



▶ Executive Summary

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ILO-EC Conference: Enhancing Social Partners' and Social Dialogue's roles and capacity in the new world of work

The profound changes sweeping through the world of work pose a number of serious challenges, but also open up new opportunities for social dialogue and the role of social partners – alongside the public authorities – in the governance of the world of work. While social dialogue institutions and mechanisms, including collective bargaining, have long been a feature of EU countries – sometimes for decades – questions have been raised about the ability of social dialogue to rise to the new challenges and opportunities and to deliver sustainable socioeconomic outcomes.

These questions have been raised at a time when trade unions and employers' organizations are seeking to adapt to the massive transformations in the global organization of labour and production, and when labour administrations, on their part, are struggling to cope with the challenge of enhancing labour market performance and workplace compliance.

Against this backdrop, the ILO and the European Commission decided to launch a new project aimed at analysing and documenting how the social partners in EU countries are endeavouring to adapt to these changes. The project also seeks to identify the many good social dialogue practices that are emerging in various countries, as well as the activities of public authorities aimed at enhancing the role of social dialogue, including collective bargaining, in tackling the new challenges and opportunities in the new world of work, while at the same time upholding social partners' autonomy.

A participatory project with social partners

The most original feature of this project is its participatory nature: the social partners have been involved at all stages in its design and implementation.

First, the social partners helped to define the geographical scope of this project, proposing that it covers not only current EU member states, but also all the EU candidate countries and even potential ones. Accordingly, project coverage was extended to 34 countries.

Secondly, the social partners selected three main topics concerning the world of work that they believed pose the most challenges and which they believed would benefit most from the research component of the project.

Topic 1. Strengthening the social partners' representativeness and increasing their institutional capacity to shape labour markets through social dialogue and consultation

This topic was very much influenced by the social partners' acknowledgment that strong and representatives employers' and workers' organizations are key for the legitimacy and effectiveness of social dialogue. Indeed, social partners in many countries face challenges from stagnating or declining membership and the need to be proactive to recruit and retain new members.

The conference volume provides examples of innovative social partner initiatives to increase membership by reaching groups that are traditionally difficult to organize.

On the trade unions' side, efforts have been made to organize workers in new types of activities, such as platform jobs, and information campaigns have targeted schools, students and young academics, while others have opened up membership to the self-employed and students. Trade unions have also developed new forms of digital support and services and online communities.

On the employers' side, attempts have been made, for example, to reach potential new members among SMEs. Some employers' organizations now put more emphasis on service provision – including new types of legal advice, training and group insurance schemes – using marketing techniques and recruitment targets assigned to territorial structures to expand membership to cover small firms, including IT companies and firms that are representative of the new economy.

Topic 2. Supporting social partner autonomy

This topic was motivated by the social partners' concerns that insufficient room was left for the development of autonomous social dialogue, notably because of over-intervention by the state, including excessive legislative provisions. The OECD (2019)¹ has underlined the value of autonomous social dialogue between workers and employers and their respective organizations: the quality of the working environment appears to be higher in industrial relations systems with powerful and autonomous social partners, associated with high collective bargaining coverage.

The conference volume discusses the respective pros and cons of three types of mechanism for further supporting autonomous social dialogue. The first are extension mechanisms (that allow extension of the benefits of an agreement to enterprises or workers that originally were not among those signing the agreement). The second are derogation clauses (which allow parties signing a lower level agreement to agree on standards or conditions less favourable than originally agreed). Finally, the tripartite agreements and institutions that exist in many European countries may also influence autonomous social dialogue in different ways.

These three mechanisms are not neutral in terms of social partners' capacity and legitimacy in developing autonomous social dialogue. This may explain why the social partners often disagree on how to handle these mechanisms, for instance extension mechanisms.

