

Social dialogue as universal remedy

SER's international sister organisations visit the Netherlands

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The economic crisis is exacerbating the social problems in many countries. Consultative bodies from other countries visited the Netherlands this week to discover the secrets of the consensus model.

Fabio Castro from Brazil wanted to know how young people find work in light of the alarming level of youth unemployment in his country. Claudia Redan from Paramaribo was interested in finding out whether Surinam would be able to replicate the Netherlands' social safety net. French delegate Damien Lanel hoped to hear whether the government's plan to allow shops to open on Sundays could be blocked. And Liu Xiaoping from Beijing wondered how China can create a civil society.

All four were members of a delegation of sixty young people from every corner of the world attending a special Summer School organised by the Social and Economic Council (SER) in Noordwijk aan Zee this week. The SER, a body in which representatives of employers' organisations, trade unions and independent experts consult on national and international socio-economic issues, may be a unique instrument in the Dutch polder model, but there are similar bodies in dozens of other countries. The SER's chairman Alexander Rinnooy Kan invited representatives from all of these organisations to visit De Baak study centre to share their ideas against the background of the economic crisis.

How can social and economic councils catch the ears of their governments? What can be done to prevent globalisation increasing social inequality? How are countries addressing the effects on everyone of the current economic crisis? And how are good jobs being created? These were the questions raised by the sixty participants from Asia, southern and western Europe, Africa and Latin America.

Even in times of healthy economic growth, countries are unable to create enough good jobs, Milan Vodopivec told the group. That is worrying, said Vodopivec, a labour market economist with the World Bank, the development bank that has projects in many of the countries the participants come from. He estimates that as many as 51 million people could lose their jobs this year because of the crisis. Global unemployment has risen from just over five percent to seven percent in the last two years. And the number of working poor, whose average income is around 1.20 dollars a day, will rise to 120 million.

What can we do to change this? asked Prihanani Boenadi, a trade unionist from Indonesia. Because of globalisation, a growing number of people in Indonesia are employed on irregular contracts because it is cheaper, she said. Globalisation is still a dream for many African countries, responded Célestin Camara from Guinea. Most African countries have been left behind. How many people in Africa use a computer?

That is a serious problem, replied the World Bank's economist. Many people have bad jobs in the informal sector, which offer no social protection whatever. How can more decent jobs be created in the face of globalisation? That is the key question, according to Vodopivec. Poverty will never be eradicated without strong economic growth accompanied by the creation of good jobs.

That is precisely why Fabio Castro has come to the Netherlands, he says later in the day. Castro (25) is a member of a youth organisation that is represented in Brazil's Social and Economic Council, which is mainly a social council. We are less concerned with economic issues than the SER in the Netherlands, he says. The Brazilian council also has wider representation. Besides the employers and unions, the members include civil society organisations (women, blacks, young people). The country's president, former trade union leader Luiz Inácio da Silva, whose nickname is Lula, is the council's chairman. People in the Netherlands are surprised by that, says Fabio. But we can achieve more with the president as chairman.

And there is a lot that needs to be done in Brazil, he says. The country has 60 million young people in a population of 190 million. Most of them are poor, have temporary jobs, are uninsured and have no social rights. We are fighting to secure decent jobs for the young people of our country, says Fabio, who is interested in discovering how other countries accomplish that.

Surinam faces the same problems, although its population of 500,000 is far smaller. We have a large informal sector and many people live below the poverty level, says Claudia Redan, a financial specialist in Paramaribo's university hospital and a member of Surinam's SER, which was established in February. People with a job are insured through their company, but we have no safety net for people without a job or who work in the informal economy. The council in Surinam is therefore looking closely at the Dutch model. The SER in the Netherlands possesses a lot of expertise. It is a model for us because we want to present the government with plans for a good social system in Surinam, she says.

The group has visited the SER, the FNV trade union federation and ING Bank this week and has spent a lot of time discussing the social dialogue, or lack of one, in their own countries. Although the economic situation and the make-up of councils differ greatly from one country to another, it became clear in Noordwijk that they all share the same objective.

How can we create a better social balance with less inequality? wonders Claudia Redan. She believes that consensus is typically something for a developed country like the Netherlands. Everyone keeps talking until a problem has been solved. In Surinam, it is already quite an achievement that the new council provides a forum for a social dialogue and that the country is no longer being bankrupted by strikes.

Liu Xiaoping will return to Beijing full of inspiration. He has learned a lot, he says. In particular how social dialogue can avert conflict. China is a developing country, he says. The cities are modern and we have modern factories, bridges and roads, but there is more to being a modern society. Our social life must also become modern, he says. Better education and better social services provide people with security in their lives. The civil society has a long tradition in the Netherlands, he has discovered this week. I am convinced that we can also accomplish that if we develop our social amenities.

And what will Damien Lanel be taking back with him to Paris? We get too little done in France, he feels. France's three-hundred member Conseil économique, sociale et environnemental may be the oldest and largest social and economic council in the world. The SER is smaller, but it is more influential. We have to modernise and make the politicians listen to us more closely, he feels.

We are fighting to secure decent jobs for our young people, Fabio Castro, member of a Brazilian youth organisation

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