The role of social partners in the Post-Lisbon strategy: the European sectoral social dialogue


“The Post-Lisbon Growth Strategy: New Challenges for the European Social Model”

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Work in progress-draft version

Introduction

The Europe 2020 strategy, launched in the prolongation of the Lisbon strategy, aims fostering smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and helping member states to deliver high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion (European Commission 2010(a)). While the European Commission stressed at several occasions in the past the important role of the European social partners in the implementation of the Lisbon objectives, the Europe 2020 strategy seems to simply have ignored it (European Commission 2002, 2004, 2010(b)). In a joint statement, the European social partners recall and insist on the need to include social partners at all levels (European, national, regional and local levels) in the design and monitoring of the reforms in order to guarantee the post Lisbon strategy to succeed (ETUC, Business Europe, UEAPME and CEEP 2010).

At the time of the Lisbon strategy, the social partners were involved in the achievement of the objectives through variables ways. However, it seems that the role of the social partners was rather limited and it highly differed from one country to another (Baradel & Welz 2005, de la Porte & Pochet 2002, Gold et al. 2007, Léonard 2005).

1 This paper is based on research funded by the Banque Nationale de Belgique
In this paper, we study the specific case of the European sectoral social dialogue (ESSD). Despite many critics (Branch 2005, de Boer et al. 2005, Keller 2003), it seems ESSD has potential to respond to the challenges raised by European integration to the social market economy. Until now, more than 500 joint texts have been adopted by the sectoral committees and 40 sectors have formed an ESSD committee (European Commission 2010(b)). However, this dynamic is undermined by the lack of knowledge the European social partners have about the effective implementation of their joint texts within the national contexts. Most of these texts are non-binding and the European social partners have no means to constrain their affiliates to follow their recommendations. This weakness raises the issue of the legitimacy and the ability of the social partners to handle European issues and to be involved in the creation of a European social model.

Our objective is here to highlight the mechanisms that could favour the implementation of the joint texts within the EU member states and then enable the European social partners to be involved and to weight on the post-Lisbon strategy. In this aim, we seek to build an analytical framework integrating the inputs of the neo-institutionalist perspective to actor-centered approaches and that traces the whole decision-making process at stake within the European social dialogue. We argue that the joint texts will be implemented at the national level when the national social partners are involved in the decision-making process of the European social dialogue committees (Kaeding & Müllensiefen 2009, Perin & Léonard 2011, Pochet et al. 2009). Throughout their mobilisation at the European level, the national actors would be progressively socialized to the European ideas and then would be more prone to implement voluntarily the European texts. This analytical framework is still in progress. It has been build from a theoretical work and an exploratory research that was conducted in three sectoral committees of social dialogue, agriculture, commerce and postal sector (Pochet et al. 2009)\(^2\). Therefore, data presented here remain hypothetical and need further empirical testing.

In a first part, we briefly review the role played by the social partners in the European integration process and mention the many challenges that were recently raised towards their

\(^2\) Research conducted in 2008 for the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound). Results were published in Pochet,P., Peeters, A., Léonard, E., and E. Perin (2009), 'Dynamics of the European sectoral social dialogue', Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities : European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions
role in the Lisbon strategy and in the European social dialogue. In a second part, we present the specific case of the European sectoral social dialogue (ESSD) and introduce our analytical framework. We argue that the European social dialogue offers new opportunities for action to the national social partners. In consequence, the mobilisation of the national social partners at the European level will lead to the voluntary implementation of the joint texts in the domestic contexts and therefore will favour changes in national employment relations. In a third part, we show that the involvement of the national players at the European level is bounded up with their national framework of actions. Accordingly, we identify different degrees of involvement within the ESSD committees. Finally, in the last part, we see that participating in the ESSD committees can trigger learning and socialization process. National actors go beyond their national strategies, develop transnational interests and are thus more prone to implement the European texts. In consequence, national actors, while implementing the European texts, obtain additional opportunities to foster new practices in their domestic context and hence, bypass or even change their national institutional constraints. This will increase the European impacts at the national level while the European social dialogue in itself will be strengthened.

