

“Social dialogue is about listening and building bridges”

“We believe that social dialogue is the only way towards sustainable change,” said FNV President Han Busker in his opening speech in Veerensmederij in Amersfoort on 8 October 2019. With this in mind, bridges were built and more than 200 participants learnt from the best practices in the world at the Building Bridges Conference organized by Mondiaal FNV.

Busker opened the conference with a reference to the historical site where it was being held. Veerensmederij was the workshop of HMS (Holland’s Iron Railway Company), where the springs for the undercarriage of railway wagons were forged from 1908. “Now the building has been given a new purpose, as a result of dialogue and collaboration,” Busker concluded.

“Social dialogue is about communication. We know that companies are more productive when a good social dialogue takes place. But in some countries, people are not used to this; they think they do not need one another.” Busker pointed to the current environmental crisis, refugee crisis and other global problems. “We have no time to lose; the problems are too big,” said Busker. “This is why we will share positive examples at the conference. We believe that social dialogue is the only way towards sustainable change. There will always be problems, so you have to find ways of solving them.”

Basic attitude and mindset

Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands spoke on behalf of the Number 5 Foundation, an NGO that focuses among others on supporting dialogue. She provided pointers for a good dialogue. “Dialogue is the most misunderstood form of communication,” she said. Laurentien believes there are three basic rules: knowing why you are sitting together, understanding the collective nature of the thought process, and ensuring an independent space in which everyone feels safe.

Princess Laurentien also mentioned a number of conditions for a successful dialogue. “The basic attitude and mindset of all involved persons must be good and should include curiosity, lack of ego and the ability to listen. It is vital that people value what others have to say. This leads to trust and understanding. Finally, focus on people’s strengths rather than their function. It’s what they can do that matters.”

Public property

Alette van Leur, ILO’s director for sectoral policy, spoke about the 100th anniversary of the international tripartite organization. “This year our theme is The Future of Work, in which social dialogue plays a crucial role, as long as it is based on freedom of association. Freedom of association is a key requisite for a good social dialogue, together with trust, commitment and respect. These can be found in various shapes and intensities; it is not one size fits all. Social dialogue is public property. It is about listening and building bridges.”

Van Leur led a panel with key figures, including Ghana’s Minister of Employment and Labour Relations, Ignatius Baffour-Awuah, who noted that his country has been working on social dialogue for a long time. “You get the best out of people by giving them a voice,” said the minister. Jyoti Macwan of India’s women’s trade union SEWA spoke about her trade union’s

success in procuring social facilities for informal workers. “Social dialogue is very important, but it isn’t easy,” she warned.

Stable relations are crucial

Paola Simonetti of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) zoomed in on ITUC’s #TimeFor8 campaign, which refers to the Sustainable Development Goal 8, on decent work and economic growth. She pointed out that 80 % of the world’s countries disregard the right to collective bargaining. “As a counterbalance we chose decent work as a development strategy.” Peter Bongaerts, director of DECP, Mondiaal FNV’s sister organization at the employers’ organization VNO/NCW, sees social dialogue as a corporate process. “Stable relationships are crucial for employers and better for productivity.” He remembers a social dialogue in the Netherlands’ leather industry, in which employers were only speaking with one another. “It was a true monologue and one of the consequences was that investments were deferred. It turned out very poorly for that industry. So we returned to the negotiation table with a more open mind and we succeeded in getting out of the impasse.”

Alejandro Arrieta, manager at Peru’s Camposol vegetable and fruit grower, represented a true best practice. Trade unions and the company management used to be diametrically opposed and negotiations would go on forever, even all the way to court, then the company went through a radical change. “We sought new ways to increase the production of avocados, blueberries and other fresh products. We explored possibilities together with Mondiaal FNV and DECP, and the social dialogue improved. Now we no longer have strikes, and 70 to 80 % of our personnel is from the area, because they like to work for us and no longer have to travel. Happy worker, happy company. And we learnt that if you want to transform your industry, you should begin with social dialogue.”

The gap between will and practice

Before the second panel discussion in the afternoon there was a presentation by David Vermijs from Shift, the centre of expertise on business and human rights that published the “Respecting trade union rights in global value chains” report together with Mondiaal FNV on the occasion of the conference. The publication studies the gap between the stated policy of companies to respect trade union rights and a reality in which these same rights are often still lacking. The report presents among others a collection of practical examples and is intended as inspiration for companies that want to work on social dialogue and the broader field of trade union rights.

<https://www.shiftproject.org/resources/publications/tradeunions/>

Strong and independent actors

Alette van Leur again led proceedings during which Catelene Passchier, president of ILO’s employers’ group, spoke about the importance of social dialogue. “Trade union rights lie at the heart of ILO’s work. If we are to listen to one another and to enter into dialogue, we need strong and independent actors, as well as political will and commitment, respect for trade union rights, and a legal framework that legitimizes trade unions.” Her advice to the room: “Here, I am preaching to the converted, but in the ILO I also encounter much resistance. This is why we must all continue to encourage the people who are reluctant, we must take a leap of faith and build bridges.”

Marcela Manubens, vice-president of Unilever's CRS department, explained how a complaint filed by the IUF international sectoral trade union before the intergovernmental Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) led to a social dialogue with international trade unions. The complaint involved a violation of labour rights at an Indian subsidiary. The result was that contract workers gained the same rights as employees. "Vulnerable work is now a topic on our agenda," said Manubens. "We create our own policy on the protection of workers." The director of shipbreaking at IndustriALL, Kan Matsuzaki, spoke of the success achieved in this sector thanks to the steady reinforcement of trade unions.

During the conference, the public had two opportunities to participate in workshops on social dialogue at the sectoral and national levels. The inspiring day closed on a film report by the Raging Reporters. In it, Princess Laurentien again took the floor: "Social dialogue is about exchanging different views and perspectives in order to arrive at new solutions together. It is an exercise in collective thinking and I truly believe that current issues call for this type of dialogue."

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Text: Astrid van Unen

English translation: Philippa Burton