

Social partners – employers’ and workers’ representatives – play a key role in developing EU social policy and defining European social standards. The dialogue between social partners influences the way we organise our work and helps to boost growth in jobs and social well-being.

The social partners’ fundamental role in shaping legislation in the social field is recognised and defined in the EU Treaty, Articles 138 and 139.

The role of the European Commission is to support and promote social dialogue. Before the Commission makes any proposal for a law in the social or labour field, social partners are asked to give their views. Social partners can also negotiate agreements between themselves which are then applied across the EU.

FORUMS FOR EUROPEAN SOCIAL DIALOGUE

- Social Dialogue Committee (cross-industry)
- Sectoral social dialogue committees (SSDCs)
- Tripartite Social Summit
- Advisory committees
- Working groups, seminars etc

• Under the EU Treaty, social partners directly shape employment relations across Europe by making agreements at EU level

Did you know?

Social partners in cross-industry social dialogue

European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)	www.etuc.org
Confederation of European Business (BUSINESSEUROPE)	www.businessseurope.eu
European Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation and of Enterprises of General Economic Interest (CEEP)	www.ceep.eu
European Association of Craft, Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (UEAPME)	www.ueapme.com
Eurocadres (Council of European Professional and Managerial Staff) - as part of the ETUC delegation	www.eurocadres.org
European Confederation of Executives and Managerial Staff (CEC) - as part of the ETUC delegation	www.cec-managers.org

Sectoral social dialogue committees

Natural resources sectors	Agriculture	Extractive industry	Sea fisheries
Manufacturing sectors	Chemical industry	Construction	Electricity
	Footwear	Furniture	Gas
	Shipbuilding	Steel	Sugar
	Tanning and leather	Textile and clothing	Woodworking
Services sectors	Audiovisual	Banking	Catering
	Civil aviation	Commerce	Horeca
	Hospitals	Industrial cleaning	Inland waterways
	Insurance	Live performance	Local and regional government
	Maritime transport	Personal services	Postal services
	Private security	Professional football	Railways
	Road transport	Telecommunications	Temporary agency work

Further information on social dialogue and videos

http://ec.europa.eu/socialdialogue

KE-81-08-426-EN-D



Understanding European Social Dialogue

Social dialogue refers to the discussions, consultations, negotiations and joint actions that take place between employers and trade unions on a wide range of social and work-related issues. At the EU level, social dialogue makes an important contribution to the EU strategy for growth and jobs. It is an essential element of the European social model and complements national social dialogue and industrial relations.

LEVEL OF DIALOGUE

Cross-industry
Covering the economy as a whole: workers’ and employers’ organisations

Sectoral
Covering workers and employers of more than 30 specific sectors of the economy

TYPE OF DIALOGUE

Bipartite
Dialogue between the European employers’ and trade union organisations

Tripartite
Interaction between employers, trade unions and EU authorities (European Commission, Council of Ministers)

DRIVER OF DIALOGUE

Autonomous
Autonomous activities, agreements, seminars, statements following social partners’ own work programme

Treaty-based
Consultation and possible negotiation on issues raised by the European Commission (Treaty Articles 138 and 139)

Who are the social partners?

Six types of organisations are involved in cross-industry social dialogue, including organisations representing trade unions, employers in the private sector, the public sector and small and medium-sized enterprises, and professional and managerial staff (see back cover for the list of organisations and their websites). More than 70 European organisations from specific economic sectors take part in their respective sectoral dialogues.

For an organisation to be recognised as a partner in European social dialogue it must be organised at the EU level and capable of taking part in consultations and negotiating agreements. Organisations should be as far as possible representative of all EU Member States, while their national members must be recognised as social partners in the respective countries.

Types of dialogue

The European Commission facilitates social dialogue. Once the European-level employer and trade union organisations decide to start up an official dialogue process, the Commission provides the framework enabling the dialogue. The framework now includes the cross-industry Social Dialogue Committee, as well as 36 sectoral social dialogue committees covering economic sectors as diverse as agriculture, commerce, civil aviation, the chemical industry and more (see back cover for the full list of sectors covered).

Bipartite social dialogue at European level is the dialogue between the employer and trade union organisations. The issues discussed can affect industry as a whole or specific sectors of the economy. Dialogue takes place in the committees mentioned above and in working groups. The European Commission can act as facilitator and mediator in bipartite dialogue.

