



Social dialogue: recent initiatives across the continent

The thrust towards greater social dialogue in African countries has taken off in recent months, with a number of workshops, conferences and symposia focusing on the role of social dialogue in social and economic policy making. Other workshops have highlighted the need for stakeholders across borders to come together and strategise about trade relationships. This issue's *Focus on Nedlac* is on five of these recent events, attended by the Nedlac secretariat and constituencies.

Unido workshop

The United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (Unido) held a workshop in Dakar, Senegal, on establishing consultative mechanisms and partnerships for industrial development. It was attended by representatives from a range of countries, including Mozambique, Mauritius, Tanzania, Ghana, Nigeria, Eritrea and Cameroon.

Nedlac presented a paper on its experiences and specifically those of Nedlac's Trade and Industry Chamber. We reported that Nedlac had enjoyed some degree of success in respect of dialogue on trade and industrial policy matters including competition policy, a social plan, research on sector competitiveness, workplace change, trade negotiations, and industrial development zones.

A number of countries had established Industrial Partnership Councils to

promote consultation and dialogue on industrial policy matters. In certain countries these councils did not yet include all relevant stakeholders. Nedlac emphasised that it was very important that the consultative forums include organised labour and other organised sectors of civil society. Other countries felt that development finance institutions and universities could also contribute to effective dialogue. The countries agreed that dialogue on industrial development was critical if they were to successfully manage the economic challenges they faced. They acknowledged that development could not be achieved by one sector, whether the public sector or the private sector, acting alone. Rather, government, business and labour had to work together to promote sustainable industrial development. Dialogue between these parties would lead to effective policy-formulation, implementation and monitoring.

Although the experience with consultative mechanisms in Africa is fairly recent, several lessons have started to emerge:

- A balance of power among the parties fosters productive dialogue.
- All parties must commit time and resources to the process of dialogue.
- The development of trust through information-sharing is very important.
- The process must be flexible and well-managed.

- Patience is required as it takes time to build trust and develop a partnership.
 - Capacity-building in technical and strategic competencies is important.
- Some common constraints on productive dialogue emerged from the workshop. These included the costs of institutionalising dialogue processes. Certain representatives argued that all participants in the process should contribute towards its funding. Other constraints were overcoming distrust and facilitating the identification of common interests, as well as the difficulty in obtaining consensus on complex policy issues.

People emphasised that the model of social dialogue represented by Nedlac was, in many respects, unique to South Africa as it had evolved from the country's political transformation. Countries were urged to develop a model of dialogue appropriate to the dynamics in their own country. Nevertheless, it was useful to share experiences and identify best practices that could, after appropriate adaptation, be replicated in other countries.

Ministerial meeting on social dialogue in Africa

Organised by the ILO, this meeting came about as the result of a decision at the annual OAU social and labour commission. The organisers invited 20 countries. Les Kettledas, deputy director-general of labour represented South Africa's Minister of Labour, whilst Bokkie Botha represented business and Manene Samela, labour. The conference was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The main themes on the agenda were familiar items:

- Should social dialogue be opened up to parties not currently in it?
- Should the agenda be limited to social affairs or labour market issues, or

should there be a wider agenda?

- How supportive is government of social partnership?

As in the Unido conference, the South African delegates warned other African countries against trying to copy the South African model too closely, although it did seem to address most of their requirements. The ILO statutes require that member countries commit themselves to a social dialogue body, but the question of whether poorer countries could afford such an institution was of serious concern. Participants were impressed by the South African government's commitment to Nedlac and by the inclusion of the community constituency. They also commented on Nedlac's wide agenda, the fact that it has sustained its contribution over a period of nearly five years, and the number of actual agreements reached.

Structural adjustment and social dialogue

The ILO also put together a regional seminar on structural adjustment programmes and social dialogue in southern Africa. The seminar was held in Harare, Zimbabwe. Participants at the seminar were drawn from the tripartite bodies of Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia. The ILO and SADC played an advisory role at the seminar.

The main focus of the discussions was to impress on social partners the importance of involving civil society in the formulation and implementation of structural adjustment programmes. Other important questions included:

- Who should benefit from reform programmes?
- How to ensure that the reform programmes reach the targeted people?
- How to compensate those who were negatively affected by the programmes?





□ How to use the proceeds of the programmes in the future?

The employer delegation felt that the lack of an all-inclusive social partner consultative process had led to reform programmes that were unrealistic and unobtainable. Meaningful dialogue between social partners required an unquestionable social will from government to drive the process.

The labour movement expressed its dissatisfaction with the current reform programmes in the southern African region. It said that the current programmes were increasing poverty because the programmes did not consider the consequences of reform on local industry and the labour market. The reduction of the civil service generally led to massive retrenchments and was not matched by the emergence of new jobs as

was promised. Governments also tabled their frustrations with structural adjustment programmes. They complained that the time span

between the implementation of programmes and the impact on its beneficiaries was too long. Generally parties shared a view that there was a need for government to initiate proactive home-grown reform programmes. Social dialogue institutions needed to be changed from being advisory to being able to reach binding agreements between parties. In respect of the model of such institutions, similar points were made as in the above-mentioned workshops regarding a broader agenda, broader consultation base, and political commitment from the government.

Oxfam trade unions workshop

'Trade and investment in the new millennium' was the theme of this workshop attended by a wide range of union representatives from across SADC,

and other civil society organisations. Its purpose was to strategise around SADC and globalisation, and how best to address this.

Discussions centered around:

- the nature of trade and investment;
- what power relations exist and opportunities to influence the system;
- who potential alliances could be formed with;
- how regionalism could be used to reduce the costs that globalisation and the dominance of liberalisation might bring if not effectively managed.

In this context, delegates saw the upcoming WTO Seattle Ministerial meeting in November as an important event around which social movements and civil society should strategise. There was a recognition that unionists need to find ways to balance members' immediate needs with a broader strategic vision and awareness of how trade and investment might impact on their everyday existence. Participants felt that these issues needed to be demystified in order to become more accessible to broader society and enable debate.

Regionalism and a post-Lomé convention trade regime

This workshop, jointly hosted by the Institute for Global Dialogue, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Institut Français d'Afrique du Sud, brought together a variety of players from SADC, Africa, Europe and South America. It provided an opportunity to more clearly position southern Africa in the context of various regional trade strategies. Specifically, participants considered what the EU's overall global strategy might be in relation to both trade and other issues, and how southern Africa was placed to maximise the potential benefits of interacting with the global economy.