

On 27th March CEDAG member the Union of social profit enterprises (UNIPSO), organised a stakeholders meeting in Brussels within the project Promoting employers' social services organisations in social dialogue (PESSIS).

The purpose of the PESSIS project, funded by the European Programme Industrial relations and Social dialogue, is to promote the participation of employers' social services organisations in social dialogue in the national as well as in the European context.

The first step towards this long-term goal is a mapping on the organisation and the functioning of social dialogue in the eleven countries covered by the project partnership (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Finland, France, Ireland, Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, UK). The information and best practices gathered will feed into national reports which will then compiled into one European report by a European Researcher and assessed during the final Conference planned for June 2012.

Between March-April 2012 stakeholders meetings shall be organised by the national project partners as a way to meet key players and gather relevant information on the size of the social services sector and its participation in social dialogue. The form and the kind of discussion of each stakeholder meeting is likely to be modulated according to the specific context in each country.

As regards the Belgian case, this is one of the few examples where social services employers participate in collective bargaining about labour issues. The stakeholder meeting organised on 27th March took the form of a focus group where different participants of the non-profit social services sector were invited to highlight both strengths and weaknesses of the participation of the social services sector in social dialogue in Belgium.

The specific features of the sector, the way of working, evolution trends were among the main

issues discussed. Considering the distinctive characteristics of the non-profit social services sector, many participants highlighted that the staff costs account for 70% or 80% of the total costs.

Other specificities are the presence in large majority of female workers , the part-time (voluntary or not) as the predominant form of labour contract and the large proportion of older workers. The work is in both public and private enterprises of the social profit sector. The sector continues to rely largely on government sources and recently, in the context of the economic crisis, it has attracted a great deal of interest from public authorities for its resilience and job creation potential.

The non-profit sector as a whole is the third main employer in Belgium and it is reality composed of organisations which vary greatly in terms of size and social purposes. One of the elements highlighted during the meeting was a tendency towards harmonisation in the social profit sector, and towards its being considered as a bloc.

The social partners often defend globalising positions, such as harmonising salary levels, to promote workers mobility in the sector and make the jobs more attractive. This being said, it is still necessary to take advantage of the specificities within different subsectors. During the meeting, the role of public authorities was raised : they finance a large part of the activities of social profite enterprises, helping to guarantee service accessibility.

Participants agreed that the professionalization of the sector has been the main trend observed during the last years, which has gone hand in hand with an increased representativity. Disparate sectors have federated at sectoral and then intersectoral level to speak with one voice where possible. This allows the creation of social dialogue in sectors where previously there was no dialogue between social partners.

Increasing scarcity of resources has also imposed a stricter financial management in the sector, with the increased prominence of 'budgetary logic' (cost reduction) in managing services which must respond to essential needs of the population.

The relationship between public authorities and the sector is currently evolving. Subsidies are progressively replaced by a competition between enterprises through calls for tender and

contracts. These changes on one hand have somehow improved the transparency and efficiency in the provision of the services but on the other hand, these lead to a commercialization of the sector and imposes a bureaucratic burden for the non-profit social services sector.

Considering the way the collective bargaining is organised in Belgium, every two years, an intersectoral collective agreement is negotiated between the main organisations representing employees and employers at the national level.

This agreement establishes the main developments in terms of wages and working conditions that will be further discussed in the next two years within the joint committees at sectoral level and/or within the National Labour Council at cross-sectoral level. Pay and working time are covered by collective agreements negotiated within the sectoral joint committees (Paritaire comités/Commissions paritaires).

The Belgian social dialogue system is generally understood as being a good example, linked to a unique welfare state model. Whereas many aspects of this model need to be preserved, other elements of it could be improved further. In this respect, some participants highlighted that there is not a official place where all the social partners' organizations from the public and private non profit sector could have a dialogue with the public authorities and establish a collaboration on different issues.

The information and comments exchanged during the stakeholder meeting in Brussels will enrich the understanding of the good practices existing at European level regarding social dialogue and the involvement of the non-profit social services sector. In a coordination meeting scheduled for 16th and 17th of April, PESSIS project partners will compare the situation in different countries and discuss the preliminary finding of the research.

