

# SOCIAL DIALOGUE FOR DECENT WORK AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH: NATIONAL SOCIAL DIALOGUE FOR PEACEFUL AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN TUNISIA<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Tunisia faced significant social and political challenges following the revolution of 2011. The strengthening of social dialogue helped facilitate the transition to a more democratic, representative and inclusive form of governance. This case study seeks to highlight the historic process of dialogue that began in Tunisia in the aftermath of the revolution and resulted in a peaceful transition and the institutionalization of tripartite social dialogue.

## The context: political transition and social peace

The revolution of 2011 marked a turning point in Tunisia's history. Tunisia was able to elicit the active participation of workers' and employers' organizations, as well as that of civil society, and through dialogue ensure that demands for change were voiced constructively and heard. The stakes were high given the national context in which these process of dialogue took place. In the face of a crumbling regime and a tense political climate, exacerbated by security issues in the region, social dialogue served to put relations between parties and constituent groupings back on track, maintain channels of communication and prepare the way for a stable democratic transition in Tunisia.



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<sup>1</sup> Based on: A. Mouelhi: *A report on good practices of social dialogue for decent work and inclusive growth: The national social dialogue process in Tunisia* (2018), unpublished note.

## National Social Dialogue: the beginnings

Mechanisms of collective bargaining which had been in place in the country before the revolution were not voluntary. As a result, workers' and employers' organizations did not have an effective voice in a post-revolution society. New challenges of social stability and cohesion demanded a renewal of these institutions. This was accompanied by a growing demand for social dialogue on the formulation of effective public policies aimed at addressing the huge economic and social challenges faced by the country (especially poverty, unemployment, imbalanced regional development and inequality).

The first step towards regenerating social dialogue began under the "Partnership on promoting and reinforcing social dialogue in Maghreb countries", launched by the Government of Belgium and the International Labour Organization (ILO) in May 2011. The Belgian Minister for Employment, representatives from the ILO and tripartite delegations from the three Maghreb countries of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco launched a partnership for the promotion and strengthening of social dialogue at a high-level conference held in Brussels on 8 December 2011. The conference determined the priorities of the partnership and a schedule for its implementation. The three countries requested support for capacity building of the actors involved. They considered social dialogue to be a national priority for the promotion of decent work, national economic and social policy and the consolidation of democracy.

In Tunisia, the partnership was launched in May 2012, at the initiative of the Tunisian Ministry of Social Affairs, in cooperation with the ILO and the Government of Belgium. The conference concluded with a clear roadmap to design a social contract in Tunisia for the period 2012-2020. The social partners agreed to establish a tripartite working group which would meet periodically and deal with the main areas identified: industrial relations and decent work, employment and vocational training policies, social protection, income and wage policy, collective bargaining, regional development policy and institutionalization of social dialogue.

These very same priority areas were included in the final text of the Social Contract signed on 14 January 2013 by the Government, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), and the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA). The Social Contract provided a roadmap for a new governance of industrial relations and public policies, and has generated effects that go well beyond the world of work.

## The role of the ILO

The ILO placed the strengthening of social dialogue mechanisms at the centre of its support to the transitional government, while involving UTICA and UGTT and facilitating their engagement in fruitful

negotiations for the formulation and implementation of economic and social policies which would have an impact on work and livelihoods.

Since 2012, the ILO has been providing technical assistance to the country through a multi-phase project named “Promoting Social Dialogue and strengthening Labour Governance”, in partnership with the Government of Norway.

The first two phases of the project focused on: strengthening the capacities of social partners to enable them to effectively engage in effective social dialogue; reinforcing the existing social security system; reviewing the labour legislation so as to modernize labour market institutions; and supporting the review of employment policies and regional development. In order to achieve these goals, the ILO implemented capacity building activities and provided support to the social partners and the government.

The third and ongoing phase of the ILO project aims to facilitate the operationalization of the National Council for Social Dialogue and to promote social dialogue at national, regional, sectoral and enterprise level. The activities, integrated within the United Nations Development Assistance Framework for Tunisia (UNDAF) for 2015-2019, are fully aligned with the principles of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth.