The role of social partners in the European decision-making process

Trade unions and employers federations took part to the European construction since the very beginning of the process. If their role was at first mainly informal and consultative, the involvement of the social partners progressively grew along the years. The social partners are now involved in the definition of the European policies throughout three different paths: they are consulted informally and formally by the European authorities; they take part to tripartite concertations with the European Commission and the European Council and finally they are involved in a bipartite dialogue at cross-sectoral and at sectoral level (Smismans 2004).

From the launch of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952 and the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, consultative groups were settled in the sectors concerned by the first common policies such as agriculture, coal and steel (1963), road transports (1965) and inland waterways (1967) (Dufresne 2006). These groups constitute the precursor of the future European sectoral social dialogue committees (Dufresne 2006). At the cross-sectoral level, consultations were also held in ‘cross-industry advisory committees’. The social partners were asked to give their views about the European policies in different policy areas such as

In addition to these specific consultative committees, the social partners have the possibility to give their opinions via the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). The Committee, established by the Treaty of Rome, associates the representatives of the socio-occupational interests groups, including the trade unions and employers federations, in order to create a platform where they can express their point of view on the European policies. The Committee is consulted on a mandatory basis by the Council or the Commission, and the European Parliament since the Treaty of Amsterdam, on matters defined within the Treaty. Originally, these areas were limited to agriculture, free movement of persons and services, transport and social policies but since then, the areas of consultation have been largely extended during the various Treaty reforms (Dimitroulias 2008).

The role of the social partners was then mainly consultative. Yet, in the 1970’s, the first tripartite conferences on employment are organised. It gathered the Council of Ministers, the European Commission and the European social partners in order to facilitate the policy coordination on employment. However, the results of these conferences were mainly statements of intention and few concrete measures were finally adopted (Pochet & Van Gehuchten 2010: 406).

More recently, the institutionalization of a formal European social dialogue at the end of the 1980’s and the launch of the European Employment Strategy in the 1990’s and the Lisbon strategy in 2000 encouraged a further inclusion of the social partners in the European decision-making process. However, many issues challenge their involvement in the procedures.

Since the launch of the European Employment Strategy in the 1997 Luxembourg European Council and of the Lisbon strategy in 2000, the social partners are indeed encouraged to contribute to the formulation and implementation of the European employment and social objectives. At the European level, the social partners are consulted for the preparation of the policy guidelines and participate to the annual evaluations; while at the national level, the social partners are invited to take part to the elaboration and implementation of the National Action Plans (Natali & de la Porte 2009). However, it seems that the weight of the social partners on
the process was rather limited. At the European level, the social partners had a restricted access to the OMC processes and, besides, the European Employment Strategy agenda did not always match the social partners’ key priorities, which undermined their interests and commitment (Natali & de la Porte 2009). At the national level, several studies showed that national concertations with the social partners were unusual and the National Action Plans relied mostly on the initiatives of the national governments (Baradel & Welz 2005, Casey 2005, de la Porte & Pochet 2003, 2004, Léonard 2005). Therefore, the role of the social partners was limited to a strict implementation of the objectives defined by the national governments and over which they had very few influences (Casey 2005, Gold et al. 2007). Moreover, the participation of the social partners varied from one country to another. The social partners that traditionally took part in the definition of the national policies were involved in the process while the others remained at best informed about the initiatives of their governments (de la Porte & Pochet 2002, de la Porte & Nanz 2004).

