



**European Sectoral Social  
Partners in Education promoting  
the potentials of their dialogue  
through knowledge transfer and  
training. The ESSDE capacity  
building project II**

**An ETUCE and EFEE, ESSDE Project  
Final report (November 2016)**



With financial support from the European Commission



This project is supported by the European Commission under the Call VP/2014/001/0467 Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue, Budget heading 04.03 01 08 (agreement number VS/2015/0037). Exclusive responsibility for this publication lies with the project's partners. The Commission assumes no responsibility for any use possibly made of the information contained herein.

**Published by the ETUCE, November 2016**

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**Also available in:**

**FR:** “Les partenaires sociaux européens sectoriels dans l’éducation et la promotion du potentiel de leur dialogue par la transmission de connaissances et la formation. Projet de renforcement des capacités du DSESE II”

**DE:** “Europäische Sektorale Sozialpartner im Bildungssektor fördern das Potenzial Ihres Austauschs durch Wissenstransfer und Schulung. ESSDE Projekt zum Kapazitätsaufbau II”

**ES:** “Los agentes sociales sectoriales europeos en educación promueven el potencial de su diálogo a través de la transferencia de conocimientos y la formación. Proyecto de desarrollo de capacidades II del DSSEE”

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Published by the European Trade Union Committee for Education - Brussels 2016



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## 1 Introduction

The project entitled 'European sectoral social partners in education promoting the potentials of their dialogue through knowledge transfer and training' was carried-out in the education sector by the European sectoral social partners i.e. the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE).

The project focused on strengthening European social dialogue structures in the education sector which is closely linked to the improvement of national social dialogue in EU and candidate countries. It ran from 2014 to 2016 and was supported by the European Commission through the Social Dialogue and Industrial Relations budget line (VS/2015/0032). During these two years, Round Table discussions with social partners from the education sector were organised in key countries (Cyprus, Poland, Bulgaria, Spain, Latvia, Estonia, Hungary and Serbia). They discussed the key opportunities and challenges in relation to social dialogue in those countries, as well as the links between the national and the European social dialogue process in the education sector. These Round Tables enabled national social partners in education to present the key opportunities and challenges in their sector. Presentations were made on the European social dialogue at cross-sectoral and sectoral level, with specific reference to the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE) to enable national social partners to understand its functioning, aims and priorities and how to best take part in it. Finally, these meetings also included a session on sharing best practices and experiences from other countries which allowed fruitful exchanges between social partners from different countries.

The following report is based on the Round Table discussions and on an analysis of evaluation forms filled in by participants at the end of each Round Table event.

## 2 The importance of social dialogue

Social dialogue plays a crucial role in the EU's policy making process. Article 154 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) requires the European Commission to consult social partners before submitting proposals in the social policy field. In addition, social partners also have the possibility to negotiate agreements which can have the force of law or be implemented by processes customary to social partners at national level (Article 155 of TFEU). Therefore, social partners have the power of shaping European social policy but this can only be done thanks to strong social dialogue at both EU and national levels. However, industrial relations differ from one country to another because of national, political and historical traditions. This also means that social dialogue may be weaker in some countries than others for the same reasons. This can create difficulties as key European social instruments can only be implemented if strong national structures of industrial relations are in place. Furthermore, the European social dialogue needs strong social dialogue at national

level to be able to communicate issues of concerns back to the European social dialogue and ensure a communication from the bottom-up but also to feed into national social partners' dialogue about priorities at EU level. The importance of interconnection between social dialogues at national and EU level is at the core of the project of the European social partners in the education sector.

The 'New Start for Social Dialogue' that was announced by the European Commission at the High-Level Conference on 5 March 2015 also brought more spotlight to social dialogue. During this conference, social partners and the Commission agreed on several measures to give a new impetus to it. A set of actions was finally agreed on 27 June 2016 in the frame of an historical quadripartite statement on 'A New Start for Social Dialogue'<sup>1</sup>, signed by the European Commission, the Presidency of the Council of the European Union and the European social partners. The actions identified should then be undertaken by the signatories with the aim of further strengthening social dialogue at EU and national level, including: a more substantial involvement of the social partners in the European Semester, a stronger emphasis on capacity building of national social partners, a strengthened involvement of social partners in EU policy and law-making, and a clearer relationship between social partners' agreements and the better regulation agenda.

