



International  
Labour  
Office  
Geneva

**Social dialogue :**

**all partners  
for decent  
work**

**Social  
Dialogue  
Sector**

## What is social dialogue?

For the International Labour Organization, social dialogue includes all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information between, or among, representatives of governments, employers and workers on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy.

Social dialogue is thus the most suitable tool for promoting better living and working conditions and greater social justice.

It is an instrument through which governance can be enhanced in many fields. It is relevant to any effort aiming to achieve more productive and effective enterprises and sectors and a fairer and more efficient economy. It thus contributes to a more stable and more equitable society. It also has particular relevance to the globalization process.



## What are the basic prerequisites for social dialogue?

The explicit political will of all of the parties concerned to engage in social dialogue.

Strong, independent workers' and employers' organizations with the appropriate technical capacities and access to the information that enables them to participate in social dialogue.

Respect for the fundamental rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining (as set forth in ILO Conventions 87 and 98).

Appropriate institutional support.

Mutual recognition and respect amongst all social partner representatives.

## What are the different forms of social dialogue?

The institutions of social dialogue are often defined by their composition; they can be bipartite or tripartite. The tripartite actors are government representatives and employers' and workers' organizations.

Social dialogue can have various aspects. It can be a tripartite process, in which case the government is an official party to the dialogue. It can also consist of bipartite relations between employers and workers' representatives or between trade unions and employers' organizations, in which the government is involved either directly or indirectly. This dialogue can be informal or institutionalized, or a combination of both. It can be held at the national, regional or local level. It can also take place at the inter-sectoral, sectoral or enterprise level.



## The activities most frequently involved in social dialogue:



## Does social dialogue differ from one country to another?

Social dialogue is rooted essentially in freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining and must take account of the social, cultural, historical, economic and political context in each country. There is no “all-purpose” model of social dialogue that can be readily transposed from one country to another. There are distinct differences in social dialogue depending on the country, although the fundamental principles of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining of course remain the same. It is essential to adapt social dialogue to the situation in each particular country in order to ensure that the local partners are really included in the process. Institutional arrangements and legal frameworks as well as traditions and practices pertaining to social dialogue vary widely throughout the world.

### Information-sharing

This is one of the most fundamental and essential factors for any effective social dialogue. Although it does not itself involve actually debating issues or taking action, it is nevertheless an essential part of the process through which dialogue can be established and decisions can be taken.

### Consultation

The parties engage in an exchange of views, which can lead to more in-depth dialogue. Some bipartite or tripartite organs have an advisory role, whereas others act more as bodies which provide information.

### Negotiation

Collective bargaining is one of the most widespread forms of social dialogue. The parties can engage in either bipartite or tripartite bargaining with a view to concluding agreements or collective labour agreements, and the negotiations can be held at the company level or at the sectoral, decentralized, regional, national or even multinational level.





## What is the role of the ILO in social dialogue and tripartism?

The ILO's commitment to the concept of participation is summarized as follows in the Declaration of Philadelphia: "The war against want requires to be carried on with unrelenting vigour within each nation, and by continuous and concerted international effort in which the representatives of workers and employers, enjoying equal status with those of governments, join with them in free discussion and democratic decision with a view to the promotion of the common welfare."

Tripartism and participation are mentioned in several international labour standards (nos. 135, 144, 151 and 154) and resolutions of the International Labour Conference with regard to the activities carried out by the ILO in the technical cooperation context.

These instruments not only provide for tripartism in technical cooperation projects and pro-

grammes as an objective in its own right but also advocate that it be employed as a management tool. They also make provision for the participation of the population groups concerned in the elaboration and implementation of measures for social progress.

Social dialogue is an integral part of the Decent Work Agenda. It is also a means of achieving the objectives of that Agenda. The Resolution concerning tripartism and social dialogue, which the International Labour Conference adopted at its session in 2002, developed this idea further, recognizing that social dialogue plays an essential role in the promotion of fundamental principles and rights at work, the achievement of employment objectives and the improvement of social protection.



## What role do the social partners play in strengthening social dialogue?



### Workers

Workers and their organizations play a crucial role in social dialogue. Along with employers and governments, workers put tripartism and social dialogue, the constitutional principles of the ILO, into action. Certain fundamental conditions must be present, however, if these principles are to be implemented, namely freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. Social dialogue is a valuable tool, which is designed to protect and promote workers' interests by introducing the principles of democracy and human dignity at the workplace. It is furthermore an instrument which has proved its worth in the management of social and economic change and which preserves both consensus and stability within society. Social dialogue, including collective bargaining, enables workers and their organizations to improve wages and working conditions. In many instances

they have extended the scope of collective bargaining to include worker protection issues such as health and safety at work, social security systems, education and training for workers, and worker participation in enterprise management.

