



APRIL 2021 | DIESIS ARTICLES SERIE

SOCIAL ECONOMY ORGANISATIONS AND TRADE UNIONS – PARTNERS IN SOCIAL DIALOGUE?



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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.

Depending on the number of parties involved, it could be tripartite (government, employers, employees), or bipartite (employees, employers). At the national level, its tripartite by nature, on regional, sectoral or company level it is bipartite. Social dialogue goes hand-in-hand with industrial relations. However, social dialogue is an instrument, while industrial relations is a complex system or framework. Good social dialogue, practiced properly, is necessary to maintain healthy industrial relations.

The main objective of national level social dialogue – just like any other level – is to maintain the world of work balanced and to solve the potential conflicts and problems that come from the different interests of the main players – ideally it is based on mutual trust. Life is not so simple though and the world of work is not an exact science, like maths. Workers have their preferences, as well as employers.

Life is constantly changing. The tools and processes can be highly complex and can vary from country by country, depending on the employment relations traditions and economic and political maturity.

At the national level the representatives of the parties – the recognised social partner organisations – participates in social dialogue. On the employers' side, these are the national level employers' associations, while on the workers' side, most often it is the trade union confederations. Their recognition or representativeness is subject to national law and / or national traditions.

Just like commercial enterprises, social economy enterprises have similar features in respect to company-level industrial relations, so the employers and employees could belong to respective representative organisations. They can be members of sectoral or national level social partner organisations. Only in some rare cases associations of social economy organisations count as formal social partners in their own right. However, Italy is an exception, where national level social economy organizations have this status on the employer side at the national level.



Cooperation between trade unions and social economy enterprises is an exciting area that needs to be explored further. In many countries, there is hardly any formal link between social economy organisations and the trade unions – this is especially true in Eastern European countries where neither social economy enterprises nor trade unions are strong or particularly interested in each other's activities, so it is not so easy to find direct links. In other countries, where the cooperation is well established and developed, other issues make the partnership a bit more tricky. In countries where worker-owned cooperatives and companies are well-established and employees are also possibly co-owners of the company, there is no clear distinction between social partners. Information and consultation rights of employees, therefore, raise particular questions when it comes to social dialogue.

Regarding formal links and cooperation at the national level, a so-far unique agreement was signed in Italy in January 2021, between the three main national-level associations representing cooperatives (AGCI, Confcooperative and Legacoop) and the three main trade union confederations, CGIL, CISL and UIL, for the promotion and development of worker buyouts. The agreement was reached after years of discussions because there was a common willingness to act together.

Another promising development is in Spain where during the Covid-19 outbreak, COCETA, the umbrella association in the social economy field, signed an agreement with the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy to set up a social dialogue committee, involving organisations of the social economy, trade unions and other ministries, to further develop the social economy in Spain.

Worldwide and at European level the development of digitalisation is having a serious impact on the labour market.

While traditional forms of employment (labour contract, standard work, etc.) is still prevalent, at least in Europe, **new forms of employment** (casual work, collaborative work, ICT based work, etc.) are spreading quickly. It is not yet clear what implications digitalisation will have on working conditions and other work-related areas, or how it will impact on social dialogue. Interest representation of employees and employers in platform cooperatives and the economy is just one of the current hot topics related to these new forms of work.

Cooperation between social economy organisations and trade unions will hopefully get a boost from European level policy developments. The social economy is becoming a topic of key importance for the EU. The ongoing open consultation on the **EU Action Plan for Social Economy** is an important part of implementing the principles of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. European level stakeholders, such as the ETUC, Social Platform, Social Economy Europe and CECOP/CICOPA Europe have formed **an alliance** to support the action plan. Diesis Network together, with Euricse and with the support of Social Economy Europe, drafted a **position paper**.

Diesis Network's many former and ongoing projects, such as **Wins**, **Seeding**, **In4BTE**, **Rights to Grow**, **ElforPHS** and **Mesmer** brings enlightened (although some ways limited) answers to the questions above posed, but questions are still open on all levels:

- How do information, consultation and participation rights work in social economy organisations?
- What is the relationship between social economy and trade unions in the different levels of social dialogue?
- What role does social economy play (or not) within the sectoral and cross-sectoral system (even at national level)?
- How can trade unions be involved in worker buy-out processes?

Above all, how can this relationship works for everyone's benefit...?