have already mentioned the one-dimensional focus of many (not all) civil society organisations. Many of them are concerned with one issue only or the interests of one group only. This means that when the trade union movement compromises because of its broader agenda, they cast us as traitors to the cause because we did not agree to commit all the necessary resources to the issue or group of concern to them. There is always tension within the negotiating process because of that.

My final point relates to a concern which trade unions generally have in response to the involvement of civil society organisations in this type of process. Most of the civil society organisations do not have a workplace orientation and are not very interested in traditional workplace issues which are the core business of trade unions. Similarly, many of them do not share the broader ‘political’ agenda of the trade union movement. Trade unions have to try to deal with this and try to relate to organisations that do not necessarily share the workplace and ‘political’ commitment of the trade union movement. This means accepting that on some issues, the civil society organisations will not share our priorities. It does not mean that they should not be participants and contributors to such a process.

## 2 The case of New Zealand

Steve Marshall<sup>1</sup>

Before looking at some specific partnerships that I've had the privilege of being involved in, we should have a look at the background and context of the question of civil society within the ILO and maybe the national context.

The most visible and, I have to say the most regularly heard sectors of civil society, are the groups known as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). As Ms. O'Donovan has mentioned, there are some traditional concerns in respect of NGO structures, particularly that they tend to be single-issue lobby bodies. But the reality is that they are many and varied, from those that are very professional, extremely well-funded, with very broad constituency organizations, right the way through the spectrum to basically amateur organizations, with a very narrowly targeted mandate and a very small constituency.

The shape or the size or the wealth of an organization, in my view, should not be the criteria for any measurement of value of that organization in terms of its role in society or the community. In fact, sometimes it is quite the contrary to what you might think, and the small organizations can add some real value to the social debate. However one does, I think, have to consider such issues as the mandate of the organizations in terms of representativity, a point that was raised by Ms. O'Donovan, before they can be given real credibility. It's a question of proportional representation and the structure of debate within a society. I don't know whether others have experienced this, maybe it's because we are a small country with 16 million sheep and 3 million people, but, in New Zealand the situation is that if you have a group made up of two men and a sheep dog that do something extreme they get completely disproportionate media attention. And we have to be extremely cautious about the nature of recognition within our society. I'm not talking as an employer, I'm talking about society as a whole.

The world economy has two elements, with its parallel emphasis on competition and on democratic growth. This has required governments to be far more inclusive in the way they govern society, and it has also required them to decentralize their programme delivery, passing more and more responsibility back to the broader community. This has led, I believe, to a considerable increase in the number of NGOs in our own society and in other societies, and it also has given those organizations much greater influence. I suggest that this has not really been recognized.

This background would suggest to me that there are two different types of NGO. I'm not talking about size or shape, I'm talking about approaches. One relates to policy, the political direction of the country. They are basically lobby groups in respect of policy, on a national or an international base. The other group of NGOs are the practical organizations which want to form partnerships with other elements of society for the delivery of services. In some instances, the same NGO would carry out both activities. But in the main, we see quite a clear division between those that are interested in and driven by policy and those that are interested in delivering services to society. Those that are carrying out a dual function tend to be the minority. In fact, I find it far more difficult to deal with NGOs that are handling both activities, because one area will tend to bias their view in respect of the other. There is an interplay between policy and delivery, which can skew or bias the outcome.

But from an ILO perspective, I would suggest that both groups are critically important. Because the ILO is not only deeply involved in policy but is also deeply involved in service delivery throughout the world.

I believe that the ILO has been ahead of its time, because of its tripartite constituency. The partners within the tripartite structure are, although they'll hate to admit it, NGOs. Tripartism is a very important element in the strength of the ILO and it extends the organization

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<sup>1</sup> Company Director Former Chief Executive New Zealand Employer's Federation and Member of the ILO's Governing Body

in terms of its ability to operate, both internationally and at national level. It's very valuable, but I am conscious that some people see the prospect of including other groups as a threat; they fear that the relationship that currently exists may be undermined.

Given the constitutional nature of the relationship within the ILO, I would suggest that involvement is not only necessary but also that it can be managed quite easily. Obviously it would be important to reaffirm the existing tripartite relationship because this organization is about workplace relationships and that is the appropriate tripartite grouping. However, I would suggest that it's equally important for the ILO at international level, and governments at national level to recognize the existence of the other organizations and to view their contribution as an additional resource. I think the ILO must in fact develop a broader policy on NGO involvement.

