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International  
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# Social Dialogue Indicators

## Comparative Note

Collecting information through  
Labour Force Surveys

Department of Statistics

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# Collecting information on trade union membership and collective bargaining through Labour Force Surveys

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining are at the core of decent work. They are fundamental rights at work and the foundations of sound industrial relations and effective social dialogue. Data and indicators on trade union membership and coverage of collective agreements, together with other qualitative indicators, are important for monitoring the progress made towards the effective realization of these rights at work. The measurement of these social dialogue indicators is also essential for assessing the quality of industrial relations and its impact on employment and working conditions.

However, the collection of data on trade union membership and the coverage of collective agreements is not straightforward. There are no international guidelines for collecting information on trade union membership and the coverage of collective agreements. Countries that do collect and report this data do not use standardized methodology. As a result, data collected is not comparable across countries. Moreover, the legal, regulatory and institutional framework for industrial relations is particular to each country, hindering the comparability of the data.

## **Labour Force Surveys: the preferred source of data on trade union membership**

Data on unionization can be collected from a number of sources. Statistics on trade union membership and coverage of collective agreements are often obtained from administrative records, such as registries kept by Labour Ministries or by trade unions

themselves. In other cases, the source of data is an establishment survey. However, the preferred source for these statistics is a Labour Force Survey.

A Labour Force Survey has a number of advantages over other sources when it comes to the production of social dialogue indicators:

- It provides data with comprehensive coverage, or at least with greater coverage than administrative records and establishment surveys. Indeed, Labour Force Surveys usually target a wider population, apply to all sectors of the economy and tend to have larger geographical coverage – mostly national. The other sources mentioned tend to concentrate on a specific sector (private or public), some economic activities (generally non-agricultural), some groups of workers (e.g. only employees), and some regions (e.g. only urban areas).
- The use of a Labour Force Survey reduces the likelihood of the double-counting and miscounting of union members. In a Labour Force Survey, every person can only be counted once. Administrative records on the other hand often reflect inaccuracies: (i) members who have left a union or have died are not removed from the registry; (ii) persons switching from one union to another may be counted as members of both unions for a certain period; and (iii) where registries are not centralised, persons who are members in more than one union may be counted more than once.

- A Labour Force Survey collects other labour market information that can be analysed together with trade union membership, such as whether the person works in the formal or informal economy.
- The treatment of data from a Labour Force Survey is usually more cautious than that from other sources, generally including a more thorough data cleaning process and several quality checks. This increases the reliability of social dialogue indicators derived from data collected through a Labour Force Survey.
- A high non-response rate to the questions on union membership in a Labour Force Survey can cast light on a number of issues, such as the inclination of respondents to hide their union affiliation and their reluctance to disclose information on this subject.
- The use of Labour Force Surveys as a source of data on union membership could facilitate comparisons between countries, since the methodologies applied in these surveys differ less from country to country than those of administrative records and establishment surveys.
- Respondents to the survey may not have the information needed to answer questions correctly. In Labour Force Surveys, proxy answers are often used, that is to say, one person in the household selected for the survey provides the information requested in the survey for all the members of that household. This could introduce inaccuracies, since the respondent may not be aware of the union membership status of all the members of the household.
- Although Labour Force Surveys are the preferred source of data on trade union membership, they are not as reliable when it comes to the collection of data on the coverage of collective agreements. Respondents may not know whether or not their employment conditions are determined and regulated by a collective agreement(s).
- A Labour Force Survey can be a costly exercise. However, if a Labour Force Survey is already in place or is in the planning stage, the cost of adding questions on union membership and coverage of collective agreements is very little.

Despite these advantages, a review of practice shows that the number of countries using a Labour Force Survey to collect data on union membership is very limited.

When using a Labour Force Survey to collect data on social dialogue, the following issues should be kept in mind:

- The periodicity of the production of data obviously depends on the periodicity of the survey. An analysis of trends is more difficult in countries where Labour Force Surveys are not conducted on a regular basis, or only once every several years.

