Social Partners for the Union for the Mediterranean

Operational conclusions of the fifth UfM Social Dialogue Forum

21-22 November 2023

Social Partners of the two shores of the Mediterranean met on 21-22 November 2023 in Marseille, France, for the fifth UfM Social Dialogue Forum.

This edition of the UfM Social Dialogue Forum has been **a mix of taking stock** of past activities of the European and South Mediterranean Social Partners in the context of UfM, **and of looking forward** to the next steps of their cooperation in the context of the UfM paving the way for their future **joint contribution to the 2025 UfM Labour and Employment Ministers Meeting.**

This fifth edition of the UfM Social Dialogue Forum has also been an important opportunity for Social Partners of both regions to meet and talk about their recent experiences at national level and in both regions. The debated issues related to improving effectiveness of bi-and tripartite social dialogue, including collective bargaining, tackling green and digital transitions as well as climate change, supporting economic growth, sustainable social protection systems as well as advancements in the field of social policies. Social Partners from both sides of the Mediterranean also discussed in a frank and constructive manner the need to improve management of migratory flows between both regions in a way that is mutually beneficial for sending and receiving countries and always guaranteeing the protection of people's fundamental rights.

Practice of social dialogue

Social dialogue and collective bargaining have the potential to play a greater role in responding to the labour market challenges faced by workers and employers. It is important that national governments provide the space for social partners to play their role in finding joint solutions. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that in some UfM countries, and even a few EU countries, social dialogue is still facing obstacles and/or is weak. It is essential to strengthen the capacity of independent trade unions and employers' organisation; ensure there is an enabling environment for tripartite and bipartite social dialogue, including collective bargaining that respects the fundamental rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining in all UfM Member States, while respecting variations in national systems and approaches.

The last UfM Social Dialogue Forum (2020) underlined the crucial role played by the continuous bi-and tripartite social dialogue, including collective bargaining, to address the pandemic, but also the further challenges of democracy, peace, economic growth, social justice and climate change. Social partners in both regions were committed to improving the cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean. Since then, social partners in several countries have played a key role in tackling the far-reaching impacts of the war in Ukraine.

Despite this, the role of social partners and social dialogue could be further highlighted in the context of the UfM cooperation and the growing synergies between the North and the South of the Mediterranean.

Further work should be carried on:

- developing social dialogue at all relevant levels;
- mainstreaming social dialogue in decision making at all levels and consequently leading to more democracy at work, in line with diverse social dialogue and industrial relations practices in both regions and in individual countries;
- promoting social partners recommendations on addressing growing labour and skills shortages, updating skills curricula for labour market needs as well as co-designing upskilling and reskilling provisions and a fairer economy are also worthy of more discussion;
- strengthening the implementation of the different Ministerial Declarations at the level of the different UfM Member States in consultation with the relevant social partners and the Member States.

Green and digital transitions

Governments have a critical role to play as they are urged to invest in digital infrastructure and collaborate with social partners and academic institutions to develop vocational training and education programs that allow a rapid and effective up/reskilling to cope with digital and environmental changes. In this regard, employers' organizations and trade unions must act to identify training needs and areas of improvement to offer as much tailored support as possible and needed, thereby making job-to-job transitions smoother. As efficiency and productivity increase, advocating for both incentive and supportive measures appear as essential to increase workers participation in training.

As for the social dimension of greening, social partners positioned themselves as key advocates for regulatory reforms that promote sustainable practices, energy efficiency, and the utilization

of renewable energy sources. Additionally, they remain essential elements in raising awareness about sustainability imperatives and advocating for policies that protect business ecosystems and resilience of local communities that are most impacted by this dual change.

Addressing social dimension of digital transition requires governments to multiply investments in digital infrastructures, particularly considering the existing disparities in broadband internet access across the Mediterranean region. Digitalization offers both opportunities and challenges, calling for a quick but smooth alignment with international and European norms on human, trade union, social rights, and occupational safety and health.

Further work should be carried on:

- making use of the unique position of social partners to collaborate with governmental and academic institutions in the formulation of vocational training and education programs;
- ensuring that individuals are equipped with the required skills to adapt to evolving technologies;
- supporting businesses in an effective uptake of new digital and environmentally-friendly technologies for Just Transition;
- ensuring that productivity gains are balanced with the protection of workers' interests. for effective monitoring, impact measurement, and data collection that is needed to drive the twin transition so it is beneficial for employers and workers.

