

Involvement of national social partners in policymaking – 2019

Introduction

Social dialogue is enshrined in EU treaties. Social partners are core stakeholders who can assess policy needs and contribute to policy formation and to designing and implementing national reforms in the social and employment fields. Consequently, social partners should be involved in making and implementing policies. This role has been acknowledged in Guideline 7 of the Council of the European Union for the employment policies of the Member States, as well as in Principle 8 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

Policy context

In the last decade, the European Semester has shaped a comprehensive approach to national policymaking. Since the proclamation of the EPSR, social objectives have been made explicit in key policy documents issued along the Semester cycle, although better coordination with fiscal and macroeconomic objectives should always be possible and desirable. Member States have integrated reforms and policy initiatives into their national agendas, providing a framework for the involvement of social partners in policy design and implementation.

The quality of the involvement of the social partners in policy formation and policymaking is one key indicator of the quality of social dialogue at national level. Experience shows that the better the involvement of the social partners in policy formation, the more effective the social dialogue.

Political developments influence the involvement of social partners in policymaking, even in those countries with a solid industrial relations and social dialogue background. In these cases, social partner autonomy is challenged; this must be reinforced to enable independent contributions to national policymaking.

Key findings

- Social partners in most countries have been consulted in policymaking to some extent. Consultations frame policy initiatives within both the country-specific recommendations (CSRs) and the national agenda. Many reforms involved the social and employment fields; in central, eastern and southern European countries, some of these reforms were enacted without the participation of social partners.
- Countries can be categorised into three main groups in terms of practices involving social partners in policymaking.
 - Countries in which well-established social dialogue structures involve the social partners and work effectively: the social partners are mostly consulted by government on social and labour issues (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Sweden).
 - Countries where social dialogue institutions exist, although the social partners are not fully satisfied with their involvement in policymaking: in regard to a number of issues, social partners have expressed dissatisfaction (Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom).
 - Countries in which the social partners feel they are not meaningfully involved in policymaking: here, any identified shortcomings remain almost unchanged and social dialogue itself appears to have stagnated (Greece, Hungary, Romania).
- Analysis shows that most social partners were involved in the elaboration of the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) in 2019. However, a few social partners, notably in Greece and Italy, stressed that they were not involved at all, and trade unions and employer organisations in Hungary were critical of the quality of involvement.

- Involvement usually comprises formal consultation on an institutional basis or via bilateral contacts. In some Member States, consultation relies on exchange of views with trade unions and employers, or the use of tailored national proceedings (specific procedures, not standardised through special working groups or committees). Often, a mixture of these schemes is applied.
- Most social partners considered the setting used for their involvement appropriate. However, social partners in some countries repeatedly said that the most important issue remains the lack of time allowed for consultation. In contrast, it was not reported as an issue in other countries. This difference of opinion should not be hard to resolve.
- The majority of social partners and national authorities reported little change in the quality of their involvement in the NRPs between 2018 and 2019, with little variation in the four elements analysed (the setting; the form and content of the consultation; the time allotted; and the feedback provided as well as the visibility given to the social partners' views). However, the social partners in some countries reported partial improvements in their participation in the consultation process, though often against a background of general deterioration.
- Social partners in several countries remained dissatisfied that their views were not incorporated in the final NRP. This perception of being heard but not being listened to varies across countries and stakeholders.
- There is some correspondence between the strength of the national social dialogue and the involvement of the social partners in policymaking. The same relationship can be identified in relation to the involvement of the social partners in the elaboration of the NRPs. In some countries, social partners use the Semester and the CSRs to promote their national concerns at EU level.

Policy pointers

- The European Semester provides not only a governance architecture for the EU to coordinate fiscal and economic policies, but also an arena for national social partners to exert influence over both economic and social agendas. More sectoral approaches and specific policy fields should be considered when the time comes to involve relevant social partners.
- Incorporating the objectives of the 2020 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS) and the Sustainable Development Goals into the European Semester will have implications for social, economic and employment policies. Proactive and meaningful involvement of the social partners in the European Semester would help in the progress towards these specific EU goals.
- Given the huge fiscal and economic implications of these changes in the European Semester, it may be worth expanding social partner involvement into other key policy areas, such as the Stability or Convergence programmes. Consideration should be given to ensuring that social partners have sufficient capacity to participate in these policy debates.
- Research reveals that social partner engagement in policymaking and in the European Semester is ineffective in some of the same countries year after year. More action should be taken to promote upward convergence of these countries with others where there is effective involvement of the social partners.

Further information

The report *Involvement of national social partners in policymaking – 2019* is available at <http://eurofound.link/ef19017>

Research manager: Ricardo Rodriguez Contreras

information@eurofound.europa.eu