While decision-making responsibility should remain in the ILO context, I believe that mechanisms have to be developed or where they currently exist, further refined to ensure that the full benefit is gained from involving others, both in respect of their intellectual capacity, which is great in my view, and also in terms of their practical competence.

Let's look at a few practical partnerships that I've been involved in. It's interesting that the Irish experience appears to be on a more national type of structured base whereas again maybe because of the nature of our society, our partnerships tend to be more on an *ad hoc* regional basis. But I'll give you some indications.

The first concerns environmental policy.

Our Ministry for the Environment understood very early that environmental policy is by nature divisive. People take extremely strong positions on environmental policy and there are a host of philosophical views and different levels of vested interest within society that make it very difficult to manage. There is no question that environmental policy impacts on almost every other element of policy in society, including employment policy. So, the New Zealand Ministry for the Environment recognized these issues and even though they knew it was very unlikely that they would actually negotiate any agreements or consensus views, they set up a consultative body. This body brought together representatives from many groups, both governmental and non-governmental, including the employers' organizations and the union movement, but extending right out to encompass the various environmental and conservation lobby groups, the chief executives of major companies involved with environmental products and energy users. All these groups were invited to take part through their representative structures.

This consultative body is an ongoing group which meets when the need arises. If the Ministry is producing a policy paper for consideration by the Government, it drafts a document, looks at the policy issue, raises the options that could be addressed, and calls the consultative group members together. They study the paper and discuss the issues, which may be of domestic concern or which may have an international dimension. The objective, as I said, is not to reach a negotiated agreement, although obviously if a consensus arises it makes the process a lot easier. The aim is essentially to ensure that everyone is: a) aware of the issue, and b) able to make decisions which are informed by the views of all the interested elements in society. It works.

It does not undermine the Government's authority to make policy or reach decisions, nor is it allowed to undermine the rights of any of the groups concerned to continue their own separate policy lobby activities or make submissions to Government in terms of the legislative process. It is purely a consultative process and it covers a whole range of areas, such as global warming and the question of permitted levels of emissions. A very simple example occurred in the fishing sector, where environmental groups raised the problem of seals being caught by the fishing fleet in a particular area. Under our traditional way of working, there would have been huge publicity about the plight of the seal, there would have been a corresponding, very emotive response from the fishing industry, it would have become a major public spat and probably would have done a lot of damage. The result was, in this very simple situation, that the parties sat down in the environmental consultative group, discussed the problem, and realized that for a very small investment they could keep the fishing activities without changing any management practices if they caught the seals and relocated them in another part of the country. For a very

small investment, this was done, all the parties were very happy, there was no public argument and no need for any disruption to the economy or society. A very simple example, but it's simply a matter of communication.

A second initiative on the policy front relates to education and training.

The employers' organization saw that education and training were an absolutely critical part of social development and in our country, and I am sure in many others, there are literally hundreds of organizations involved in the provision of training. A whole range of people and users are obviously interested in policy development including Government, business, private providers and unions.

With somewhat similar intentions as the Ministry for the Environment, in my first example, the employers' organization established a Forum on Education and Training. Again this has representatives from right across the spectrum and it meets as required; again it is not a negotiating body but it is extremely valuable in making sure that people understand the different views, the problems within the sector and the possible solutions. And it has led to changes in policy and delivery because of the input of practitioners who know what's going on in the field, rather than bureaucrats in employer organizations, unions or Government, who might have lost touch with some of the things that are going on in society.

### ***Some practical delivery issues***

I have the pleasure of being the Chairman of the Prince of Wales Trust. This organization is concerned with the position of long-term unemployed youth and is supporting them in their preparation for employment. This is not only for their own good, but also for the good of society. It is a purely voluntary activity. The activities of this trust are funded 50/50 by the public sector and the private sector. The trust itself is made up of representatives from private business, local government, indigenous people - the Maori people, and respected individuals from the broader community. At regional level the organization is overseen by Advisory Boards made up of the local mayor, for example, local business people, a union representative, the president of the local service organization, the Rotary Club or something of that nature, an elder from the Maori community or the Pacific Island community.

Each programme receives a group of young people, normally 11 young people, who come into the programme with us for 10 weeks. The young people sign a contract to say that they will carry out the procedures within the programme and we sign a contract that says if they do this we guarantee that they will be in work at the end of that 10 week programme. A two-way contract.