### **Current practices in countries that use a Labour Force Survey to collect information of union membership and collective bargaining coverage**

The ILO reviewed the questionnaires of fifteen countries that use a Labour Force Survey to collect information on union membership. On this basis, a number of observations can be made:

- Two-thirds of the countries studied use one question to address the issue of union membership in the survey questionnaire, four of which also included one question on the

coverage of collective agreements; two countries have two questions on union membership; and the remaining three countries have three questions on union membership.

- The most common question used in the survey questionnaires is relatively straightforward: “Are you a member of a trade union?”. Most of the questions on trade union membership and coverage of collective agreements coverage are designed for the respondent to answer “Yes” or “No”. In some cases the option “Does not know” is also included. A multiple choice is sometimes used to determine the confederation to which the union is affiliated.
- Based on the responses to the questions, respondents are typically classified as either *union members* or *non-union members*. One country classifies the interviewed population into three categories: *union members*, *non-union members covered by a collective agreement*, and *non-union members* (not covered by a collective agreement). This provides additional information that may be useful in assessing the reach of collective agreements.
- Questions on social dialogue can be addressed to the whole survey population, or to a specific group such as employed persons. Of the countries studied, eight address questions on union membership to employed persons; one country addresses questions to all employed persons except unpaid family workers engaged in a family business or on a farm; and six countries request this information from all the persons in the age group covered by the survey. Where the questions are addressed to the whole population, disaggregated data is also available on union membership among employed

persons, unemployed persons and the economically inactive population.

The quality of the information collected from a Labour Force Survey can be linked to the number of questions dedicated to union membership and collective bargaining coverage in the survey questionnaire.

- All countries studied address the general issue of union membership. Some are also concerned with the affiliation (to a confederation) of the union of which the respondent is a member. One country addresses specific characteristics, such as the existence of a trade union in the respondent’s workplace, how long the respondent has been a union member, whether or not the union to which the respondent currently belongs is the first one he/she joined and whether those that are not members of a union would like to join a union.
- Only four countries addressed the issue of coverage by collective agreements in their survey questionnaire. The limited treatment of coverage by collective agreements in Labour Force Surveys may be related to the reliability of responses. Many households may not know whether or not the members of that household are covered by a collective agreement. Other instruments, such as establishment surveys, may be more reliable source for this data.

In conclusion, a review of a select number of Labour Force Surveys reveals that the collection of information on trade union membership is a relatively simple exercise and one which permits the production of reliable social dialogue indicators, a critical aspect of labour market information so often disregarded. On the other hand, Labour Force Surveys appear to be a least preferred option for the collection of reliable data on collective bargaining coverage.



## Annex

### Some model questions on trade union membership and coverage of collective agreements currently included in Labour Force Surveys<sup>1</sup>

#### Canada (Labour Force Survey)

Is he/she a union member at his/her [new] job [at name of employer]?

Yes  No

Is he/she covered by a union contract or collective agreement?

Yes  No

#### Estonia (Labour Force Survey)

Is there an organisation (trade union) representing the interests of the employees in your enterprise/ organisation?

Yes  No

Which trade union organisation does it belong to?

(multiple choices presented)

Are you a member of this organisation?

Yes  No

#### Iceland (Labour Force Survey)

Do you belong to a labour union?

Yes  No

Which labour union do you belong to?

#### Ireland (Quarterly National Household Survey)

Are you a member of a trade union or staff association, which represents its members in labour and industrial relations issues?

Yes  No

#### Luxembourg (Labour Force Survey)

Are you a member of a trade union?

Yes  No

Since what year?

Is it still the first trade union you ever joined?

Yes  No

#### Netherland (Labour Force Survey)

Are you a member of a national union?

Yes  No

Do you know to which federation of trade unions the union is affiliated?

(multiple choices presented)

What is the name of the union?

#### Sweden (Labour Force Survey)

Are you a member of a trade union?

Yes  No

Which trade union do you belong to?

Do you know which central organisation you belong to?

(multiple choices presented)

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<sup>1</sup> For a full list of questions on trade union membership and collective agreements' coverage currently included in Labour Force Surveys, please contact the ILO Department of Statistics.