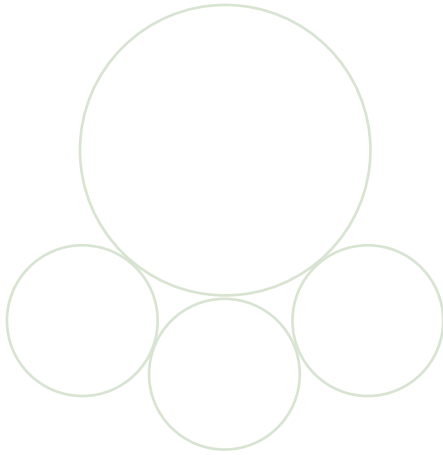
Whatever the level, local, decentralized, national, regional or international, trade union organizations are effective intermediaries, through which workers can take part in social dialogue.

These organizations are thus regarded as key instruments for improving workers' quality of life and promoting the fair and sustainable development of society as a whole.

### Employers

Employers' organizations actively contribute to helping countries to create the necessary conditions for achieving their objectives regarding employment and living standards, since they can convey corporate needs better than any other institution or any of their affiliates. They help to strengthen the good results which enterprises obtain by influencing the environment





in which they operate and providing services through which they can enhance their performance. They also improve corporate operational effectiveness by providing firms with information, advice and training tools. As official partners in tripartism and social dialogue, employers' organizations play an essential role in strengthening employer-employee relations and building better understanding, the principles underpinning the Decent Work Agenda.

## **Governments**

Labour administrations have two major roles to play in social dialogue, whether tripartite or bipartite, namely:

### **A promotional role**

According to international labour standards, the labour administration is responsible for promoting consultation with the social partners and taking any appropriate measures to ensure that consultations and negotiations take place in due form.

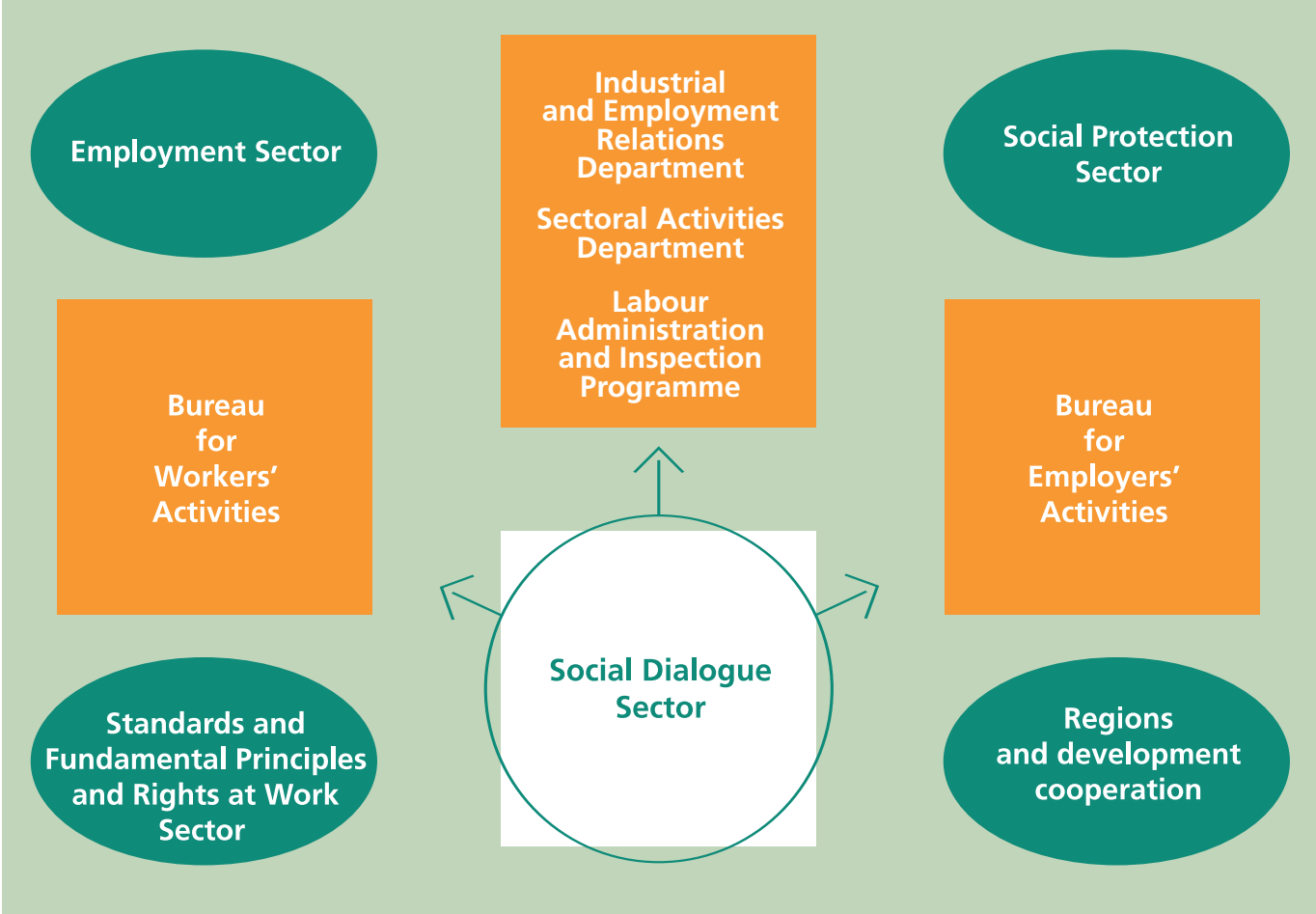
### **An active role**

Labour administration provides instruments for encouraging dialogue between the social partners. It can play other roles including that of the principal employer in the public sector. Labour administration can also