For every 11 young people that we get on to the programme, the army provides us with an NCO (non-commissioned officer) as the young peoples' team leader. This is part of their NCO training. The NCOs do not give them any skills; they just support them as they go through the programme. One of the private-sector companies provides a 13-seater minibus for each of the groups, they receive the necessary work clothing from different companies, and they receive a whole range of developmental inputs, from company organizations, community groups, and private individuals. When they are placed in a job the young people each have a mentor provided through one of the local clubs such as the Lions Club or the Rotary Club, so that they are not left to try to cope alone.

Now these young people are selected on the basis that they really do need assistance. We are not talking about people who can move into employment themselves, they have invariably been unemployed for at least 12 months and most have never worked. A fair proportion of them are unable to read or write properly, and many come to us with pretty unsavoury histories, in terms of their background. For each activity group throughout the country we employ one coordinator. All the other activities are provided through community groups. So we only have one person in each location around the country. And currently 80 to 85 per cent of the young people that start with the programme finish in full-time employment and 80 to 85 per cent of those young people continue to be in employment beyond six months after concluding the programme. Which for people in that situation is a pretty good result.

The strength of the programme, I believe, is the cooperative involvement of the community – both private and public cooperation on a voluntary basis. I am convinced that if this was a formal public sector initiative you would not get the same results. It is because it is community owned and a partnership between community and the public sector that it works in my view.

A natural follow-on to that has recently been initiated. We found that although many groups are involved in youth employment issues very few ever talk to each other. So a small operation has been put together which simply invites all these groups, both in the public sector and the private sector, to sit down and add value. So, instead of competing for work in the voluntary and community sector, we “case manage” all the young people who come in and ensure that they are directed into the best support structures to meet their particular needs.

The last example that I would like to refer to, is the Partners New Zealand Trust.

This trust has been established on a very similar basis, being representative of the broader community. The interest is in forming partnerships between business and schools on the basis of a contractual arrangement. Obviously it needs to start with very small beginnings, as you build up trust and they are initially limited to relatively simple cooperative activities. For example a company will provide work experience for two or three special needs children from a school to give them some understanding or experience to follow through after leaving school. And in return for that service the school will provide a young person to help with IT training in the company. It’s a two-way deal. Once the relationship has been tested and trust developed, it starts to build and we now have businesses supporting schools in a whole range of curriculum and administrative fields. For example, a business may be providing the whole of the accounting and management systems support for a local school. And in return the school may be providing English - as-a-second - language tuition in the company concerned. This develops into a very positive partnership between the organizations. And the only limitations in my view to this sort of partnerships are imagination and some practical realities.

Now, these are only a few examples, I don’t believe they are dreadfully innovative, I think they are pretty much common sense, but it is amazing how common sense never appears to be applied to this sort of activity. I suggest that as we see developments in the global economy and the pressure to compete intensifies further there will be even greater pressure on us to develop more of these types of partnership. They will become much more important, internationally and domestically.

### 3 *The Case of South Africa*

**Khulu Mbongo<sup>1</sup>**

I appreciate this opportunity to share my views and experience of civil society participation.

First, let me briefly explain the role of civil society partnership in the struggle for democracy in South Africa. I would also like to show how this innovative partnership has been sustained in the post-Apartheid era. Secondly, I will focus on the institutions of social dialogue that are at the heart of innovative partnerships. I will describe our experience so far, which has made South Africa a political miracle of the twentieth century with its success in creating a new model of society.

Thirdly, I would like to revisit the processes and milestone events that made innovative partnerships a reality, and present them as lessons for the world. We should also discuss why this innovative partnership is so critical to sustainable development, given a rise in the influence of civil society in the international arena. Lastly, we should reflect on the challenges and the future of social dialogue in resolving questions of socio-economic justice in the world, noting the protests which have taken place at international gatherings recently, especially at the WTO and IMF/World Bank sessions in the United States.

Social dialogue and partnership with civil society, was a pillar of the liberation struggle in South Africa. It was instructive for us to see the importance of non-governmental actors in formulating and in shaping their own future. Trade unions joined forces with civil society, and this partnership set a clear agenda for democracy in the country.

Women's groups, civic organizations, student programmes and youth movements forged strategic links, both informal and formal, with trade unions, as a mass democratic movement which was a powerful force for change in South Africa. At the heart of this partnership were campaigns and instruments to render the Apartheid machinery ineffective, Socio-economic conditions in the country creating such that the regime was forced to negotiate.

The interaction between all these social partners was carried through to the post-Apartheid era with the government as the new partner or protagonist, so that civil society remains an important element in the social dialogue. The National Economic and Development Labour Council (NEDLAC) was born out of this struggle and experience. NEDLAC is strengthening the social dialogue, and proving to be a vibrant institution in the area of policy formulation.

