



Policy Paper

Social Dialogue as a Tool to Fight Inequality & Recover After a Pandemic

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“*Universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice*”
—Versailles Treaty, 1919. ”

1. Why Social Dialogue?

Si vis pacem, cole justitiam” – “If you desire peace, cultivate justice,” is the motto enshrined in the foundations of the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) building in Geneva, established in 1919. World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the fear of communism that followed, had convinced world leaders that, “universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice,” as they stated in the 1919 Versailles Treaty. Widespread injustice, inequalities, and exclusion were the enemies of peace. Many would argue they are no less relevant today.

“At the same time that populations are increasingly empowered and demanding more, governments are coming under greater pressure from new challenges and more limited resources. This widening gap portends more political volatility, erosion of democracy, and expanding roles for alternative providers of governance.”

—National Intelligence Council. “Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World.”¹

Over the past 100 years, “social compacts” and “social dialogue” are frequently referenced all over the world as tools to achieve shared growth and prosperity, better working conditions, higher living standards, and higher productivity. Social dialogue is often seen as a miraculous recipe for sustainable development, decent work, and growth, especially in times of crisis or recovery. This was seen in South Africa, where institutions were established as part of the effort to rebuild after Apartheid. It has also occurred periodically in Latin America when social issues have become contentious. The concept was evoked in the U.S.’ New Deal of the 1930s following the economic “crash,” as well as in crisis-torn Scandinavia in the same decade. Now, social dialogue has emerged again among those who are now planning priorities for next decade in the face of massive challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions addressed in this paper include: what actually is social dialogue and what value may it hold for post-pandemic management and recovery?



2. Background: Social Contracts, Pacts, Compacts, and Dialogue

The need to strengthen social contracts has indeed become a returning reference in the discussions around reset and recovery after COVID-19. There are both domestic and external pressures for reform. Domestically, the combination of massive social and economic challenges combined with increasing popular protests and decreasing trust has reset the agenda in many countries for discussions around priority-setting, improving government deliverables, and governance. At the global level, governance and distribution has again been questioned due to dysfunctional trade and supply chains, a widening gap between countries, as well as pressures on the multilateral system itself (seen most clearly in the tensions over inequitable access to vaccines and fiscal space).

United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, raised the need for a new social contract in his Mandela lecture in 2020.² Others have reiterated the call. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, calls for countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to take action on a new social compact – a political instrument based on a broad and participatory dialogue that would arrive at agreements and consensuses to face the present situation and rethink reactivation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.³ The World Bank argued before the pandemic that a new social contract was fundamental for prosperity the Middle East. Similar calls have been heard elsewhere.⁴

Social contracts, and preferably *new* social contracts, are now called for by politicians, academics, and global leaders alike. Yet, whilst calls for renewed social contracts are heightened, they are also relatively broad⁵. While social contracts have deep philosophical and historical roots, the concept refers as a point of departure, simply to a contract, or “consent” between citizens and the state whereby citizens acknowledge the right of the rulers to rule for assuring them in return some level of safety and security.⁶ Yet, there are a wide variety of definitions of what lies both in the “social” and in the “contract.” Social pacts, compacts, and social dialogue are generally looked at as more organized and focused – as a more organized dialogue between organized parties, discussing or negotiating concrete deliverables—and where there is a more concrete outcome—with designated responsibilities and expectations.

Social pacts or compacts, and the social dialogue that led towards them grew out of WWI and reflections on the social despair, upheaval, and revolutions that had transpired in the beginning of the 20th century. John Maynard Keynes argued in his 1919 *Economic Consequences of the Peace* that the economic subjugation of Germany would, “sow the decay of the whole civilized life of Europe.”⁷ The ILO, formed in the same year, was based on the recognition that social justice and social dialogue were important steppingstones to the developments that occurred after the war and helped to prevent new ideological conflicts. The vivid memory of economic crises in the 1920s and 1930s, and the political opportunities these provided for fascism in Europe, as well as in Asia, pushed social justice further to the center of attention. The link between peace and social justice gradually widened in the 1920s and 1930s through a fixation with communism that moved towards rising fascism. It was becoming apparent that social injustice within and across countries provided a formidable breeding ground for fascism.