In parallel, the European social dialogue was developed and for the first time the social partners were offered the opportunity to intervene autonomously on European policies. In 1985, Jacques Delors, president of the European Commission from 1985 to 1995, launched the ‘Val Duchesse’ process. The representatives of employees and employers agreed to organise a bipartite dialogue at the European level and on the possibility to establish contractual relations that could lead to joint texts (Didry & Mias 2005). Provisions were first inserted in the Single Act and then in the Maastricht Treaty that provided the basic institutional framework for the European social dialogue. The last reform of the Treaty introduced new provisions that enhance the role of the social partners at the European level (Art. 152; 154 & 155 TFEU). According to Articles 154 and 155 of the Lisbon Treaty, the social partners are able to intervene according to several ways (Léonard et al. 2007). At first, the Commission has to consult the social partners before initiating any social policy in the areas covered by the Treaty. Following this consultation, social partners may request to deal with this issue through a negotiation. In this case, the legislative procedure is suspended and will resume only if negotiations fail (art. 154 TFEU). On the other hand, the European social partners can decide to negotiate independently of a Commission initiative on the subject of their choice and on issues that are not covered by the Treaty: “Should management and labour so desire, the dialogue between them at Union level may lead to contractual relations, including agreements” (art. 155 TFEU).
If the social partners finally reach an agreement, there are also two ways to implement it:

- **In accordance with the procedures and practices specific to management and labour and the Member States; this is the ‘autonomous route’;**
- **Or in matters covered by Article 153, at the joint request of the signatory parties, by a Council Decision on the basis of a proposal by the Commission (art. 155 TFEU)**

The implementation via a Council decision makes the provisions of the agreement binding and they become part of the community law. The ‘autonomous route’ relies on the national structures of industrial relations within the Member States and the implementation will mainly depend on the will and the capacity of the national social partners (Léonard 2008).

For some, the European social dialogue, at the interprofessional and sectoral levels, could indeed constitute an important tool in order to develop and implement the Lisbon and post-Lisbon strategy objectives: “Although the impact of the European social partners’ activities is not necessarily obvious, they have made every effort to contribute to the achievement of the strategy’s objectives” (ETUC and ETUI 2011: 87). Examining the work programs and the joint texts issued by the European social dialogue committees, Clauwaert et al. (2009) show that the European social partners had been highly active in implementing the objectives of the Lisbon strategy (Clauwaert et al. 2009).

However, the ability of the social partners to act on European issues through the European social dialogue is still subject to many criticisms as regards, notably, to their capacity to implement the ‘autonomous’ texts at the national level (Branch 2005, Keller & Sörries 1999, Keller 2003). Berndt Keller raised some major problems such as the diversity of the coverage rates from one country to another, the absence of extension clauses in most EU member States as well as the absence of any legal power for the European peak federations to enforce their national affiliates to implement the texts (Keller 2008).

While these issues can prevent the European social dialogue to succeed, we believe that in some circumstances the vicious circle can be transformed in a virtuous circle (Perin & Léonard 2011). In the next parts, we present the mechanisms that could favour the implementation of the joint
texts within the EU member states and then enable the European social partners to be involved and to weight on the post-Lisbon strategy.

**The European sectoral social dialogue: from a vicious circle to a virtuous circle**

European social dialogue refers, at the strict sense of the term, to bilateral negotiations between European trade unions and employers’ federations (Smismans 2004). Social dialogue committees are organised at the cross-sectoral level as well as at the sectoral level. Currently, 40 professional sectors such as agriculture, chemical industry or telecommunications, have created a social dialogue committee (European Commission 2010(b)).

If social dialogue committees were at first mainly consultative bodies, in the 1990’s European social partners were encouraged to develop bilateral relations and to sign joint texts (Dufresne 2006, European Commission 1998). In terms of outcomes, 70 joint texts were issued by the cross-sectoral organisations and more than 500 texts at the sectoral level (European Commission 2010(b)). If the social partners have the possibility to transform their text in Council decisions such as Directives, most part of the texts consist in process-oriented texts such as frameworks of actions, guidelines, codes of conduct or joint opinions (European Commission 2004, Degryse and Pochet 2011). As already mentioned, those texts are non-binding given European organisations have no power to constrain their national affiliates to implement it (Keller 2003, Pochet et al. 2009).