take part in dialogue as a partner in its own right with a view to encouraging an exchange of views, further developing discussions and seeking support for its own implementation policies. Social dialogue covers a wide variety of fields involving the activities of labour administration at the national level, including that of: securing social peace and regarding it as a precondition for accelerating productivity in the world of work and a factor of economic and social development. Labour administrations should endeavour to create consultation bodies at the national level attached to ministerial structures and establish permanent secretariats with a view to ensuring that those bodies operate effectively and efficiently and that the services they provide are useful and sustainable.

**Who deals with social dialogue issues in the ILO?**



## How does the ILO encourage its constituents to strengthen social dialogue?

By attending to a wide range of problems relating to work and being present in the most relevant discussions on the concerns of workers and employers.

The importance of social dialogue is being increasingly recognized at a time when the international community is seeking appropriate solutions to the problems and opportunities created by globalization. Given the ILO's established experience and competence in the area of tripartism and social dialogue, the Organization is well-placed to play a leading role in the promotion of dialogue, partnerships and participatory approaches in the policy-making process.



It assists its constituents by:

- promoting international standards concerning social dialogue;
- promoting gender equality in each of its programmes and activities;
- elaborating social dialogue indicators as part of the overall indicators of decent work;
- helping to modernize national labour legislation and by strengthening labour administrations;
- organizing bipartite and tripartite meetings in many technical and sectoral fields.

## The Social Dialogue Sector – “Strengthening tripartism and social dialogue...”



1.

### Bureau for Employers' Activities (ACT/EMP)

The mandate of this Bureau is to maintain close contact with employers' organizations in ILO member States and to assist them in the context of their relations with the Organization. A further task is to keep the ILO constantly aware of the views, concerns and priorities of employers' organizations. The Bureau also promotes international cooperation amongst employers' organizations and is in charge of a global technical cooperation programme aiming to build the representative capacity of independent employers' organizations offering services for developing business competitiveness.

2.

### Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV)

The mandate of the Bureau for Workers' Activities is: to strengthen representative, independent and democratic trade union organizations in all countries so that they are in a position to defend workers' rights and interests to best advantage, to provide efficient services for their members at both the national and the international level, and to promote the ratification and implementation of ILO Conventions.

3.

### Industrial and Employment Relations Department (DIALOGUE)

This Department aims to promote the advantages of social dialogue in addressing economic and social issues. It does so by strengthening institutions which work for social dialogue and supporting the role of governments and the social partners in constructing that dialogue. For that purpose, it advises ILO constituents on bargaining, mediation and dialogue machinery and processes and provides supporting tools. The Department also helps ILO constituents to revise national legislation in accordance with international labour standards.



4.

### Labour Administration and Inspection Programme (LAB/ADMIN)

The LAB/ADMIN Programme aims at assisting ILO constituents in promoting Decent Work through the strengthening of labour administration machinery, including labour inspection, making them more effective. This was recognized by the Treaty of Versailles 1919, when setting out the general principles for the foundation of the ILO, and was recently recalled by the ILO Declaration of Social Justice for a Fair Globalization adopted in June 2008.

The Programme provides technical assistance to constituents to promote the implementation of international labour standards such as Conventions No. 81, No. 129, No. 144 and No. 150, assessing labour administration and labour inspection systems, creating networks, developing action plans for building capacities of labour administrators and labour inspectors.

5.


### Sectoral Activities Department (SECTOR)

The sectoral approach is the ILO's platform for addressing all aspects of work in the various sectors of economic activity. It provides better insight into the world of work, bringing together ILO constituents at the international, regional and national level. SECTOR is responsible for the sectoral dimension of the ILO's work and outreach; developing and expanding sectoral analyses and social dialogue at sector level. Social dialogue at the sectoral level is strengthened through a combination of sectoral research, meetings, national activities, action programmes and standards-related activities, as well as a number of inter-sectoral activities.

6.

### Better Work Programme (BETTER WORK)

« Better Work is a unique partnership between the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). It unites the expertise of the ILO in labour standards with that of the IFC in private sector development. Better Work brings together local enterprises, international buyers, governments, workers' and employers' organizations to improve labour standards and competitiveness in global supply.



**Where can I find  
information on social  
dialogue in the ILO?**

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