⁸The ILO was founded to promote the fundamental rights of workers, promote paid employment, social protection, and to improve conditions of work through social dialogue.⁹ It is the only public international organization, and the only one in the UN system which is tripartite: where workers and employers enjoy equal rights with governments in representation and decision-making. Social dialogue is the very foundation of the ILO, and is not only reflected in the “Decent Work Agenda” embraced by many other international



bodies, but is also relevant for the United Nations Common Agenda, the Decade of Action, and several of the Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁰ A number of other international bodies have supported the same need for dialogue between key economic and social partners. The European Union's New Start for Social Dialogue reinforces social dialogue as a pillar of Europe's social market economy. Regional bodies on other continents have in several resolutions appealed for similar, such as SADC in Southern Africa¹¹ and ECLAC in Latin America.¹² Initiatives such as the multi-stakeholder partnership, The Global Deal, also seek to enhance social dialogue around the world.¹³ The OECD's 2017 Recommendations on Open Government support this by underlining the need for and value of stakeholder participation in decision-making.¹⁴ The ILO also argues that the COVID-19 pandemic, with its far reaching socio-economic consequences, calls for effective tripartite social dialogue and cooperation to design effective strategies and policies to address its impacts.¹⁵

But while current calls for social contracts and dialogue—or 'crisis compacting'—abound, these are concepts and tools that paradoxically receive the most focus in crises, and commonly receive less focus in general discussions around development in between crises. Too little focus, some would say.¹⁶ Whilst social dialogue is often kickstarted with a crisis, it is thus best developed over time, as with all other trust-building efforts. It's success builds to a large extent on trust and 'failing and succeeding'. Both trust and assessment need time to develop.

3. Content and Impact of Social Dialogue

Social dialogue, as defined by the ILO, 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.¹⁷ It can exist as a tripartite process, with the government as party to the dialogue, or it may consist of bipartite relationships between trade unions and employers' organizations. The main goal of social dialogue is to promote consensus in building democratic engagement among major economic stakeholders around a specific issue. It holds the potential to resolve important economic and social issues, to encourage good governance, to advance social and industrial peace and stability, and to boost economic progress.

Social dialogue differs from other forms of governance in the types of outputs it produces and the means employed to achieve them.¹⁸ It creates tangible outputs, such as collective bargaining agreements, welfare policies and practices, or educational reforms through social pacts. It can involve the co-determination of policies and the tripartite governance of certain policy areas, such as human resources development, employment policies, welfare, or bipartite management of wage settlements, green deals, etc.

While social dialogue holds huge potential for many sectors and parties, it has been practiced mostly in the economic and labor market sectors. Yet, economic and labor market issues impact almost all other policy areas. Many will agree, for example, that development, and ultimately peace, is based to a large extent on economic factors and on how many are unemployed, poor, and destitute in a given country. Likewise, that trust will depend on who is marginalized in the labor market and thereby deprived of hope for a future. Nation-building or national reconciliation depends on whether the distribution of jobs, and other economic



“Expanding economic opportunities, ensuring the recognition of fundamental social and economic rights, advocating, advancing and achieving decent work, and facilitating social dialogue between workers, employers and civic organizations, are critical components of recovery from conflict and the prevention of any return to war.”

—Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland³⁶

opportunities and future prospects favor particular religious, ethnic or geographical groupings. Social services, health, and welfare depends on the economy and the labor market, etc. And achieving transitions to a greener economy will depend on, and have consequences for, the economy and the labor market. Realizing decent work for all requires strong social partners and effective social dialogue and tripartism. Fair terms of employment, decent working conditions, economic, and social development can only be achieved with a broad-based effort and the consent of workers, employers, and governments, some would say.

Not all would agree, of course, regarding the value of social dialogue and negotiations. For some in the business community, social dialogue has the potential to serve as a productive input into business.¹⁹ For others, the positive case remains unconvincing. Same goes for both labor movements and governments. Yet, where social dialogue between organized groups has developed to its fullest extent over time, actual trust-building has happened, and real commitments have been put on the table – commitments needed for development, crisis management, and/or peacebuilding. Questions, or any disagreements, linked to the value of, and deliverables accruing from, social dialogue are mostly linked to the variance in institutional architecture rather than the need for dialogue itself.