In the past five years NEDLAC has negotiated substantial agreements, many of which have been enacted by Parliament. Key policy issues are developing a new labour market system, negotiating an appropriate competitive regime, providing basic infrastructure and delivering basic services to our communities. There is a clear public policy directive around the provision of water and electricity, primary health care, housing and, education for the poorest of the poor in society.

#### ***Institution of social dialogue***

The experience of the 1980s has meant that partnership with civil society is critical in achieving the goals of economic growth and social equity. In turn, this positive experience has increased the need for social dialogue.

NEDLAC has generally been successful in creating a broad-based social partnership. There are certainly shortcomings in the process, given the differing degrees of capacity to engage on key issues of social and economic development over the last six years, since the dawn of democracy. Local structures support partnerships in the delivery and implementation of capital as well as the development of infrastructure through the community development

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<sup>1</sup> National Convenor, Community Constituency, National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) South Africa

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In South Africa, we have had innovative partnerships in various forms, where civil society and non-governmental organizations have participated in determining the agenda for transformation, the content and strategy of policy imperatives and the process of implementation. The social dialogue goes beyond NEDLAC, to a variety of institutions at national, provincial, local and sectoral levels. What constitutes this civil society in our country?

In terms of NEDLAC the community constituency includes groups organized and represented by the Women's National Coalition, the South African National Civic Organization, the South African Federal Council for Disability and the South African Youth Council.

NEDLAC gives a voice to civil society in a broad-based social dialogue as it interacts with other constituencies, namely, government, workers' and employers' organizations. The sectors represented in the dialogue are extremely diverse and yet they all represent development goals and community interests. The primary difficulty is a tendency to focus on sectional concerns rather than broad developmental issues. Building the capacity to engage more qualitatively will strengthen our democracy. There is a danger that sectional interests could work to the detriment of the very agreements reached through social dialogue.

Another problem is how to ensure a legitimate mandate and how to provide feedback to the people we represent, thereby closing the gap between the principal organizations and their delegates to NEDLAC. Civil society and our own community constituency are not homogeneous in character. They need to unify their position on specific issues, and use their expertise to make a meaningful contribution to the social dialogue and policy formulation. There is an urgent need to build capacity in the area of policy development and research so as to influence the social agenda and improve the quality of the community input. At the moment other groups express their views more coherently, and this weakens the constituency we represent and undermines its autonomy.

This new partnership in South Africa should take into account the global dimension of social and economic policy, because global forces can take far reaching decisions that affect the poorest of the poor and the voiceless in the global village. These people are left out of the process that determines the global agenda. We need energy and wisdom to cope with the new reality.

### ***Milestone events***

The nation-wide process of engagement in the social dialogue and the partnership that emerged from it have produced remarkable results that could be a lesson for the international community. South Africans are proud of this achievement.

Two examples stand out as successful models for resolving some of the key social and economic issues:

#### ***National Peace Accord***

In the early 1990s, during a period of extreme violence and the subsequent unbanning of political organizations in South Africa, the process of negotiation was inaugurated. Extra-parliamentary organizations, notably the African National Congress, agreed with the then government that negotiations could not take place under those circumstances and that it was necessary to bring the situation under control, so that talks could take place.

In 1993, the Apartheid regime, extra-parliamentary organizations and community associations formed a partnership for peace. The National Peace Accord was signed and the country experienced relative stability on its way to democracy. This is a miracle that still defines our success story in the transition to democracy. South Africa's intervention in conflict situations in other countries is informed by this experience.

The National Peace Accord was not an end in itself but it established a new and meaningful partnership between community organizations and the security forces. There was serious tension about police violence, coupled with a history of brutality on the part of the "law

enforcement” agencies before 1994. Today, there are innovative partnerships between the police and community structures, known as “community policing forums”. These are fighting crime and building a new image of law enforcement in South Africa in the post-Apartheid era.

### *Presidential Jobs Summit*

The second milestone event was the Presidential Jobs Summit, which took place against the backdrop of low economic growth and concern about soaring unemployment caused by fundamental economic restructuring that precipitated massive layoffs. The government proposed a jobs summit and the social partners worked very hard to resolve disputes and conclude agreements, often at breakneck speed.

This process took approximately ten months. A full range of issues was discussed by the jobs summit and the social partners agreed on the measures that should be taken. The community constituency made a significant contribution to the debate by bringing to the fore the social dimension of economic restructuring and the effects of unemployment on communities. The community constituency has made great progress through its involvement in these processes and has ensured that attention is paid to issues that might have been ignored by the rest of the social partners or other constituencies.