In 2010, the European Commission assessed the activities of the European social dialogue in the sectoral committees and showed that there is a direct correlation between social dialogue at national and at European levels: ‘European social partners must have the capacity to ensure consultations are coordinated among their members, as well as being able to deliver outcomes and contributions. However, their capacity depends on that of their national affiliates whose strengths and resources may be limited (...)’ (European Commission 2010(b):13). This means that the implementation of the joint texts and consequently the effectiveness of the European sectoral social dialogue (ESSD) depend on the relationships between the European federations and their national affiliates as well as on the latter’s goodwill and capacities (Pochet et al. 2009, Perin and Léonard 2011).
Accordingly, we make the hypothesis that the implementation of the European texts will rely on the mobilisation of the national actors in the ESSD process. The mobilisation and the presence of national actors at European level can indeed reveal their intention to use European norms to promote new practices at domestic level. Furthermore, by participating in ESSD, national actors could learn and be socialized to new perspectives. Consequently, they would be more prone to transpose European norms. Nevertheless, national social partners are constrained by the framework of their national system of industrial relations. Yet, the European text could offer new opportunities of action or a new legitimacy to the national actors which would be able to intervene in new areas and therefore to bypass their national institutions or even to revise it.

The underneath diagram presents our analytical framework. It has been built from an exploratory research conducted in three sectors, agriculture, commerce and post. Hence, the data and propositions as currently presented in the next parts remain hypothetical and must be tested by further research.

From Mobilisation...

Industrial relations are rooted in their national context and employment issues are still mainly dealt at the national level. Therefore, it is not a natural process for national social partners to be involved in European levels of decision. Some questions can be raised. What are the reasons...
that could explain the involvement of national social partners in the ESSD? Do they all participate and if so to what extent are they involved?

A survey conducted by the European Commission (2010(b)) shows that there are significant differences in participation from one Member State to another. Participation rates are generally high for representatives from Belgium, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, and low for representatives from new Member States as Cyprus, Malta, Estonia, Romania or Slovakia (European Commission 2010(b)). Such differences in participation could be explained by the strategies conducted by the national organisations according to their political opportunity structure as well as their capacity to be involved in European decisions.

In terms of strategies, sectoral issues have to be taken into account. Referring to quantitative analyses on the topics covered by the joint texts and the content of committee work programmes, social partners seem to be interested in discussing subjects that are connected to European policies and transnational challenges that go beyond the national players’ scope of action (Pochet et al. 2006, Pochet et al. 2009). The national members then tend to support action at the European level on issues that have no core role in national agendas or on which they have no power to act in their domestic context. For instance, the most active sectoral committees correspond to sectors highly impacted by European regulations such as agriculture or telecommunications and postal services facing the liberalization process as well as sectors exposed to international competition such as the textile sector. By contrast, social partners acting in sectors embedded in a national environment, such as the graphical sector, have little motivation to act at a European level (Leisink 2002).

In addition to matters at stake in the sectors, it seems that social partners could find reasons to act at the European level according to their national objectives. These objectives will depend on the political opportunity structure that defines the weight and the access of the group on its domestic political scene. Following studies on interest groups and multi-level governance, actors tend to seek the levels of decisions that would be the most responsive to their claim (Marks and McAdam 1996, Pralle 2003). If an organisation is willing to defend its position on a certain issue

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3 “Political opportunity structures are comprised of specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilization” (Kitschelt 1986: 58), these configurations favour in some instances the interest groups actions and constrain them in others.
but is unable to do so due to its weak negotiating position within its domestic system, or because its counterpart refuse to negotiate, such an organisation may be motivated to handle the issue at the European level. In Spain, for instance, health and safety issues are dealt via tripartite concertations (Gangas 2007). Bilateral collective agreements do not cover such matters. However, the European agreement on musculoskeletal disorders in agriculture offered the social partners a devious way to seize the stake and to raise their voice about the issue in the Spanish context.

Furthermore, being involved within European levels of decisions requires resources, people and expertise (Beyers 2004, Eising 2007, Klüver 2010). Some organisations interested in participating may face material obstacles, such as a lack of representatives who can travel to Brussels or little or no knowledge of the working languages (Pochet et al. 2009). Participating also requires experience in sectoral-level collective bargaining, which is generally the case for organisations from the ‘old’ Member States, but much less for ones from the new ones (Léonard et al. 2006). Hence, it seems these institutional competences are determined by the national position of the organisation and thus depend on the national industrial relations system. Marginal groups, with few resources and little collective bargaining experience, will meet difficulties to be mobilised at the European level. Consequently, strategies and capacities cannot be conceived on a separate basis. They are mutually constitutive.