There is indeed a rich diversity in institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, traditions, and practices of social dialogue throughout the world. Some set-ups have become relatively institutionalized. Others are formed on the basis of regular dialogue between parties where both or all recognize that joint efforts can achieve more than the combined value of their respective independent investments. Others, in turn, are set-ups meant only to exchange information. In these cases, information sharing can provide the platform for trust and more elaborate joint decision-making to be developed as they go along. And whilst traditionally the typical social dialogue processes have entailed tripartite employer-employee-government dialogue, several countries have also brought in other groups to represent the unemployed, rural populations, the informal sector, youth, and other underrepresented groups. Rather than giving a full list of social pacts, the following examples represent a variety of cases to illustrate the breath and richness of cases and experiences. For more info regarding Tunisia, Colombia, South Africa and the Republic of Korea (RoK), see Erin McCandless (2021).²⁰

In South Africa, social dialogue grew out of the anti-apartheid movement’s focus on dialogue and the establishment of forums. This was spearheaded by the Black trade union movement, and to some extent, their collaboration and negotiations with employers that developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, the establishment of the National, Economic and Development Council (NEDLAC) took this to an entirely new level, representing one of the few global attempts to introduce collaborative decision-making between social partners on a wide set of policy areas. Furthermore, the traditional parties in the labor market were joined by broad civil society groups in negotiations over policy and reconstruction. The Labour Relations Act in 1995 was the first product to result from this governance structure, and several tripartite and multipartite agreements followed in its wake. The “Green Economy Accord” signed in 2011 by the government, employers, three labor federations, and other civil society organizations aimed at developing the green economy aspect of South Africa’s New Economic Growth Path is another example of such social pacts in the framework of NEDLAC. And in 2017, amendments to the LRA introduced a national minimum wage, again finalized through tripartite negotiations and social dialogue.²¹





In Tunisia, a tripartite “Social Contract” was concluded in 2013 and was signed on the day of the second anniversary of the events that led to the Arab Spring uprisings. The Contract aimed at paving the way for improvements in areas such as labor legislation and industrial relations, employment policies, social protection, and vocational training. It also called for the establishment of a National Council for Social Dialogue. Simultaneously, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet was formed by the confederation of labor, the confederation of trade and industries, the lawyers association, and the Human Rights League. It pushed forward the constitutional and democratization process, and established an alternative, peaceful political process at a time when the country was on the brink of civil war. In 2015, the social dialogue process in Tunisia, represented by the Tunisian Quartet, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.²² And in 2016, the tripartite Tunis Declaration on Employment was signed, reiterating the consensus to tackle the complex challenges that Tunisia is facing with respect to employment policies through a comprehensive approach that actively involves social partners in the design of innovative employment policies.²³ Social dialogue has thus shaped not only labor and economic issues in Tunisia, but the whole post-revolution political process.

While several social dialogue processes were set up in Southern Africa during the 1990s, most of them remained processes of information sharing rather than forming real negotiating bodies. While the principal commitment to social dialogue has remained strong in several national and regional bodies, dialogue processes have generally been challenged by weakly organized employer bodies and trade unions, large informal sectors, and lack of institutional resources and trust. In Latin America on the other hand, conditions seemed more promising for social dialogue from the 1990s onward, and dialogue processes were introduced in several countries in tandem with the strengthening of trade unions where labor friendly governments came into power.

In Uruguay, for example, social dialogue was introduced 15 years ago in order to shape and administer the social security system.²⁴ The National Dialogue on Social Security (NDSS, 2007-2012) brought together a broad range of societal actors to discuss changes to the social security system, including representatives of workers, pensioners and employers, civil society organizations, the government, and academic institutions. The outcomes of the discussions led to the redesign and extension of unemployment benefits. The second round of talks (2010 – 2012) aimed to address more contentious issues, such as permanent disability benefits and wage guarantee funds, but had more limited outcomes. In Brazil, tripartite industrial policies, The Plano Brasil Major, were developed from 2011-14 in the wake of the financial crisis, with the goals to increase capacity, structural change, efficiency, and to expand markets. The governance structure of the plan is tripartite at all levels from the strategic Industrial Development Council, to the Sectoral Competitiveness Councils on the articulation and policy formation level. In 2009, social dialogue had also resulted in the establishment of a tripartite ‘national commission for dialogue and evaluation of the National Commitment regarding labor conditions in the biofuel industry’. Other forms of social dialogue also exist: In Costa Rica, the Consejo Superior del Trabajo is a permanent consultative body formed by representatives of government, employers’, and workers’ organizations, whose mandate is to contribute to the consolidation of labor relations based on decent work and permanent social dialogue.²⁵ Linked to the broader challenges and need to consult broader groups following, among other crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, the decision was made to set up the economic and social advisory council in late 2020.²⁶ In El Salvador, the Consejo Nacional del Salario Mínimo, is a permanent tripartite forum that sets the minimum wage in the country. Yet, here, as on the African continent, social dialogue has been hampered by a weakening of the organized workforce and, in some countries, a lowering of trust between governments and social partners.

