Social Dialogue and the Future of Work

Background report for the ILO-AICESIS-OKE Conference
23-24 November 2017
Athens, Greece

Executive summary

This report is a background document for the conference on 'Social Dialogue and the Future of Work', being held on 23-24 November 2017 in Athens and organized jointly by the International Labour Office (ILO), the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (AICESIS) and the Social and Economic Council of Greece (OKE). The report is based, in large part, on the results of a survey of Economic and Social Councils and other Similar Institutions (ESC-SIs), to which 44 such institutions responded. It presents a snapshot of the current perceptions, priorities and capacity of ESC-SIs with respect to the various elements of the Future of Work (FoW) agenda and proposes some preliminary recommendations on how to strengthen their engagement.

The ILO-AICESIS conference takes place in the context of the Future of Work initiative, one of several initiatives launched by the ILO Director-General in 2015 to mark celebration of the centenary of the ILO in 2019. The initiative is encouraging reflection among the ILO's tripartite constituents – governments, employers and workers – on the transformational changes underway in today's world of work, and what they will mean for the economies and societies of tomorrow. Consideration of the role of social dialogue constitutes a central part of these reflections.

The ILO has identified four mega-drivers of change – technological advances, demographic shifts, climate change and accelerating globalization trends – that are fundamentally transforming the world of work. Social dialogue, involving governments and representative organizations of employers and of workers, should play a key role within the governance of work, so ensuring that countries devise balanced policies to address these forces of change, which deliver both sustainable economic growth and social justice.

The four mega-drivers of change each presents very different challenges to the ESC-SIs. The acceleration of globalization requires social dialogue to adapt to new decision-making structures, where multinational enterprises are increasingly powerful agents. Demographic shifts mean hard choices regarding the modernization of welfare state institutions and creating thousands of new and decent jobs for young workers. The potential of technological change can be harnessed only through the effective regulation of new forms of work and bridging skills

gaps. Finally, managing climate change demands a broad consensus around a sustainable development strategy. The complexity of each challenge is compounded by the need to tackle them together and simultaneously, a daunting task for any country regardless of its income level and stage of development. The enormity of the task was reflected in the survey responses received from the ESC-SIs.

Many national social dialogue institutions were, in reality, still recovering from the effects of the global financial crisis. Almost two thirds acknowledged that social dialogue had been challenged in some way in recent years. More than half had undergone major reforms, including of their mandate (e.g. adding environmental issues), composition (increased representation of youth or women), structure (e.g. establishment of dedicated working groups or committees) or method of functioning.

There was widespread awareness that the changing world of work requires serious consideration. Two thirds of the ESC-SIs had developed a strategic plan to enhance the role of social dialogue and policy concertation (or planned to do so) while three quarters had an action plan dealing with one or more of the issues pertinent to the Future of Work agenda. The role of the ESC-SIs was mostly advisory (for example, in developing economic and social policies and drafting legislation) or sharing of information, including good practices, or both. Just over half of the institutions had an active negotiating role. The ESC-SIs assigned highest priority to their roles with respect to social dialogue, promoting collective bargaining and sound employment relations; social protection; working conditions; as well as unemployment and underemployment. Lower priority was accorded to workplace compliance; corporate social responsibility; and to the changing nature of work.

Some differences emerged between countries of different income levels, as reflected in the policy priorities of their ESC-SIs. Countries with a long- established tradition of well-functioning social dialogue and well-resourced institutions, e.g. high-income countries in Continental Europe, had been able to devote greater attention to future of work-related challenges than had those lacking such a tradition and with lower human and financial resource availability. ESC-SIs in the latter group tended to prioritize current, pressing labour market problems (e.g. youth unemployment, occupational safety and health or workplace compliance) over the less familiar emerging challenges.

ESC-SIs were also at different stages of preparedness vis-à-vis the four mega-drivers of change. The newer phenomena, such as technological and climate change, which have been on policy agendas only since the early 2000s, were actively debated by far fewer ESC-SIs than the longer-standing issues of demographic shifts and accelerating globalization. For example, less than one third of the ESC-SIs had engaged in any specific activities (e.g. research, policy advice, advocacy or capacity building) regarding technological advances, and only one in three had actively engaged in discussions on this topic at the national, regional or global levels. Fewer still had engaged on the issue of climate change.

Several obstacles were identified as hampering the effective functioning of ESC-SIs. These constraints were both internal (primarily the lack of human, technical and financial resources and the weak convening power, reflecting a lack of engagement of governments) and external (decreasing trade union and employer organization density, as well as the decentralization of collective bargaining). Newer challenges, for example, the lack of representation of specific groups such as youth, migrant workers or workers in the gig

economy, the emergence of new forms of work and of new civil society actors, were accorded lower priority by several ESC-SIs.

Many ESC-SIs were, however, aware of their weaknesses and were planning to strengthen their institutions through diverse measures, such as improving their strategic planning capacity, strengthening the technical knowledge and skills of their members, enhancing the convening power as well as better internal and external coordination and collaboration.

The ESC-SIs valued the institutional support provided by both AICESIS and the ILO. AICESIS members were generally satisfied with the services provided, and welcomed the exchange of information and good practices between countries, the organization of capacity building and training workshops, and the sharing of information and analysis on the future of work. The technical support of the ILO through Decent Work Country Programmes and specific projects was also appreciated.

Several provisional recommendations were made in the conclusions of the report. These included stronger strategic planning by the ESC-SIs concerning emerging and country-specific future of work issues - both the challenges and opportunities it presents; adoption of a more pro-active and 'pre-emptive' stance vis-à-vis the future of work; setting up of specific working groups on priority future of work issues; enhanced partnerships with expert institutions and academia; undertaking awareness campaigns, public hearings and other communications activities; and increased cross-country exchange of experience, policy approaches and good practice, which might be facilitated by AICESIS, in collaboration with the ILO.