In our exploratory research, we identified three degrees of involvement in committee activities (Pochet et al. 2009). These degrees directly depend on the institutional capacities of the organisations as well as on their strategies. The ‘central players’ constitute a first group. Those national players regularly participate in committee meetings and they are closely involved in the decision-making process through their work in specific working groups or smaller group meetings. They bring their national inputs to the committee and usually have an underlying project for the European social dialogue. These are generally convinced of the necessity of transnational relationships and believe in the development of a European dimension in social matters. Most of these actors represent organisations from Member States where collective bargaining is well developed at the sectoral level and where social partners, in a certain extent,

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4 Interview conducted in February 2008 near Spanish trade unions and employers’ federations in the agricultural sector.
weight on the political decisions and enjoy autonomy in collective bargaining. Such organisations have important human and financial resources, which facilitate and favour active participation.

Besides, the organisations’ strategic and political objectives explain their active presence and involvement. Among such objectives, a first set of motivation consists in trying to influence European policies and taking joint action before the Commission takes any unilateral decision. A second kind of objectives involves accompanying the transformation of national activities into transnational ones. Following the liberalization of postal services, there is a tendency for former monopolistic groups to reorganise their activities on a transnational basis leading the trade unions to focus their attention on protecting minimum standards of working conditions throughout the EU. A third preoccupation is to gain information on what their counterparts in other countries are doing and to share experience (Pochet et al. 2009). Finally, national organisations can participate with a view to backing national positions or promoting their national system, but also, in a negative way, with the aim to block the process (Murhem 2006, Pochet et al. 2009).

A second group of actors rather act as ‘observers’. They are not present regularly; they participate when they think the issue at stake has a certain added value that makes it worthwhile to face material obstacles, such as the lack of time or resources. This type of participation can be seen more as a ‘passive reaction’ than a ‘proactive action’ the aim being, rather to react to some issues and to learn about them than to propose a project or new ideas. These actors seem to be more often representatives from smaller organisations with scarcer human and financial resources. It can also be the situation of some organisations from the new Member States that are not sufficiently structured or prepared to fully integrate the social dialogue committees.

The third group corresponds to the ‘absent players’ and covers a wide range of actors with diverse reasons for not participating. These organisations might be first interested in being involved more actively, but they face material obstacles such as the lack of the financial or human resources necessary to be present in Brussels; a lack of knowledge of one of the working languages; or a weakly structured organisation with too few representatives. This situation may
be the case for most organisations from the new Member States that face a lack of resources to invest into European affairs (Léonard et al. 2006). Other elements of explanations can be found in a lack of interest. Social issues and/or European issues may be absent from the organisation agenda. European issues are often conceived as too distant from the trade unions and employers’ federations’ domestic preoccupations. Moreover, whereas a culture of social dialogue is well rooted in most Western countries, trade unions and the system of collective bargaining can be looked at with suspicion in post-communist regimes (Pochet et al. 2009).

These three profiles remain, at this stage, hypothetical and must be examined in greater details by further research. It is important to note that these different degrees of participation are not static, as players’ participation can evolve from one situation to another in line with the development of their own constraints, opportunities and interests.

... to transposition

The agenda-setting and decision-making processes within the ESSD committees differ from one sector to another. Worker and employer representatives may also organise their decision-making process in different ways and are free to prepare the social dialogue meetings according to their own organisational choices. The European-level social partners are the only organisations entitled to sign the text and are formally the only ones that take part in European social dialogue (European Commission 1993). However, in terms of physical presence, the European secretariats form their respective delegations in the committee from designated national members. When involved in the activities of the ESSD committees, national actors will participate, according to their degree of involvement, in different types of meeting structures: plenary sessions, thematic working groups or small group meetings.