Finally, social dialogue should also be seen as having an important role in overcoming the disconnect felt by citizens between EU policies and their daily lives. Actions taken at EU level can sometimes feel remote to citizens whereas the results from social dialogue are closer to the realities of the workplace, thus allowing citizens and workers to experience the benefits of EU level activities.

### 3 Factors shaping effective social dialogue

Three factors have been identified to shape effective social dialogue: **communication**, **capacity building** and **engagement**. The discussions during the different Round Tables focused on trying to determine good practice in these areas and how existing practice can be enhanced.

#### 3.1 Communication

Ensuring a **bottom-up and top-down flow of information** is key to reaching a good exchange of information and to improving social dialogue. Indeed, social partners need to agree on joint priorities to be able to work together towards a common objective. This means that information about national level developments must be well communicated to the EU level

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<sup>1</sup> Statement of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and the European Social Partners on New Start for Social Dialogue, (June 2016): <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15738&langId=en>

and results from the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE) need to flow down to the national level so that social partners are fully aware of the priorities of the sector at different levels. This can be ensured through the existence of organised structures to discuss priority issues which bring together all relevant partners.

**The means of communication** must also be available for members to ensure that communication is easy and available to everyone. In that regard, examples of good practices include the existence of an organised structure to discuss priority issues, sending regular newsletters, and/or organising meetings at national level to communicate results and share national priorities to feed the European dialogue.

Finally, **communication must be relevant** so that all partners feel that the themes discussed are the ones at stake and cover the main opportunities or challenges in the education sector. This is why the bottom-up and top-down approach is important as it enables partners at each level to be fully aware of *what* to communicate on.

Overall, the project has contributed to communication in both ways. National issues were discussed between national partners in the presence of European social partners who duly took note of the opportunities and challenges in each country. Similarly, the work programme of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee for Education (ESSDE) was presented to national partners who therefore became more aware of the issues discussed at the European level.

### 3.2 Capacity building

Social dialogue is reliant on the existence of social partner organisations mandated to negotiate on both sides to ensure representativeness, and on these organisations having adequate resources and sufficient knowledge. In countries where strong and formal structures to represent education employers are missing, involvement in dialogue at the national level as well as the implementation of European level agreements is much more difficult.

The ability to build capacity is also subject to many other **external factors** such as the crisis, and sectoral and generational changes which have undermined the capacity of social partners at national and therefore European level. This is why constant attention is required to ensure representativeness in a challenging environment.

The lack of adequate **human and financial resources** can also hinder the capacity of social partners to organise but it is important to bear in mind that EU funding is available to help in that respect. In addition, the **communication strategy** needs to be suitable to ensure adequate knowledge to build capacity and the ETUCE/EFEE project has contributed in this regard. Finally, the development of trust and mutual respect is essential for the good functioning of social dialogue and it is important to note that the current project has also contributed to fostering these two important prerequisites.

### 3.3 Engagement

Social dialogue can only function if there is **buy-in from all partners** including at the company, local, national and European levels. Involvement must exist beyond a single contact point and **effective communication and allocation of roles** is needed to ensure engagement. In practice, this can be realised through the establishment of regular meetings carried out in a formal structure that can ensure engagement and buy-in, and supports the feedback of national concerns to the European level. Similarly, it is also important to ensure that **participation is diverse** and that participants can attend all relevant European meetings and communicate results on a regular basis.

This project enabled a wide range of social partners to participate e.g. from different regional and local levels, from all levels of education and so on. This factor is another important lesson identified in the project, and is further analysed in the next section.