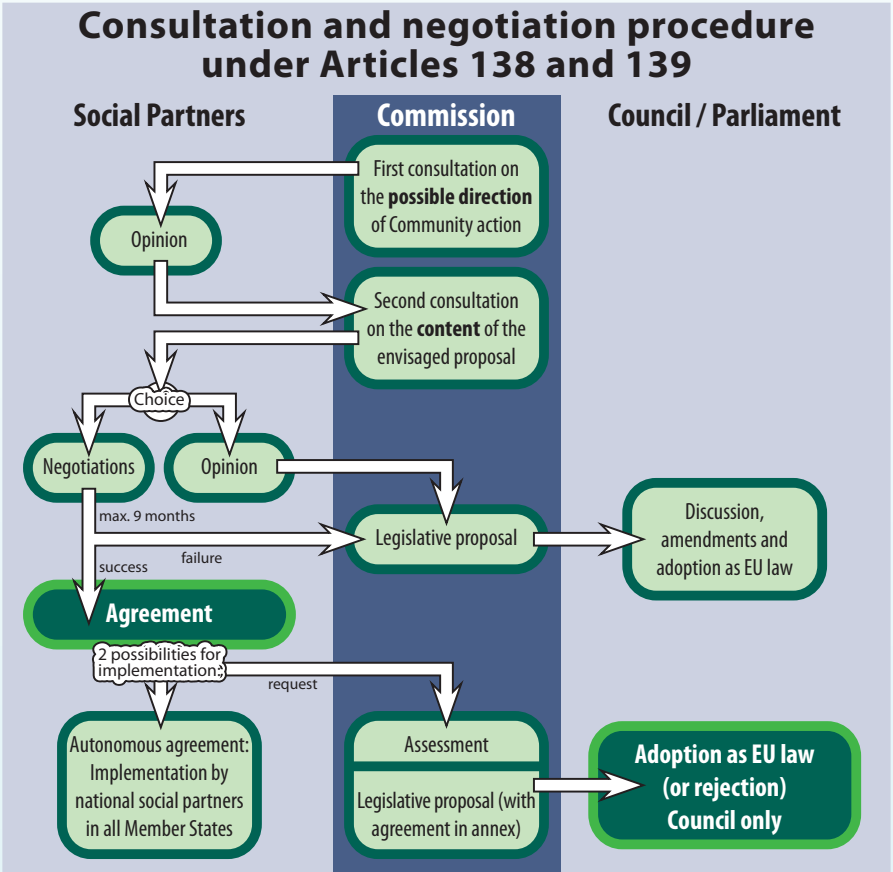
Did you know?

- A “Tripartite Social Summit” meets at least once a year for a high-level exchange of views between social partners and EU representatives
- Sectoral social dialogue has developed considerably from 19 economic sectors in 1999 to 36 committees by 2008

In **tripartite** social dialogue, employers’ and workers’ representatives meet together with representatives of the EU institutions (Commission, Council of Ministers) at the biannual Tripartite Social Summit for Growth and Employment, as well as in regular talks on a technical and political level on macro-economics, employment, social protection and education and training.

How it works

Under Treaty Article 138, representative social partners at EU level must be consulted before EU social legislation is drawn up, and - according to a process provided for in Article 139 - they can negotiate agreements on matters of social policy to be implemented by EU law or by the social partners themselves.



If, having consulted the social partners on the possible direction of proposals in the social field, the Commission considers EU-level action advisable, it then consults employers and trade unions on their content.

The social partners then give the Commission an opinion or recommendation on the subject in question. They may also inform the Commission that they want to start formal negotiations on the matter under Treaty Article 139 themselves.

Producing results

This process leads to agreements that can – for example – establish minimum standards on social policy issues. These standards will be implemented either by the social partners’ national member organisations in line with the relevant national procedures and practices (known as **autonomous agreements**) or by EU legislation.

Examples of issues covered by autonomous agreements include telework and work-related stress. Agreements implemented by EU legislation cover parental leave, part-time work and fixed-term contracts.

In addition to the formal procedures laid down in the Treaty, social partners set their own specific agendas and can discuss various topics of common interest, such as as lifelong learning and gender equality. In these cases social dialogue can result in the adoption of **frameworks of action**.

Frameworks of action identify policy priorities towards which the social partners work. These priorities serve as benchmarks, and the social partners report annually on the action taken to support these priorities.

Other possible outcomes of social dialogue include guidelines, codes of conduct, etc.

Modernising work patterns

The social partners’ 2002 autonomous agreement on telework - working away from the employer’s premises on a regular basis - has been implemented by the social partners themselves in most Member States. It addresses relevant issues such as the provision of work equipment, privacy and data protection, equal treatment and training and has helped to develop telework in a way that meets the needs of both workers and employers.

How do you benefit?

The social partners know the reality of Europe’s workplaces. They understand the needs of workers and companies and defend their interests. Involving them at EU level helps to ensure that your concerns are taken into account in all legislative initiatives.

In some cases, social partners have influenced and determined EU social policy legislation. They have reached various agreements and have produced a range of texts to spread good practice and exchange information on social policy issues. Many of these issues are of direct interest to you, such as: modernisation of employment relations and work organisation; training; health and safety; integration into the jobs market of disadvantaged groups; balance between work and family life; restructuring; equal opportunities; and job mobility.

Preventing violence and harassment at work

Research shows that one in 20 workers are exposed to bullying and/or harassment each year. As a response, employers and trade unions in 2007 reached an agreement on a zero-tolerance approach to moral and sexual harassment and physical violence in the workplace. The agreement establishes procedures in European companies to deal with possible cases.

Future developments and challenges

Social dialogue will remain a core part of EU social policy. Social partners will continue to work further on issues such as work/life balance (including leave for family reasons), work arrangements and care facilities; making it easier for disadvantaged groups to access jobs, for example through lifelong learning; and recognition of professional qualifications throughout Europe.

New topics like the social consequences of climate change and energy dependency are also coming up for discussion. At the same time the social partners are working to fully integrate their members from newer Member States into the EU social dialogue.