Topic 3. The role of the social partners in relation to digitalization

Within their possible spheres of influence, the social partners could play an increasing role in addressing the potential employment effects (on both the level and structure of employment) brought about by the digital revolution and a possible substitution of labour by capital. This can take place first at the macro level, notably through tripartite social dialogue to discuss issues such as the macroeconomic strategy, industrial and tax policies, education, skills and labour market policies, and then at micro level, with the discussion of work reorganization and production processes – including restructuring and downsizing – at the firm level. In this respect, interesting initiatives have been launched by the social partners in a number of countries to address the digital revolution, such as Industry 4.0 or digital agendas.

Other topics reported by national employers or trade union organizations

The interviews with national employers and trade union organizations also helped to identify other issues on which the social partners are increasingly active, such as labour migration and global supply chains, as well as the growing diversity of forms of employment, including those facilitated by new digital technologies.

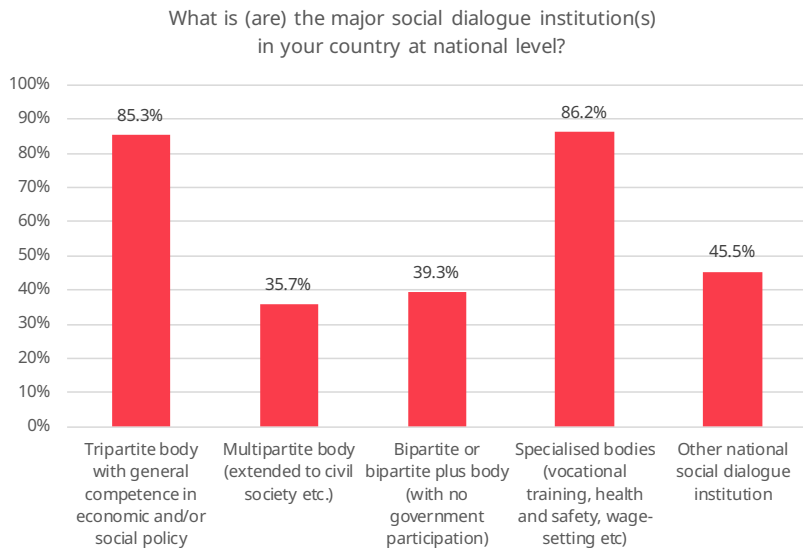
Social partners' views on national social dialogue institutions: survey results

To complement the experts' work, the ILO conducted a small survey to collect social partners' opinions about the effectiveness and impact of national social dialogue institutions, including their capacity to stimulate autonomous social dialogue. The survey, in the form of a Survey Monkey questionnaire, targeted representative employers' and workers' organizations in the 34 countries. We received nearly 40 responses from both employers' and trade unions' organizations, so the results can be evaluated as fairly representative.

The information collected revealed, first, the complex landscape of social dialogue institutions, which are generally tripartite, combining institutions of general competency (confirmed by 85 per cent of respondents), and specialized committees (reported by 86 per cent, see Figure 1).

¹ OECD. 2019. Negotiating our way up: Collective bargaining in a changing world of work (Paris, OECD Publishing), <https://doi.org/10.1787/1fd2da34-en>

Figure 1 Major social dialogue institutions



In terms of outcomes, we asked social partner organizations to report what benefits their organizations derive from their participation in social dialogue (Figure 2). The main benefit was to increase their legitimacy, together with their public profile (reported by 40 per cent). Some 37 per cent reported that one major benefit was to “raise new and emerging issues”, thus confirming the important role to be played by such institutions in addressing the newly emerging challenges in the world of work. Only 23 per cent reported that it helped to solve

concrete issues, however. The results were also mixed on stimulating autonomous social dialogue (a big influence was reported by only 22 per cent) and the conclusion of collective agreements at lower levels (reported by only 20 per cent).

This shows a need to strengthen national social dialogue institutions to support autonomous social dialogue, especially from the government.