The Housing Agreement had a particularly strong impact on civil society, given the magnitude of the problem. A great many people were living in informal settlements ravaged by poverty and disease with no access to water, sanitation, or electricity and no health services or education. The Housing Agreement was ultimately adopted as a Presidential Lead Project, given its potential effect on employment by creating jobs in the construction industry in the national effort to overcome the housing shortage.

The Agreement on Special Groups for women, people with disabilities and youth provides specific job creation programmes. The new jobs are in environmental protection, urban renewal and rural development programmes.

In October 1998, the social partners within NEDLAC held the Presidential Jobs Summit and agreements were concluded in four areas:

- job creation in particular economic sectors;
- the labour market and human resource development for job creation;
- special employment programmes;
- job creation in integrated provincial projects.

A supervisory structure involving all the social partners was set up to oversee and monitor implementation of the Presidential Jobs Summit agreements. The Summit was a major achievement in that it simulated the political energy to advance agreements that were in danger of disappearing in the minutes of never-ending meetings.

### ***Lessons learned***

In the National Peace Accord, it was critical to win the confidence and trust of the negotiating partners by making everybody feel part of the solution. Contributing to the process was better than “importing” solutions. It was essential to level the playing field so that all partners should appear equal in the process of resolving deeply entrenched historical and political problems. Indeed, it was a test of strength of all parties in mapping out the future of the country and achieving a peaceful resolution of South Africa’s situation.

The agreements that the social partners commit themselves to need institutional support to be sustainable in the long term. Quick solutions and short cuts, however attractive they may appear, could spoil the entire initiative.

Without institutional support, problems are likely to recur, and agreements will be open to violation or manipulation.

Policy making can be overwhelmed by the sheer weight of detail emerging from an

ever-growing cycle of meetings. To prevent this, it is useful to have a programme which focuses the energy of the partners and accelerates processes that have been slowed by endless meetings. In my view, it is perfectly possible to improve the efficiency of social dialogue involving more than the traditional tripartite constituencies by concentrating energies around a common objective and timetable.

The Presidential Jobs Summit provided further evidence of the importance and value of NEDLAC's multipartite structure. The participation of representatives from civil society ensures that agreements take cognisance of the needs of this often forgotten constituency.

The examples above clearly demonstrate the opportunities arising out of innovative partnerships which go beyond the conventional tripartite environment, might not have happened. A negotiating table where a very wide range of interests are represented shows how broad-based social dialogue influences governance. It also draws attention to dimensions that might otherwise be overlooked or never considered.

### ***Why is critical innovative partnership?***

We have to put a human face on the process of globalization. A balance has to be found between competitiveness and socio-economic justice in a period of financial turmoil, job losses and volatile markets.

It is vital for us to bring not only labour and capital but also the general community into the equation, in our common endeavour to resolve these often complicated and difficult questions facing humanity in general, particularly in developing countries. To tackle poverty, unemployment, health concerns and housing, community participation and involvement is very crucial.

Innovative partnerships are essential to maintain a democratic state where the various constituencies do not become passive recipients of what government offers to them. Instead, they become partners with formal structures of political governance.

Pooling of resources, planning and coordination of the contribution from the various partners will ensure better services and eliminate the duplication of effort, which wastes resources and causes discord in policy making and implementation.

### ***Challenges***

Notwithstanding the success achieved in creating innovative partnerships, there are challenges facing social policy and social dialogue, in particular given the current context of globalization. To overcome these challenges, we need to take action in the various areas.

We need to continue the effort to create formal institutions such as social and economic councils in more and more countries. Such bodies would facilitate a consensus on the strategic and economic direction of development and influence the impact of globalization in a country.

We should enhance the capacity of the representatives of civil society in those bodies to engage across a wide range of issues. We should also ensure that there is no gap between delegations and their constituencies. The time constraints faced by the senior representatives of constituencies or the social partners are enormous because they have to lead their organizations, while at the same time representing their members in numerous fora.

Finally the process of globalization itself continues to put civil society participation at the heart of policy concerns. There is clear dissatisfaction with the existing global economic order and how it affects the lives of ordinary people, in particular in developing countries. There is an international outcry against the negative impact of socio-economic policies that are determined at global level without consulting civil society actors. Protests at the WTO meeting in Seattle and the IMF/World Bank meeting in Washington clearly demonstrated international feeling. Now it is the time to give consideration to the role of civil society in the global social and economic agenda. These are the challenges I call upon the ILO to look at.