In agriculture, the agenda is generally discussed and decided by the two European-level social partners’ organisations under the auspices of one small secretariat group. Issues that would be discussed are set according to individual or joint initiatives with the agreement and input of their affiliates. The positions of each organisation are the result of previous discussions among
the European organisations and their members during unilateral meetings⁵.

In the commerce sector, the European organisations prepare, in turn, a yearly work programme compiled following the input of the national members. This is then proposed to the other side, discussed, modified and submitted to the opinion of the national members of the two organisations and subsequently approved at the committee’s plenary session. National members will participate in the different meetings organised according to the items on the agenda. During plenary sessions, all members are present and able to present joint work that could result in the adoption of a text, which must be agreed unanimously⁶.

The postal social dialogue committee is structured in working groups meetings. These groups are clearly identified according to five important issues for the sector: training, CSR, accident prevention, development of the postal sector and exchange with other sectors. Each group is composed of an equal representation from employers and trade unions. As in the two other sectors, the result of the joint work of the working groups are presented in plenary sessions and decisions can be made to issue a text⁷.

Besides, in each sector, seminars or conferences are also organised. These events are important because national actors create networks and get to know each other during more informal moments such as coffee breaks, lunches and dinners.

These different structures favour interactions and exchanges among the participants coming from 27 different countries and thus speaking different languages and representing diverse socio-economical realities. The participants often conceive their involvement in the ESSD committees as a way to learn about the other national contexts and how their counterparts are dealing with their own national problems. A Belgian respondent in the commerce sector commented: “What is interesting about social dialogue is the awareness that there are some

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⁵ Interviews conducted in February and March 2008 with GEOPA-COPA (European employer organisation in agriculture) and EFFAT (European trade union in agriculture) and some national members.

⁶ Interviews conducted in February and March 2008 with UNI-EUROPA (European trade union in the commerce sector) and EUROCOMMERCE (European employer organisation in the commerce sector) and some national members.

⁷ Interviews conducted in February and March 2008 with UNI-EUROPA (European trade union in the postal sector) and some national members as well as national members from POSTEUROP (European employer organisation in the postal sector).
issues that do not exist in Belgium yet but that we will have to face in the near future (...) to maintain what we have, we need to know the future issues that are around the corner⁸.

In European studies, it is acknowledged that regular and frequent interactions among national actors at the European level and the habits of working together transform the actors’ common perceptions (Checkel 2003, Manners and Whitman 2000, Quaglia et al. 2008). National actors are socialized to European perspectives (Checkel 2001). In this perspective, “socialization refers to the process of inducting individuals into the norms and rules of a given community” (Hooghe 2007: 66). This means national actors interacting at the European level would internalize European norms and ideas and would change their behaviour and identity (Checkel 2001). Moreover, one establishes a link between socialization and domestic compliance. Actors would easily comply with European or international norms because they have internalized new preferences (Checkel 2001, Risse et al. 1999).

In this vein, the regular and frequent ESSD meetings could favour exchange of ideas and point of views among the participant and thus trigger a learning process. Could this process trigger a socialization of the national social partners and then favour the implementation of the joint texts?

Given the high heterogeneity of the interests represented within the ESSD committees, we believe that a European identity could not be reached. However, we make the hypothesis that ESSD, through the organisation of frequent meeting, could lead to a certain extent to a European socialization of the participants. The national actors would acquire the technical and social competences necessary to play within a multi-level system and would build together common ‘transnational’ references (Wagner 2009). In that sense, we think the European sectoral social dialogue committees could play a ‘socialization’ role towards the national actors.

Furthermore, it seems that the European federations could also play a socialization role towards their affiliates. Through the preparatory meetings to the ESSD but also through informal seminars or trainings, European organisations could favour the learning of new ideas and perspectives. Katarzyna Gajewsja studied transnational labour movements in Europe and

⁸ Interview conducted in March 2008 with Belgian representatives in the commerce sector.
demonstrates that the integration of the national trade unions within European federations fosters cooperation and encourages the national representatives to be more involved at the European level (2009). This finding was as well confirmed in the case of European works Councils: “European industry federations’ (EIFs’) activities in coordinated policy-making create the structural conditions for employee representatives to more easily network across borders and, thereby, to generate closer identification with the EWC” (Pulignano 2007:75).