The most well-developed social dialogue systems are generally thought to be found in the Nordic countries. “The Nordic model”, has become a trademark of the Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden—where tripartite cooperation is pursued across political dividing lines, and is considered crucial for the management of national economies.²⁷ Yet, some decades back, few would have thought that social dialogue would end up being considered as a competitive advantage. Norway was, for example, a poor country in the 1930s. Norway and Sweden had among the highest man-days lost in strikes across Europe in that decade. The social dialogue we see today came out of a realization on the governments, employers, and employees’ side that they had problems that were too big to solve on their own, and that





they needed each other to achieve a better total outcome than they would achieve by separate actions taken on their own. The deal made was to, “grow the cake, while dividing the cake differently,” i.e. with a higher piece going to labor. The welfare system and the stable democracies we see today are to a large extent products of dialogue and negotiations between the three parties, in a fine balance of power and in a complicated web of institutions where the state, employers, and trade unions negotiate labor market issues, working conditions, as well as welfare, pension systems, and public health policy.

Social dialogue is institutionalized in other European countries, as well. Belgian social dialogue actors are, for example, part of the Federal Council of Sustainable Development, whom the government has to inform yearly on the implementation of its recommendations. In Germany, the social dialogue system is well developed and also based on an intricate system of institutions, such as works councils, company and sector-wide collective bargaining, as well as broader tripartite negotiations around economic and social policy. Whilst the German economy was adversely impacted by the 2008 financial crisis, for example, unemployment did not escalate and labor market trends remained moderate due to a negotiated package of allowances, training programs, and active labor market policies and investments by the government. The social welfare pacts, which proliferated in Europe since the late 1980s, have major implications for welfare states by bridging, and innovating the linkages between the informal and formal welfare states, and between social security systems and labor market rules and regulations. All of them consist of new market conforming policy mixtures.

In Asia, social dialogue has been held back in some countries by a lack of recognition of independent social partners and a lack of government recognition of core labor rights for workers and employers to organize.²⁸ 20 out of the 30 countries in South Asia have not ratified at least one of the two core labor conventions, and 13 countries have not ratified both of core conventions. And where the scope of union activities is restricted, there is also little scope for social dialogue. Labor is weak, except in Japan and in the Republic of Korea, where trade unions and collective bargaining systems are relatively well-organized and tripartite structures are set up to negotiate minimum wages, etc. Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines have seen an increase in the number of trade unions in the past decades since democratization began, but they suffer with fragmentation and internal competition. Large informal sectors constitute yet another challenge to social dialogue in the region.

The tripartite “deliberation councils” in East Asian countries during the crippling financial crisis of 1997 provide additional examples of social dialogue. They were established in order to facilitate consultation and information-sharing between the government and social partners in order to address needed restructuring and policy measures. In the Republic of Korea, sweeping changes had taken place in industrial relations since democratization in 1987, which gave workers the right to organize themselves. Thereafter, social dialogue became a large part of the institutional architecture of labor policy and economic developments, with the Korean Tripartite Commission taking on a featured role. In the late 1990s, social dialogue contributed to the development of a first-ever social pact allowing the tripartite partners to negotiate the fundamental reforms needed on key labor market issues. RoK has followed up with several other tripartite agreements and broad consultative processes. Minimum wages are set in tripartite structures, but also broader policies regarding labor law, economic policies, etc. In 2020 and in the midst of the pandemic, RoK finalized its New Deal with three pillars: a green deal, a digitalization plan, and an ambitious job creation program.²⁹

In Indonesia, social dialogue was institutionalized shortly after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1998.³⁰ The new democratic government quickly recognized the right to organize and set up of tripartite task force to shape labor market policy and the tripartite dialogue to follow. Whilst relatively new, social dialogue was based on the traditional consensual decision-making approach known as “musyawarah and mufakat” (deliberation and consensus) employed in Indonesia, forming the background for joint consensus-oriented formulation of socio-economic policy and of minimum wages. The broader civil society organizations, such as environmental groups, human rights groups, universities et al, cooperated with unions through awareness raising and information campaigns, advocacy, etc. Social dialogue facilitated the development of new labor and economic policies, and stimulated the process of collective bargaining between unions and employers, which altogether contributed to an acceleration of economic recovery post-1998.³¹ Job





pacts, social security systems, etc., were increasingly included in an elaborate system of tripartism and consultation at company, sector, regional, and national level from then onwards. In late 2019, social dialogue between the government, labor unions, the ILO, and environmental organizations started discussions about a joint action plan for a “Just Transition” towards a green shift.

