

# Capacity building for effective social dialogue in the European Union

## Introduction

The main objective of this report is to feed into the discussion on how Eurofound can contribute to supporting capacity building of social partners for effective social dialogue. The specific objectives of the report are to present and analyse capacity gaps, needs and issues identified to date; support possible solutions; and put forward policy pointers for further action.

The report has been developed on the basis of a review by Eurofound of its existing work and other sources. The aim of this review was to identify the capacity-building needs and initiatives of social partners in relation to national frameworks for autonomous collective bargaining, the involvement in European social dialogue and the European Semester, and the development of membership and services for members. In 2018 and 2019, Eurofound and its stakeholders identified capacity needs and issues to be addressed, and discussed how the findings of the project could be further used to enhance capacity building for social dialogue at national level.

Bearing in mind that this research was completed before the spread of COVID-19, the report makes a brief reference to the changed context. The research was conducted before the UK left the EU on 31 January 2020. Where relevant, findings are reported for the EU Member States and the UK.

## Policy context

As part of the relaunch of social dialogue, in 2014 the former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called for stronger emphasis on the capacity building of national social partners.

In 2015, European cross-industry social partners prepared a joint statement, which they later approved in January 2016. This declaration underlines that there is no blueprint for social dialogue, but it provides guiding principles for social partner involvement at EU level and for improving the functioning and effectiveness of social dialogue and the capacity building of social partners in the Member States.

On 16 June 2016, the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) adopted conclusions, stressing the importance of capacity building of social partners at national and sectoral level. On 27 June 2016, the quadripartite statement 'A new start for social dialogue' was co-signed by European cross-industry social partners, the European Commission and the Dutch Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The document underlines the signatories' commitment to continue to promote the capacity of social partners. Employment Guideline 7, adopted on 16 July 2018, stresses the importance of meaningful involvement of social partners in the design and implementation of social and employment policies, including through support for increased capacity of the social partners.

Principle 8 of the European Pillar of Social Rights states that support for increased capacity of social partners to promote social dialogue should be encouraged. In the *Joint employment report 2019*, adopted by the EPSCO Council on 15 March 2019, the Commission and the Council reiterate that increased capacity should be considered a common denominator for well-performing and effective tripartite social dialogue systems. According to the 2019–2021 work programme of the European cross-industry social partners, capacity-building activities remain a priority. Finally, in January 2020 the new Commission under President Ursula von der Leyen restated its intention to promote social dialogue and collective bargaining and to increase the capacity of the social partners at EU and national levels.

## Key findings

At international and European levels, the report maps and identifies successful examples of capacity building organised by the ILO, the International Training Centre of the ILO and the European Union.

At national level, the mapping exercise identifies the following issues under two overarching areas.

### Structural gaps and barriers:

- weakness of social partners and lack of representativeness and mandate to negotiate
- limited sectoral collective bargaining and low collective bargaining coverage
- limited tripartism and frameworks for effective social dialogue
- lack of social partner autonomy and a dominant role of the state
- lack of trust between social partners, both sides of industry, and governments

### Needs:

- legislative reforms to promote social dialogue and collective bargaining
- supportive role of the state
- increased membership, representativeness and capacity, and mandate to negotiate
- better human resources and development of skills
- better financial resources

## Policy pointers

The context in which this research was undertaken has been changed by the COVID-19 pandemic, with unknown longer-term consequences at the time of writing this report. We have already seen that social dialogue has made some contribution in responding to the crisis. But it is also clear that there will be consequences for the resources and tools available for capacity building and social dialogue. With this caveat, the following remarks still stand.

The report defines capacity building as the enhancement of skills, abilities and powers of social partners to engage effectively at different levels (EU, national, regional, sectoral, company and establishment) in the following areas:

- social dialogue
- collective bargaining

- (co-)regulating the employment relationship
- tripartite and bipartite consultations
- public policymaking
- influencing public policymaking via advocacy

Social dialogue and well-functioning industrial relations serve the general interest and should be supported by public policy. Further policy pointers identified include the following.

- Attempts to close structural gaps within the national systems of industrial relations should be supported.
- The autonomy of social partners should be respected and reinforced.
- Social partners should be supported in their efforts to increase their membership, representativeness, and capacity to negotiate and implement agreements.
- Bipartite social dialogue is the core of national industrial relations and should be underpinned by supportive legal frameworks.
- Developing expertise of both sides of industry in relation to specific skills should be supported.
- Social partners should invest in building, or, when necessary, rebuilding trust for more effective social dialogue.
- Better linkages between the EU and national levels of industrial relations, including better implementation of European autonomous agreements, would foster more effective social dialogue.
- More awareness-raising campaigns could be undertaken about social dialogue and its potential for improving working conditions and competitiveness.
- Eurofound could further examine and possibly develop dedicated tools to facilitate mutual learning exercises for European social partners' members.

### Further information

The report *Capacity building for effective social dialogue in the European Union* is available at <http://eurofound.link/ef20002>

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