

Involvement of social partners in policymaking during the COVID-19 outbreak

Introduction

Since 2016, Eurofound has monitored the involvement of national social partners in the European Semester process and documented this process in a series of reports. For 2020, the analysis focused on the involvement of the social partners in policymaking during the first months of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The report also covers the involvement of the social partners in the development of the 2020 national reform programmes (NRPs) in the context of the European Semester. The study focuses on tripartite social dialogue at national level.

Policy context

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely challenged economic and social activity, resulting in a change of priorities in the Member States' political agendas at EU and national levels. Policy measures adopted during the first months of the pandemic prioritised resilience of healthcare and preserving employment and business continuity. The involvement of social partners in the design of these policy measures was reduced, as policies were frequently adopted in emergency situations.

In addition, the cycle for European Semester 2020 underwent major changes. The EU Spring Package was reoriented to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of the crisis, and the country-specific recommendations (CSRs) endorsed by the Council in July 2020 mainly aimed to provide financial, economic, employment and social responses to the crisis.

Key findings

- The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged national social dialogue and impacted on the existing frameworks and practices for the involvement of social partners in policymaking. In this context, in the majority of countries, a significant number of policy measures were adopted without timely and meaningful consultation with social partners.
- Time pressure in terms of exchanges and consultation in this difficult period is considered to be the main issue in the quality of social dialogue and, as a result, the involvement of social partners. In general, social partners recognise the exceptional circumstances and constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the standard involvement frameworks and institutions in place. Despite acknowledging these tough circumstances, social partners also take the view that the majority of governments could have done much better.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that, where tripartite social dialogue is well established and permanent, the impact of the health crisis on the involvement of the social partners has been relatively limited. In some cases, the crisis even speeded up consultations, with some social partners reporting that their opinions were listened to more attentively.
- By contrast, in other countries, although social dialogue remained in place, it was severely restricted. In this regard, the health crisis has revealed the structural weaknesses of the social dialogue foundation in some industrial relations systems.
- The evolution of the pandemic has been variable and the quality of the involvement in policymaking has improved over time in some countries, such as France, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland (this assessment has only been provided by one employer organisation), Portugal and Slovakia. In these countries, while the first government measures were taken without adequate consultation, the consultation processes improved and in most cases social partners tended to be reasonably satisfied with the quality of the involvement.

- Social partners in a few countries (such as Belgium, Finland, Italy and Spain) took initiatives to agree joint actions to support businesses and society in response to the social and economic emergency. The governments mostly supported these joint initiatives.
- Beyond tripartite social dialogue at peak level, it has been reported that policy measures adopted at national level to tackle the COVID-19 crisis have most likely increased the social dialogue at sector and company levels. Discussions between employers and human resources managers to implement the measures have potentially led to constructive solutions. Health and safety at work and the implementation of telework are undoubtedly at the top of the agenda of employer and worker representatives, as well as in the collective bargaining negotiations in some sectors.
- Following the analytical framework applied in the study, the findings show that both trade union and employer organisations in just four countries (Czechia, Estonia, the Netherlands and Sweden) record high quality in the involvement of the social partners in the development of their 2020 NRPs. This means that both parties report that there is ample time for information and consultation, that they are satisfied with the feedback and responses that the government received, and that their contributions have been incorporated or reflected.
- In other Member States there is room for improvement in social partners' involvement in NRPs. By contrast, despite insufficiencies and weaknesses, social partners had more meaningful involvement in overall policymaking than in the development of the NRPs in the context of the European Semester.

Policy pointers

- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how effective social dialogue can be used to shape policy initiatives and find solutions to emergency situations affecting businesses, workers, the economy and society. The challenges resulting from the economic and social crisis should underline the valuable contribution social partners make in building social cohesion and supporting economic recovery.
- Unlike the previous global financial crisis, social partners, governments and European institutions have mostly shared their understanding of the policy responses needed to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and promote economic recovery. This common approach must continue, and governments should encourage cooperation with and trust in social partners to take part in implementing policy responses at the appropriate level. This applies especially in countries where social partners have stressed the lack of appropriate involvement in policymaking.
- Governments should ensure meaningful and timely involvement of the social partners in the revamped cycle for European Semester 2021. Given the changes introduced in the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy, the participation of social partners in the design, monitoring and implementation of the recovery and resilience plans submitted along with the NRPs in a single integrated document in 2021 will be key for strengthening social dialogue and ensuring a fair recovery.
- When coordinating economic policies in response to the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, the European Semester should ensure that social partners are meaningfully involved and that national social dialogue fulfils its role in shaping the policy responses to the challenges stemming from the climate, environmental, social and digital priorities of the European Union, particularly in those countries where weaknesses and structural shortcomings have been repeatedly reported as hampering genuine social dialogue.

Further information

The report *Involvement of social partners in policymaking during the COVID-19 outbreak* is available at <http://eurofound.link/ef20035>

Research manager: Ricardo Rodríguez Contreras
information@eurofound.europa.eu