Systems of social dialogue are well-tested and documented, especially the ones focusing on labor and economic issues in developed economies. They are less developed, however, in developing economies and fragile states, where roles are still emerging, economic parties are less well organized, the informal sector is generally much bigger, trust between the parties is often underdeveloped, and little is known about the value and underpinning factors of success in social dialogue. Yet, it has also proven to be a valuable tool and methodology in difficult environments, like in Zimbabwe, where bipartite sector employment councils still produce agreements and value in spite of the enormous challenges of a national political and economic crisis, as well as massive hostility between the government and labor. Tripartite social pacts in countries as diverse as Chile, Italy, Slovenia, and Zimbabwe, have given the social partners a fundamental role in decision-making regarding social security reforms, education and training, labor market regulations, and active labor market policies, among others.³² Similarly, social and economic councils were also found to play an important role in numerous countries worldwide in enabling broad support for policies in response to the global financial crisis of 2008. More recently, social dialogue has also played a key role in developing policies to protect workers’ health against the spread of the COVID-19 virus and to adjust working time, working arrangements, wages, etc.³³

Whilst labor issues and economic policies over the past decades have often been the focus of social dialogue, such dialogue processes have also produced agreements that focus on social security or that deal with economic issues vis-à-vis education reforms and other welfare programs. ‘Green deals and transitions’ have also increasingly received attention over the past decade. A new center was set up in 2016 by the global International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the European (ETUC) labor groups to support “Just Transitions” to more environmentally friendly economies, negotiated through social dialogue.³⁴ All in all, the principle of social dialogue, invented first for the labor, employment, and economic fields, may easily be adapted to other policy areas or sectors and yield the same returns: ownership, commitment, accountability, and the delivery of bigger rewards with less conflict and more trust. In many cases, similar processes of consultation and negotiations have indeed already been taken forward, focused on specific issues of transformation, reconciliation, and transitional justice, as well as peace-building, etc.³⁵ Several other consultative processes have, for example, taken place in Latin America, such as consultations on the drafting of constitutions in Chile and Mexico, Colombia’s stakeholder consultation for the Prosperity Agreements, Costa Rica’s institutional consultation mechanism for Indigenous populations. In addition, Peru’s Acuerdo Nacional consultative forum was established to promote dialogue between government authorities and civil society to ease the implementation of COVID-related healthcare and economic policies, and participatory budgeting has been used in Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries from the end of last century.



4. Social dialogue: Benefits and Enabling Conditions

Research, mainly in OECD-countries, demonstrates the various ways in which social dialogue brings more equality in wage-setting, resulting in a larger share of earnings for middle- and low-income workers, less inequality in the top income groups, and higher shares of income from labor in countries' gross domestic product (GDP). In industrialized countries in the Global North, studies suggest that social dialogue has contributed to economic stability, prosperity, growth, and competitiveness.³⁷ Social dialogue has also contributed to reduce exclusion and social inequalities by improving working conditions and guaranteeing fair labor relations, and has huge potential also in reducing the gender wage, wealth, and power gap.³⁸ In low- and middle-income countries, such dialogue has increasingly played a role in supporting transitions to more democratic, equitable, and sustainable political and economic systems. Strong collective bargaining and/or tripartite social dialogue have furthermore increased countries' resilience in the aftermath of crises³⁹ (among others, the 2008/09 financial crisis) through adjustments and investments⁴⁰ in active labor market policies, and short-term work schemes that reduce job losses and provide help to corporations. Yet, while recognizing that social dialogue can make a positive contribution at various stages of development, it is not necessarily a simple or straightforward process. Nor is it a process that should be entered into easily only to gain benefits. It is a process of both gaining and giving, of investing and getting returns.

The quality, effectiveness, and value of social dialogue is highly influenced by the context and the political and organizational criteria that is present. The ILO identifies enabling conditions as: (1) the democratic space and freedom of association and collective bargaining, allowing social partners to organize and express themselves freely; (2) the presence of strong, independent workers' and employers' organizations with the capacity and information needed in order to participate; (3) a political will and commitment to engage on all sides; (4) adequate and appropriate institutional support, through funding and well-defined legal mandates; (5) trust as well as negotiation and cooperation skills; together with (6) accurate information and information exchange. Legitimacy and the background support of the parties will also determine whether social dialogue can contribute to the broader development agenda: do parties have the necessary societal legitimacy to be engaged in the topics negotiated?⁴¹ Are the issues under consideration 'within reach' in practice, i.e. can the parties "deliver" what they are promising at the table? And do partners have the skills and expertise to credibly and effectively engage in the broader topics?

