

INFORM



ISSUE 15
APRIL 2013

NEWS AND VIEWS
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COMMUNITY

SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

By working together, governments, employers and trade unions can develop education and training to respond to the diverse needs of society, the economy and individuals. Cooperation between all these actors however remains a challenge in most countries. For vocational training in particular, it is of paramount importance that governments, employers and trade unions develop their capacities to work together in making and implementing vocational education and training policies.

This analysis builds on the outcomes of the ETF's work over the years in the partner countries, particularly in its recent projects that have specifically targeted social partners.

WHO ARE THE SOCIAL PARTNERS?

The term social partners generally refers to trade unions and employer organisations that exist to promote and protect the interests of their members. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a social partner should be independent from government, represent the sector to which it belongs and based on freedom of association. Independent social partner organisations receive their legitimacy and mandate from their members.

WHY SHOULD SOCIAL PARTNERS BE INVOLVED IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING?

Social partners represent labour markets, which are the main beneficiaries of vocational training. While the skills needs of labour markets evolve, vocational training provision must keep pace and this implies the need for detailed information on labour market trends that go beyond mere statistics. Employer and employee organisations are well placed to provide this information. Social partners can therefore articulate labour market needs during the design of vocational training policy and explain what is expected from graduates entering the labour market.

If vocational training and higher education better meet the needs of the labour market, everyone benefits – learners, enterprises and, hand-in-hand with economic development, society as a whole.

Although education is not the only factor that can have a positive impact on the economy, countries like Finland that have developed dramatically over the past 50 years, have also invested heavily in education, including vocational education.



Social partnership in vocational education and training is about employers, trade unions, public authorities and training institutions cooperating to ensure that the training provided is adequate and relevant to labour market needs. Occupations are changing. Economic restructuring and global competition are destroying old style jobs and creating new ones that have new demands for human capital. Young people entering the labour market frequently lack the competences that are required in jobs and ageing workforces struggle to keep pace with technological developments. Making training relevant to labour market needs is an issue of concern the world over.



CONTENTS

- The importance of involving social partners in vocational training policy making.
- How they are involved now
- What can be done to get them more involved in the future

HOW ARE SOCIAL PARTNERS INVOLVED?

Social partners participate in both policy making and the practical provision of training in the ETF's partner countries. They are involved in different ways at different levels of the system (national, regional and local). At national level, for example they are likely to play a consultative role in formulating vocational training policies or establishing occupational standards for different sectors, while at regional and local levels their involvement might take the form of analysing labour market trends with a view to translating this information into training programmes.

Social partners often play a key active role in providing work-based learning, including continuing training, and active labour market policies, which can support the provision of training for company work forces or unemployed job seekers.

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

Social partners have a recognised role in providing advice on training content within the context of the development of national qualifications frameworks. For example, in Turkey and Ukraine, employers organisations play an active part in the development of their national qualifications frameworks, which cover occupational standards and curricula. Trade unions on the other hand have often had a more passive (or only reactive) role due to the fact that vocational training and skills development seem to be low on their lists of priorities.

WORK-BASED LEARNING

Very often skills development takes place in the workplace. Work-based learning is typically the responsibility of the employers who develop the skills of their staff. Vocational training institutions are sometimes contracted by enterprises to provide specific staff training. Enterprises also offer on-the-job training for students or apprentices and there are many examples of cooperation between enterprises and vocational schools on practical training. The most developed system of work-based learning is apprenticeship training. Based on the German model, Egypt has recently developed apprenticeship training

supported by the National Centre for Human Resources Development, which is in fact part of a business organisation, the Investor Associations Union.

Some employer organisations, enterprises and even trade unions have their own training centres. In Russia, large enterprises such as RUSAL, the world's largest aluminium company, even have their own corporate universities. Russian Railways has more than 50 training centres and the biggest Russian trade union confederation, FNPR, has two universities. In Palestine, the trade union PGFTU has run joint projects with European trade unions to provide vocational training for workers.

COOPERATION STRUCTURES

For policy consultations with social partners and other stakeholders many ETF partner countries have established Economic and Social Councils, VET Councils or Employment Councils. Some countries also have employment or training councils at regional or local level. At local level, social partners are sometimes members of school boards, advisory bodies or training institutions.

Serbia has established the Council for Vocational Education and Adult Education, which is a tripartite body to develop the national qualifications framework and curricula. Serbian employers are involved in the policy development and strategic planning of vocational training. They also participate in the definition of occupational standards and examinations.

In Morocco, the Office de la Formation Professionnelle et de la Promotion du Travail, whose tripartite board represents the government, employers and trade unions, is in charge of implementing continuing training programmes. There are also tripartite committees for continuing training in ten different regions in the country.