At this stage, we do not have sufficient data to conclude about the role of socialization of the ESSD committees and the European organisations. However, we believe the frequent exchanges between actors could foster mutual learning and lead the national actors to develop, at least, new ideas and new practices and, at best, to build their strategies according to transnational references.

The socialization of the national actors could also help to explain the voluntary implementation of the text. Being socialized to European perspectives, they would be more prone to transpose them in their national context.

Yet, when implementing the texts, national social partners are constrained by their institutional context and their industrial relations system (Lalllement 2008). Systems of collective bargaining differ widely among the 27 Member States. Procedural rules, levels of collective bargaining, hierarchies between the different levels, the statutory status of collective agreements, and the parties entitled to conclude collective agreements all vary from one country to another (Schulten 2005) and thus shape different abilities for the national players to implement the European joint text. As an example, the role of employer federations and trade unions in vocational training highly differs in the EU Member States. In France and in Italy, social partners play mainly a consultative role, with the government having the final say. By contrast, social partners in Belgium, Germany or Sweden have greater latitude to take initiatives and to negotiate collective agreements on this issue (Verdier 2007, Winterton 2006). Accordingly, if a joint text on vocational training is adopted at European level, the ‘room for manoeuvre’ of the national social partners to implement the agreement will highly differ from one country to another.
However, the European joint text may offer some additional opportunities for the national players to intervene on issues that are not initially included in their jurisdiction or blocked by their counterpart organisation. For instance, the European agreement on vocational training issued in 2002 in the agricultural sector led the Italian and the French social partners to create a bilateral partnership in order to exchange information and good practices and to experiment and establish new vocational training programmes. National actors were in this case able to circumvent the constraints of their national systems and to act on vocational issues without the approval of their governments. Consequently, national social partners, through their mobilisation at the European level, are able to bypass or revise their initial framework of action (Jacquot and Woll 2008).

Finally, the structure of industrial relations is not fundamentally changing but it seems that by playing on the two levels of decision the social partners are able to extend their scope of action at the national level as well as at the European level. The process is indeed self-reinforcing. The European text gives new opportunities and a new legitimacy to the national social partners to act in their domestic context while the domestic transposition of the European text offers the European social dialogue an increasing legitimacy.

**Conclusion**

While the weight of the European and national social partners on European policies remains limited, it seems the European social dialogue could constitute an important tool for the social partners to be included in the definition and implementation of the post-Lisbon strategy. However, without an effective implementation of the joint texts, the European social dialogue will suffer from a lack of efficiency and legitimacy.

To ensure a good functioning of the European social dialogue, we argue the relationships between the European level and the national social partners are essential. It is indeed in this continuous link between the two levels that the whole process could be effective. The European social dialogue may constitute an additional level of action for the national actors and could offer them new opportunities to act within their national context. While the national member

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organisations are embedded within their national institutions, they also have their own interests and strategies towards the ESSD according to sectoral and national issues. On one hand, they seek to respond to transnational challenges raised at sectoral level while on the other hand they use the European procedures to promote new practices in their domestic context. However, the national social partners’ involvement in the ESSD committees will diverge according to the objectives they want to pursue as well as their capacity to be present at the European level which is strongly determined by the national industrial relations systems. When participating in the ESSD decision-making process, the national actors exchange ideas and opinions with their counterparts. Therefore, they learn new perspectives and build together new transnational references they will apply in their own domestic practices. However, when implementing the texts the actors are constrained by the national institutions and/or the strategies of the other part of the industry. Anyway, the European joint texts can provide new opportunities for action or a new legitimacy for the national actors who will thus acquire the capacity to bypass or even change their national scope of action. In the end, if the national transposition of the texts is effective it will guarantee the ability of the social partners to deal with the European policies and to be involved in the creation of a European social model.
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