Impact will depend on the levels of social dialogue, ranging from mere information exchange, through consultation, to actual negotiations about common challenges. But whilst the impact for both inequality, exclusion, and development more broadly may be expected to be largest the higher the level of engagement, mere information exchange and consultation is not invaluable, but a possible steppingstone for relationships and trust. Exchanging information, thereby levelling out information asymmetry, will also reduce the costs of information flows and may contribute to collective learning. Dialogue process can furthermore be extended from mere information exchanges to actual negotiations or joint decision-making processes, and from narrow topical discussions and information sessions to broader extended networks of civil society organizations and partners with wider topics on the agenda.

The existence, level, and quality of social dialogue will depend on several factors. The protection of civic space is key, and following is the right to organize and bargain collectively.⁴² Both employer organization and trade union density are on that basis clear indicators of the potential for, and value of, social dialogue. There must be organizations present 'at the table' with a legitimate claim to represent their constituencies



for there to be genuine dialogue. If social parties are weak, they will lack representativity and have little to deliver when it comes to making commitments. For their presence to contribute value, the parties also need to have the information, knowledge, and resources to substantially participate in the negotiations and deliver on them afterwards. One party being able to participate fully is not an advantage unless the “opposing sides” have the same level of knowledge, expertise, and organizational muscle. The increasing suppression of civic space and trade unions that we have seen globally in the past decades are therefore also worrying signs for social dialogue.

Labor market characteristics and levels of informality may also pose a challenge to social dialogue. More than 61 per cent of the world’s employed population make their living in the informal economy. Low unionization levels amongst informal sector workers has been found to seriously limit the coverage of existing social dialogue processes. With the informal employment rate accounting for 58 per cent of workers in the Latin American and Caribbean region, issues of representation and challenges in targeting policy easily pose problems for tripartite structures focusing on labor markets and economic policy.⁴³ The same has been found in countries in Africa and Asia. Few formal unions have reached out to organize the informal sector workforce. The lack of a bargaining counterpart in these instances is an important reason for this. The Indian Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), with its one million members, is one of the first national organizations that successfully engaged with informal sector workers. Considerable efforts are invested globally to help the transition from informal to formal labor markets, among others in social dialogue processes.⁴⁴ In developing countries, there are also indications that informal sector workers are increasingly being represented by trade unions in social dialogue structures.⁴⁵

Access to information is indeed crucial for the quality and effectiveness of social dialogue. Many LAC countries like Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay are now publishing public sector information, Mexico City has a specific transparency portal for social benefits and policies, and Chile has launched the bonocovid portal, where citizens can verify their status and eligibility for crisis support payments during the COVID-19 crisis. Providing information to the broader public makes social dialogue processes more transparent, thereby ensuring that parties are more likely to be accountable for commitments made at the table. By the same token, information *at the dialogue table* is also crucial. In some countries, social dialogue processes have become reliant on the parties taking joint ownership of economic data gathering in order to build greater trust in the reliability of the statistics. Committing to the development of shared, transparent wage and economic statistics has also been found to promote trust and foster “political will” in social dialogue processes.

Institutional support is another major issue for social dialogue. This does not necessarily require an institution or permanent structure to be set up specifically for the process, but there must be some level of support system for the dialogue with information exchange, background knowledge, and administration. In Ghana, as the agenda of national tripartite dialogue is restricted to minimum wage determinations, the government uses ad-hoc multi-stakeholder dialogues to consult civil society partners on economic and social policies. Yet, a lack of institutionalization of these multi-stakeholder dialogues seems to hinder their outcomes, providing few opportunities for social partners to influence and contribute to policy development and implementation. The OECD found that LAC countries share similar challenges within areas of cooperation amongst institutions, which lack comprehensive strategies and need stronger institutional frameworks.⁴⁶

The presence of political will to engage in social dialogue is a crucial part of the process. This is not a formal or technical consideration, but a political-ideological one. The major differences in models of social dialogue do not lie in their organization and preconditions, but in political will and the perception of risks and possibilities for future growth and development at play. So, the “will” needed requires more than a willingness to set aside time. It also includes an openness to put commitments on the table, and a recognition that if one party breaks their promises, withholds relevant information or pulls back from commitments, the next round of dialogue will likely see far less trust and further commitments.





