

New topics, new tools and innovative practices adopted by the social partners

Executive summary

Introduction

The main objective of this comparative study was to gather information on how social partner organisations across the European Union introduce and use new topics and innovative approaches, tools and practices. It focuses on the responses explored by the two sides of industry to address various challenges and needs emerging in working life. The scope of the study is limited to the practices of the social partners at cross-sectoral, sectoral and national level between 2000 and 2014. Building on a literature review of research by Eurofound and others, the study draws on information and analysis provided by Eurofound's Network of European correspondents across the EU and Norway.

Policy context

Social dialogue still matters in Europe. Thirty years after EU-level social dialogue was established, all actors are agreed on the need for a new impetus for the European social dialogue endeavour. Moreover, EU-level policy debates have highlighted that, particularly since the 2008 crisis, new debates on social justice, democracy, the quality of work and new models for labour relations have emerged, challenging the traditional ways of industrial relations and social dialogue systems. It is therefore important to study how the social partners have reacted to the multitude of political, legal and social challenges by exploring new topics and new tools, as well as developing innovative approaches.

Key findings

Across Europe the social partner organisations are taking action to address the challenges they face. Nevertheless, the importance, development and achievement of these actions remain diverse and are difficult to assess.

New and innovative topics on the agenda across all Member States

The first important element the study deals with is the delimitation of the novel aspect. This has been considered according to each national context and institutional setting, as there are huge differences in industrial relations systems and in the ways social partner organisations interact, depending on the institutional background.

The study identifies two main types of new topics:

- those that are new from an EU-wide perspective (such as climate change);
- those that are new only for some Member States (such as gender equality).

Beyond these differences, one of the study's most important findings is that in all EU countries the social partners have been engaged in adopting new topics on their policy agenda and applying new and innovative solutions to respond to emerging challenges. In several countries they have also been involved in organisational adjustments such as mergers and recruitment drives. Older and newer Member States differ significantly on the scope of new topics addressed and the motivation to address them. Here, three main country groups can be identified. The first comprises 11 countries (those joining the EU since 2004 and the UK), where the national social partners have mainly addressed topics introduced by the EU-level policy agenda. In the second group (10 countries from central, eastern and southern Europe), the social partners have gone beyond the 'minimum catalogue' of new topics, trying to achieve better coverage of new groups in the labour market or those with low wages or skills, and addressing social security issues. In the third group (eight Nordic and western European countries), the social partners have explored the broadest range of new topics in response to internal and external drivers and challenges.

The analysis provides indications that EU-level initiatives, and in particular the agreements of the EU-level social partners – for example, the agreements on fixed-term employment, telework and gender equality – have had a strong impact on the selection of new topics to be addressed by the national social partners. This impact has been particularly visible in countries where both organisational capacity and the political influence of social dialogue and the social partners are comparatively weak (the central and eastern European countries, for example).

Increased pressure on the social partners to change

The study confirms that the pressures on the social partners to change increased significantly after 2008 throughout all Member States. However, this trend appears to be more pronounced in countries in southern Europe and particularly evident in the countries most affected by the 2008 crisis.

The study has identified several change factors that are common to employers and trade unions. These comprise:

- internal challenges, including organisational ones such as the need to react to an increasingly diversified workforce and business population;
- external challenges, such as restructuring, increasing unemployment and legal reforms governing industrial relations.

The analysis also shows that the social partners have common interests and concerns about the need to improve the skills base and to cope with demographic change and with the growing diversification within the labour market. There is also a joint interest in stabilising and strengthening the role of social dialogue itself.

However, there are key differences too. Between 2000 and 2014, trade unions experienced greater organisational restructuring than employer organisations. Significant differences remain between the two sides of the industry in regard to addressing specific topics and applying policies related to working life.

It is evident that not all the social partners have the capacity to adapt and deploy new practices. This mainly results from differences in organisational strength and in their particular industrial relations framework. The study found evidence of a polarisation

between Member States where the social partners play a substantial role in working life regulation and those where they play no part at all.

Three different types of impact

Assessing the socioeconomic impact of the new practices and innovations is challenging. This study identifies three different types of impact:

- a quasi-regulatory impact on working conditions: mainly the case in northern and western European countries;
- a strong but less universal impact: mainly in the southern European group of countries;
- a marginal impact: mainly central and eastern European countries.

The study found that these three types of impact, by and large, overlap with the different industrial relations models that exist across Europe. The strongest impact has been achieved in those countries in northern and western Europe that are characterised by strong unions as well as employer organisations.

Conclusions

The social partner organisations already display some innovative approaches in trying to address new needs and to explore the room for manoeuvre left by the most recent reforms to industrial relations systems. However, there is still a considerable need to assess the exact extent and impact of these approaches: measures to help evaluate current actions and develop other useful paths could be devised both nationally and sectorally.

It is acknowledged that the process of social dialogue needs to be strengthened. Again, measures developed sectorally or nationally could increase the capacity of the social partners to respond to new emerging themes and challenges.

The innovative strength and potential of the social partners, as well as social dialogue, has been rooted in their autonomy – and this should be supported.

Finally, beyond employment issues, there is a need for policymakers to support and strengthen the role and involvement of the social partners and social dialogue in discussing the major challenges faced by European societies.

Further information

The report *New topics, new tools and innovative practices adopted by the social partners* is available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications>

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