Sectoral social dialogue on vocational training exists in Croatia and Turkey. Croatia has 13 VET sector councils which started as voluntary bodies with a limited mandate. Their legal basis was established in 2009

and their task is to define national qualifications. Turkey has occupational standard committees and a Vocational Qualifications Agency. Overall in the partner countries, there is a lot of interest in sector initiatives including establishing skills councils. For example, the Republic of Moldova and Kyrgyzstan have recently established sector councils which are currently getting up and running.

Efficiency is an issue. VET or sector skill councils and school boards can serve as effective cooperation platforms if they have the expertise, staff and funding to fulfil their mandate. With supportive frameworks in place, employers and trade unions can develop their capacity to contribute to the vocational training policy process to ensure that provision meets labour market needs. This entails establishing objectives and organising their work to meet them. Sharing responsibilities and power is in the core of social partnership. The first step is that governments demonstrate their willingness to work with social partners. This can be expressed in various policy



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HOW CAN SOCIAL PARTNERS GET MORE INVOLVED?

documents and supported by appropriate legislation and practice. Secondly structures like vocational training or sector councils must be agreed together with social partners. Effective partnership goes beyond mere formal cooperation. The motivation of the stakeholders depends on whether they believe that their voices are likely to be heard. Thirdly, to enhance their involvement, the governments must establish a vision to which stakeholders can respond.

This doesn't mean that initiatives should be limited to governments, but in view of the fact that many ETF partner countries have a tradition of centralised policy making, even with the best political will, change takes time. In many cases social dialogue is a government led operation. The ETF regional project to support social partnerships in southern and eastern Mediterranean has proved that it can be difficult to establish bipartite partnerships between employers and trade unions often more used to confrontation rather than collaboration.

ATRIPARTITE PROCESS

In many ETF partner countries, dialogue is seen as a tripartite process in which public authorities also take part. Practical

cooperation is based on the involvement of enterprises. Public authorities also invite individual experts or enterprises to participate in the development of qualifications or standards.

Employer organisations and trade unions are autonomous when representing the interests of their members, but there are constraints. Governments do not always welcome the independence of the social partners, while social partners are occasionally limited by their capacity to be involved in complicated policy issues. They often lack information to support their argumentation.

They define the needs of their members as priorities and goals in their policy papers. Vocational and continuing training are independent issues but they are also linked to the wider agenda of an employer organisation or a trade union. Trade unions in partner countries have so far only rarely defined links between vocational training and their agendas.

KEY ACTORS

Social partner involvement can be inhibited if employers and trade unions do not see themselves as key actors. All concerned parties, including governmental actors, should understand the benefits of their

participation. The different roles and functions in cooperation at different levels of governance can be defined in agreements between the three parties, as happened in Albania in 2009.

The representation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) and employers from the informal economy is an issue in many ETF partner countries, as they are rarely members of employer or business associations. Trade unionisation is often concentrated in the public sector or big companies and unions rarely cover all economic sectors. These limitations can affect the part social partners can play in all areas of their work.





CONCLUSIONS

The involvement of the social partners is based on their awareness of the changing skills needs of the labour market – a precondition for employment and economic growth. They bring added value to the development of VET policies and practices if they argue these needs. Employers and trade unions also promote training in enterprises in many ways.

VET councils or other permanent cooperation structures exist in most ETF partner countries but their capacity is not always fully exploited. Real cooperation demands trust from all partners. By working together, governments, employers and trade unions can develop education and training to respond to the diverse needs of society, the economy and individuals. When successful, cooperation transforms the role of social partners from a reactive one to active participation even if their role remains consultative. Both governments and social partner organisations need to demonstrate their willingness and capacities to work together. At the same time, cooperation has the potential to increase the capacities of all three parties to impose policies and practises.

Employer organisations and trade unions need organisational and individual capacity to contribute to dialogue on vocational education and training. It includes understanding and articulating the needs of their members which are companies or workers. Currently they are not always well organised. Taking on such an active role is part of the professionalisation of an organisation. The overall capacity of social partner organisations depends on the interests and capacity of their elected leaders and staff. Shortcomings can be visible at national or regional level. Often resources or organisational capacity vary from one economic sector to another. If social partners have problems with the way they are represented, they often have limited resources and capacity to be involved in various policy debates.

Improving the involvement of the social partners is based on understanding that vocational training has close links to the labour market and the economy. If governments are willing to empower social partner organisations to be more involved in vocational training policies and implementation, they gain by developing expertise among their stakeholders. This can be used when developing occupational standards, qualifications and training. The promotion of work-based learning can improve the quality of learning outcomes in a cost-efficient way. Involving social partners should go beyond formal participation into a real contribution that is taken into consideration when decisions are made. Their contribution requires capacity, but without real involvement in policy work social partners cannot be empowered.

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