Trust-building is a demanding aspect of all social dialogue processes. Comprehensive and high-trust social dialogue processes can underpin win-win outcomes even in the most unfavorable economic circumstances. Distrust can easily extinguish all of the advantages of social dialogue. Trust needs to be built up over time. It is also fragile and can easily be destroyed by backstabbing or by failing to deliver on deals or promises. The South African social dialogue process, for example, was highly promising in the first period of the new democracy post-1994, but was put under heavy pressure by a high level of tensions developing between government and social parties at the end of the 1990s. Trust-building will also depend to some extent on distribution of resources. Where social dialogue processes are limited to negotiating low minimum wages, for example, while the wage gap is otherwise exploding, trust-building between parties may be undermined.

The role of a *willing state* is also important to full-scale tripartite social dialogue. Some research argues that the dominant role of the state in economic developments in the Republic of Korea undermines the regular negotiations between employers and unions of wages versus jobs.⁴⁷ Yet, the dominant role of the state has also made it possible to reach far-reaching agreements for example now with the 2020 Korea New Deal. Similarly, the role of the state is also crucial in Scandinavian social dialogue processes, where the contribution of the state in areas of health, education, pensions, etc. has repeatedly been the crucial determining piece at the dialogue or negotiations table between the other parties. Where the state has been willing to add improved education, health or pension to the negotiation, or active labor market investments in vocational training or start-up incentives, wage negotiations between labor and employers have also been facilitated. For the state, social dialogue and joint processes with other relevant parties may help to bring long-term economic and/or development benefits, help information flows and crisis management, and contribute to greater accountability and trust. The participation of social partners as representatives of workers and employers on the boards of social security institutions can also help to make the management of those institutions more accountable.

Whilst recognizing the role of the state, one needs to acknowledge that bilateral dialogue and processes may have broader value in the longer-term. Bipartite social dialogue between employers and unions is often a stepping-stone towards tripartite dialogue in countries lacking formalized mechanisms and institutions for such dialogue. In South Africa, it was the bilateral negotiations between employers and unions in the 1980s and early 1990s that paved the way for broader corporative structures and dialogues in the post-1994 democracy. And in Scandinavia, both employers and unions will generally say that the quality of social dialogue depends on the value of the parallel collective bargaining system.

All depending on the institutional set-up and what criteria are present, social dialogue per se promotes *inclusiveness* by giving voice to key stakeholders not represented in formal governance structures, and by bringing parties with different views and interests together. Such dialogue has the potential to further reinforce this by strengthening and identifying policies that promote representation and the interests of broader groups. It is also seen as strengthening *democracy* by giving key constituencies particularly affected by specific policy areas an 'added voice' on those issues. Social dialogue, through information-sharing, consultation, negotiation, and joint decision-making, allows social partners to share their views on and influence policies that affect them, and will on that basis also improve chances for democratic ownership and effective implementation of those policies. In addition, social dialogue provides opportunities for strengthening transparency and accountability among the actors involved.





5. The Way Forward?

Social dialogue can be a driver for crisis management, for economic and social resilience, competitiveness, and inclusive growth and development. The challenges of reset and recovery after COVID-19 should prompt us to reconsider our beliefs about the link between peace and social justice. ILO assessments of country responses to the COVID-19 crisis point out that social dialogue has been used to positive effect in the various stages of the COVID-19 crisis response in many countries. Cultivating justice, reducing inequalities and exclusion, and on that basis achieving peace in a globalizing world will need a greater sense of common purpose to achieve shared goals at both international and national levels.⁴⁸ It will require integrated thinking, and the recognition that that the challenges we are confronted with are shared and will not be possible to solve without addressing them together. These are collective action problems – in which more problems arise when one member of the group fails to act together with others to secure an outcome that has most potential to benefit the group.