## 4 Lessons learnt from the project

### 4.1 Wide participation and dialogue

One of the positive outcomes of the project is the wide participation in the Round Tables. Participants from different levels of the education system were present which enabled the meeting to cover a wide range of issues faced in the education sector but also reinforced solidarity between teachers and education personnel at the different levels. The wide participation also spurred dialogue amongst national social partners. The Round Tables created a forum for discussions and this was seen as a great opportunity to discuss current challenges, especially in countries where occasions for meetings are rare. In countries where different trade union organisations attended the Round Table, it created an opportunity to share views and experiences and to discuss challenges between the organisations.

On the employer side, representatives of Ministries of Education and other education employer organisations participated in the Round Tables even where they were not currently a member of EFEE. This can be seen as a positive step as this issue of some countries not having an employer representative as a member of EFEE had been highlighted by several countries as an obstacle for the effectiveness of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue for Education. The fact that representatives of the education employer organisations were present - even when not a member of EFEE - enabled them to have a better understanding of the role of EFEE and in some cases triggered the start of a dialogue between the national and European education employer organisation. This can be seen as an important step which resulted from the project's activities. The only critical issue raised during several Round Tables was the absence of a representative of the Ministry of Finance. Indeed, a strong message that came out of these meetings was that the Ministry of Finance tends to be the one to have the last word as it decides on the budget allocated to education. Trade unions were pleased to be able to have discussions

on reforms and working conditions with the Ministry of Education and other education employer organisations but they also underlined that these subjects are tightly linked to the budget decided by the Ministry of Finance.

#### **4.2 Synergies between the EU and national priorities**

As mentioned above, the Round Tables gave the floor to both national and European social partners to share the themes and priorities that they are working on at their respective level. These discussions highlighted many common themes and clear links between the themes of national concern and the priorities of European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE). The theme of recruitment and retention of teaching professionals was discussed in several Round Tables and also at the Final Conference, specifically to identify the role of education social partners to make the teaching profession more attractive to younger generations.

Investment in education was a vast topic which was discussed in relation to the following:

- Continuous Professional Development and Initial Teachers' Training
- Recruitment and retention in the teaching profession
- Quality of education (including quality teachers, quality tools for teaching and learning and quality environments)
- The public nature of investment in education
- Quality of social dialogue at national level
- Impact of European education agenda on national education systems

This project made national social partners more aware that they are not alone in facing these types of challenges and that these problems are indeed shared by many other countries. This contributed to reinforcing a feeling of unity and importance of tackling issues at a higher level via the European social dialogue.

#### **4.3 Summary of the evaluation forms**

Evaluation forms were filled in by participants at the end of each Round Table. The analysis of the forms revealed a lot of similarity in the points made:

The session on the exchange of good practices was seen as extremely valuable. Participants appreciated being able to understand how social dialogue works in other countries. This enabled participants to share good practices but also gave national social partners an opportunity to ask about the concrete solutions that were used to overcome the challenges faced. Evaluation forms showed that participants would have appreciated having even more time to spend on this session which they found really fruitful.

Another common suggestion made across the different Round Tables was to try to integrate more practical and concrete examples.

Finally, the Round Table was seen as a good opportunity for networking and participants were keen to strengthen that aspect of the project via the exchange of email addresses as a way to keep building on the momentum launched by the project.

On a more technical note, participants suggested that in order to prepare for the conference and familiarise themselves with the content of the conference and the presentations, all relevant information might be sent to them in advance of the conference.

## 5 Conclusions

This project consisted of an important momentum for social partners who now need to keep engaging with national, regional and local level social partners. The many Round Tables and the Final Conference managed to gather a wide range of participants in all countries.

The re-launch of the European social dialogue was discussed both during Round Tables and at the Final Conference to enable social partners to use the opportunities created by this 'new start.' Social partners agreed that they must now exploit this opportunity to enhance their dialogue and debate and become even more involved at European level.

Finally, quite a lot of achievements have been reached in this relatively short period of time and this provides a very good foundation for the future of social dialogue in the education sector at both European and national levels. The positive comments and suggestions for improvements can enable social partners to keep strengthening the links between social dialogue at national and European level.



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