

Coming out of crisis in Africa: the role of social dialogue

Over the last 10 years, the ILO's Regional Programme for the Promotion of Social Dialogue in French-speaking Africa (PRODIAF) has helped more than 20 African countries to promote social dialogue between governments, employers and workers and prevent social conflict. Putting particular emphasis on countries coming out of crisis, the programme enters its third phase this year. ILO Online spoke with Johanna Walgrave, acting director of the ILO's Social Dialogue Sector.

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ILO Online: What were the goals of PRODIAF when the programme was launched in 1998?

Johanna Walgrave: The Regional Programme for the Promotion of Social Dialogue in French-speaking Africa (PRODIAF) was launched to help a wide range of francophone countries to strengthen tripartite cooperation between governments, employers' and workers' organizations at the national and subregional levels. Funded by the Belgian, and with the help of the French, governments, PRODIAF allowed the ILO constituents in the region to explore social dialogue and tripartite cooperation systems, and make improvements, changes and reinforcements where they were deemed necessary. PRODIAF also focuses on institutional and organizational aspects of tripartite consultation and negotiation mechanisms, strengthening research activities and creating a network of African social dialogue practitioners/experts.

ILO Online: How does the programme relate to the ILO's Decent Work Agenda?

Johanna Walgrave: The ILO aims to ensure that it serves the needs of working women and men by bringing together governments, employers and workers to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes. Achieving fair terms of employment, decent working conditions, and development for the benefit of all cannot be achieved without the active involvement of workers, employers and governments, including a broad-based effort by all of them. To encourage such an approach, one of the strategic objectives of the ILO is to strengthen social dialogue among the tripartite constituents. Social dialogue between governments, employers' and workers' organizations is essential in order to establish sound labour relations, adapt labour laws to meet changing economic and social needs and improve labour administration.

ILO Online: Can you give us concrete examples for this revitalization of social dialogue?

Johanna Walgrave: A recent positive trend across the continent has been the negotiation of tripartite "social pacts" or "partnership agreements". While these national accords are often negotiated as a way out of civil or economic crisis, they also serve as the basis for healthy collective bargaining. Economic and social pacts are a popular formula today in Africa, and their results are inspiring for post-crisis countries, or for countries where consolidation of social peace is at stake, for example Guinea, the Great lakes countries, Central African Republic and possibly Kenya, in English-speaking Africa.

Thus in November 2002, Senegal adopted the National Charter on Social Dialogue to upgrade the institutional framework for social dialogue between the State, private sector employers and workers. In Mali, the 2001 partnership agreement committed the government and the social partners to promote a "responsible social dialogue with the aim of encouraging social conditions conducive to economic development". Other examples of functioning collaborative frameworks for social dialogue in French-speaking Africa include Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger and the Democratic Republic of Congo. PRODIAF played a decisive role in these developments.

ILO Online: What about ILO activities in English-speaking countries in Africa?

Johanna Walgrave: Since 1995, the ILO has worked with its South African constituents to gain access to justice for hundreds of thousands of ordinary workers. In the immediate aftermath of the apartheid era, this helped to ensure that the advantages of democracy were translated into fairer workplaces and the creation of a stable labour relations environment.

The ILO helped to establish the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) of South Africa, as an independent institution of dispute settlement. Apart from the impact on the lives of the individuals who benefited directly from these services the establishment of a dispute resolution system, which had the confidence of both business and labour, contributed to deepening democratic governance and promoting social, economic and political stability in the new South Africa.

The CCMA of South Africa is now a model for building similar institutions of dispute settlement in seven other countries in the Southern Africa region (Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe).

ILO Online: The examples show how closely social dialogue is linked to democracy and political stability on the continent...

Johanna Walgrave: I think President Wade of Senegal explained the link very well when he wrote in 2002 that “new and courageous forms of democratic governance are sweeping across Africa. By encouraging political pluralism, free and open elections, civilian control of the military, a thriving private sector and the protection of labour unions and other civil society groups, Africa’s leaders are bringing new hope and opportunities to their people”.

If, by nature, labour is an important field for conflict prevention and resolution, social dialogue is also seen as beneficial to political stability. An illustration is offered by countries facing political unrest showing the dire consequences of a lack of national social dialogue. On the other side, countries like Mali and Niger have developed effective social dialogue mechanisms and were rewarded by social peace and political stability. What’s more, PRODIAP activities since 1996 have contributed decisively to regional integration. For example, they made it possible to establish a Sub-Regional Tripartite Committee on Social Dialogue within the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) in 2006. The first meeting of this body in October 2007 discussed the situation of migrant workers, social protection and pension systems in member States. The West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) now intend to establish a similar Committee.