Certain parallels can be drawn with earlier crises regarding the role of social dialogue in devising response packages to support employment and economic recovery.⁴⁹ Countries that have already experienced social partnership and have well-established social dialogue institutions are, of course, more likely to formulate rapid and effective tripartite responses to a crisis. While a crisis puts extra pressure on social dialogue and collaboration, those countries in which social dialogue has proven most resilient, also did better in weathering the 2008/09 crisis.⁵⁰ The ILO underlines other learning from previous crises: governments should involve social partners at the earliest possible stage of a crisis response; social partners should be proactive in quickly bringing the concerns at the grassroots level to the attention of the authorities; addressing the immediate consequences of the crisis should be accompanied by a commitment to give priority attention in the longer-term to protecting and promoting decent work; and that free, independent, strong, and representative employers' and workers' organizations, trust among the actors and respect by the government for the autonomy of social partners, are essential preconditions for effective social dialogue.⁵¹ Social dialogue plans for COVID-19 management were quickly put in place in countries such as South Africa, Italy, and Spain. In the Republic of Korea, for example, social partners agreed to lift the employment retention subsidy from 63 to 75 per cent with additional emergency support available for small businesses and workers on non-standard contracts.⁵²

Partnerships are needed more than ever before. Several of the 2030 Agenda's targets, such as the right to organize and assemble, are preconditions for effective social dialogue. On the other hand, social dialogue can play a pivotal role in developing a collaborative framework to design and implement policies to achieve all the 168 SDG targets in the post-pandemic phase. There is no 'one size fits all' prescription for sustaining social dialogue through difficult times, nor is there a standard model of dialogue that can be applied uniformly across countries, or exported from one country to another. Adapting social dialogue institutions and practices to the national situation is key to ensuring effective representation in the process and its outcomes. However, research does show us how, where tripartite social dialogue has been maintained through and after a crisis like the financial crisis, it tended to produce positive outcomes in terms of promoting a return to positive economic growth, ensuring social and industrial peace, sustaining competitiveness and employment, and contributing to an increase in productivity and wages. Three sets of factors help explain the differences in overall trends and social dialogue dynamics across EU countries in



the post-2008/09 crisis period: the economic context, political conditions, and national institutions.⁵³ They are all relevant for rebuilding social dialogue in a broader setting beyond Europe and in light of the current challenges we are, and will be, confronted by.

The economic context and different views among social partners regarding the need for stimulus packages, fiscal consolidation and wages will pose challenges to social dialogue. Furthermore, where countries have seen income inequality rise during the crisis, this may now, as in 2008/09, present an additional obstacle to social dialogue's recovery in the post-crisis period. Political conditions may also play a part where key actors have lost broad credibility and trust due to poor crisis management. And finally, the degree of institutionalization will likely influence where long-standing social dialogue institutions and processes are most likely to survive and contribute positively to a crisis, simply because trust has been built up and social dialogue is valued. This does not mean, though that social dialogue is impossible in countries that have limited previous experiences of it – those with sluggish growth, huge informal sectors or in countries without well-organized social partners.

Contrasts between, for example, the Nordic countries and others around the world are stark regarding inequality, labor markets, density of organizations, etc. However, from a historical perspective, the differences are less obvious. The Nordic model started as a developmental model. Low inequality, industrial peace, low crime rates, and high welfare is a *product* of the social contract rather than a prerequisite. The Nordic social dialogue model did not develop out of surplus, but out of need and desperation. All parties in the Nordic countries saw the need to find common solutions to massive problems they were unable to solve on their own. This is not so different from the starting ground that many others are now facing. Social dialogue is a development model and a governance model.

Yet, one cannot just decide, or dictate, that one wants social dialogue. In order to get proper social dialogue or a social contract, *everyone* has to give something. Labor has to give. The same with employers, business, and the state. Importantly, what is being given must be of interest to others. Otherwise, the offer has little value. If everyone gives a little bit of what others want, they all gain. The way the prototype of the Nordic social dialogue started was by making a basic deal about how to share the national 'cake', i.e. the economy: workers would get a larger share of the cake in exchange for helping to make the cake bigger, i.e. helping to grow the economy. Similarly, how the Korean New Deal was negotiated was by offering not only growth and a green transition, but also offering job creation and digitalization. The relevance and potential value of such deals cannot be overestimated in these post-pandemic times. Yet, in order to get the corporate sector, labor, and other civil society groups interested in such deals and waiver disinvestments, demonstrations, strikes or wage demands, they need to get something interesting in return: better education systems for their children, improved pensions for the elderly, enhanced social security for all, or other real commitments to lower the wealth gap.

For countries that want to try out the social dialogue process, strengthening labor laws, recognizing the right to organize, committing to transparency and information-sharing, and building capacity are generally good steppingstones. The most important, however, is simply to invite parties in for talks. Starting with that—and a genuine wish to identify how the others see the problems ahead—are often the most valuable first step.



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