Active inclusion and effective social protection

Inactivity has serious consequences for employability and professional development, ability to generate income as well as for the adequacy and sustainability of social protection entitlements. Longer inactivity spells result in social exclusion created for the affected persons as well as trigger direct and indirect costs at societal level.

Achieving inclusive labour markets is a multi-faceted challenge. Quality jobs are the best way to ensure self-sufficiency, professional development and access to work-related social protection provisions. Active inclusion measures are effective when tailored to the specific vulnerable group needs and combined with appropriate training provisions and enabling services.

In Europe in particular, reducing inactivity rates will be crucial in the coming years to alleviate the growing labour and skills shortages, but also in view of the fighting against poverty. In the Southern Mediterranean region, a key challenge has been identified in developing social protection systems in parallel to efforts to reduce the size of the informal sector.

Social protection systems need to support employment while protecting people against life risks including job loss and ensuring adequate living conditions to everyone. Social protection should also be tailored to the diversity of workers' needs and diverse forms of work.

Addressing informality can also help ensure the sustainability of social protection systems by increasing their contributory base. There is also an urgent need to rethink the efficiency of spending on social protection in the current context of public budgets under pressure.

Social partners are committed to contributing to performing labour markets and social systems, subject to their own capacity and national specificities.

Further work should be carried on:

- strengthening sustainability and adequacy of national social protection systems; in case of some Southern UfM Member States supporting their effort to set up effective social protection systems;
- reducing inactivity rates, through a more holistic approach, and including by proposing specific measures for different vulnerable groups;
- involving social partners in designing, implementing and managing, whenever appropriate, different social protection measures;
- supporting multi-partner cooperation – social services, public and private employment services, social services etc. - for an effective labour market integration for all those who can work.

Economic migration and brain drain

The discussions have recognised the significant difference of demographic situations between the South and North. The Southern Mediterranean, in the one hand, witnesses a younger population and an increase in its working age population, while the North is characterized by a rapid decrease with the EU's working age population expected to fall from 265 million people in 2022 to 236 million in 2050.

Keeping in mind the positive role of bilateral agreements between the EU and Southern Mediterranean countries, or between Northern and Southern countries, the regular outflow of workers puts pressure on Southern countries. They find themselves under pressure to fill in various vacancies, which further differentiates the level of economic development between North and South. Effective governance of skilled migration must take place in the current context in a way that is beneficial for both sending and host countries. The recent EU Talent Pool proposal and the Talent Partnerships initiative can play an important role in this respect in terms of helping to foster circular migration and is something to be further developed between Northern and Southern countries. The cooperation between the EU, its Member States and Southern mediterranean countries is also important to reduce the flows of irregular migrants to Europe.

In practice, the establishment and promotion of bilateral agreements between the two Mediterranean shores, in accordance with EU and diverse national migration needs/preferences and labour market situations across the two regions, will be vital to achieve win win skilled migration, also keeping in mind the important role played by remittances sent by migrant workers in the EU for their families and communities in their countries of origin. Improved cooperation should ensure that interests of all stakeholders - governments, employers, and workers – are secured within appropriate and different levels of migration related partnership agreements. These provisions should recognize the skills of people coming from countries of origin through improved recognition solutions, support their education and vocational training programs, support well-functioning labour markets in both regions, allow for mobility, and ensure the economic and social rights of immigrants in destination countries.

Further work should be carried on:

- Improving the role of talent partnerships between the EU and Southern Mediterranean countries and in parallel the development of supportive bilateral cooperation between countries of both regions;
- ensuring that migration policies take into account the main international standards for labour migration and improve immigration procedures where appropriate, in particular for the migrants working in occupations and qualifications that are prioritised as part of the applicable bilateral agreements;
- conducting continuous monitoring to collect data related to skills, specialization, working conditions, and living conditions in destination countries;

- raising awareness of the potential for social dialogue-related solutions to foster labour market integration of migrants from the Mediterranean region;
- promoting circular migration that can be beneficial for all UfM Member States.

Social Partners from both shores of the Mediterranean stand ready to engage in the above-mentioned policy areas and strands of work either through social dialogue at the appropriate levels or through their cooperation in the context of the South Mediterranean social partners' projects SOLID 1 and SOLID 2.

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