Figure 2 Organizational benefits for social partners

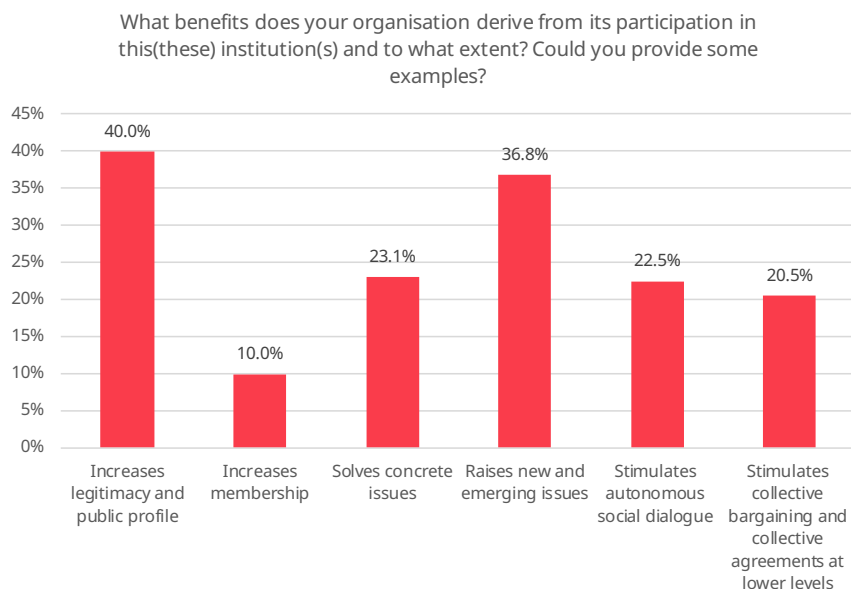
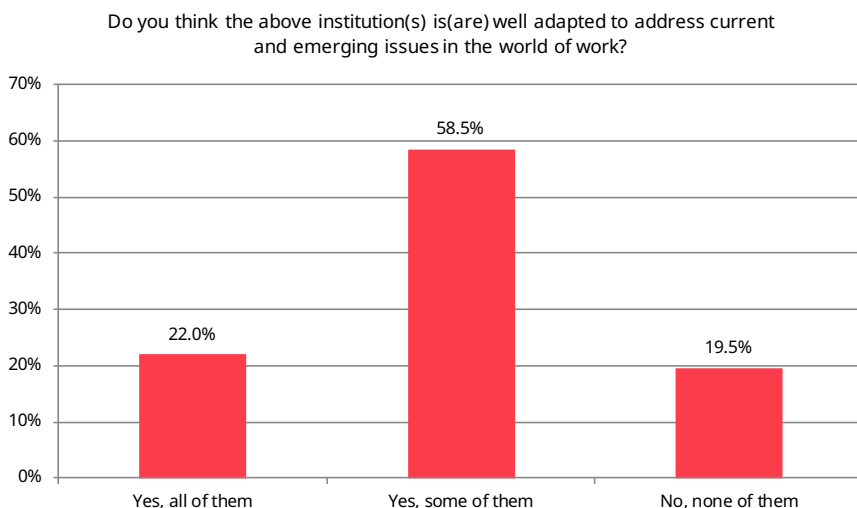


Figure 3 National social dialogue institutions' ability to address emerging issues in the world of work



When asked about how well adapted social dialogue institutions were to current and emerging issues in the world of work, the results were rather mixed (Figure 3). While 22 per cent of social partners believed that current national social dialogue institutions were well adapted, 59 per cent reported that just some of them were fit for purpose, with nearly 20 per cent reporting that none of them were up to this task.

The survey carried out among national social partners is in line with results presented by the experts. In particular, they seem to confirm the mixed feedback received by the social partners about the effectiveness of their national social dialogue institutions and more generally about governments' role in encouraging autonomous social dialogue and enhancing their participation in decision-making.

The survey results also revealed a need for such social dialogue institutions to be more inclusive and reflect the interests and concerns of all labour market parties.

Undoubtedly, the credibility of social dialogue actors and tripartite institutions in the longer run will depend on how they adjust to the new face of the world of work and formulate adequate and innovative responses to the rapid and deep transformations currently unfolding. We hope that this research and following debates will give them ideas and inputs to address these issues and to put them on their policy and operational agendas.