## Political transition and participatory democracy

A Constituent Assembly was elected on 23 October 2011 to draft a new Constitution reflecting the values of the people of Tunisia. The active involvement of unions in the political transition marked a new phase of ‘participative democracy’. The trade union movement played a key role in the Tunisian revolution and remained committed to the task of social and political transformation in its aftermath. The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) was at the centre of political negotiations. It maintained its political influence and soon became a key player in the transition. The negotiations launched by the UGTT gave rise to the “UGTT initiative on national dialogue”. The Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, born from this initiative and comprising UGTT, along with UTICA, the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers (ONA), finalized a process of consultation on a roadmap that was then proposed to more than a dozen political parties. The roadmap achieved its primary objectives, making way for the adoption of the new Constitution on 27 January 2014.

In a challenging post-revolution environment of political and social instability, inclusive national dialogue proved to be an extremely effective means to enable a peaceful democratic transition in the country. Indeed, various organizations were invited to participate in this compact. This allowed the Tunisian society to overcome a political crisis and recognize human rights in their Constitution. It culminated in the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, composed of UGTT, UTICA, LTDH and ONA.

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*“The Nobel Peace Prize is a tribute to the courage, perseverance and principles of the UGTT, the UTICA and their partners. I salute their commitment to human rights and democracy. The ILO is proud to be associated with them and their activities.”*

*Guy Ryder, ILO Director General*

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## The establishment of the National Council for Social Dialogue

In a subsequent phase of the transition, the model of participatory democracy gave way to a more institutionalized forms of dialogue. After the signing of the Social Contract, social partners took ownership of the formulation and effective implementation of policies designed and adopted through processes of dialogue and consultation.

In 2016, the tripartite Tunis Declaration on Employment was signed, reiterating the consensus to tackle the complex challenges that Tunisia is facing with respect to employment policies, through a comprehensive approach actively involving social partners in the design of innovative employment policies. The declaration was adopted by the government and social partners in conjunction during an event on “National Dialogue on Employment”, which took place in March 2016 in the presence of the UN Secretary-General, the ILO Director-General, the Tunisian Prime Minister, and the heads of UGTT and UTICA. This Declaration outlines eleven principles to guide further action on employment, including the need to adopt a comprehensive employment strategy covering all aspects of job creation. On 22 August 2017, under the aegis of the Tunisian Prime Minister, the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment (MFPE), UGTT and UTICA launched work on a national employment strategy. Three tripartite and inter-ministerial committees (a political committee, a steering committee and a technical committee) have been set up involving all the parties interested in the development of an employment policy. This paves the way for the development of a future employment strategy in a concerted manner that ensures the involvement of the social partners in the process, and hence its effective implementation.

The approval of law No. 2017-54, dated 24 July 2017 established the National Council for Social Dialogue and determined its mandate and operational modalities. The creation of this tripartite body sought to anchor dialogue between social partners and created an enabling framework allowing it to go beyond one-off discussions of specific issues and become a constant and permanent model for decision-making. According to articles 2 and 3 of the law, the Council is responsible for organizing and managing social dialogue on social and economic issues of common interest for the social partners. It allows workers' and employers' organizations to participate in the debate on national issues, contribute to the development of sectoral policies and promote the economic and social development model, in addition to taking part in the debate on issues related to employment, unemployment, education and administration reform as well as the reform of social funds. The aim is to ensure fair and sustainable development through social dialogue and participatory democracy. The National Council for Social Dialogue will be officially launched at the end of November 2018.

## Tunisia and the Global Deal



The Government of Tunisia, together with the UGTT and UTICA, associated themselves to the Global Deal at its inception in 2016. Tunisia's Five-Year Development Plan for 2016-2020 focuses on the role of social dialogue in promoting transparency, trust and sustainability, thus assisting Tunisia's transition towards

inclusive growth and social justice. A recent Global Deal seminar in Tunisia noted that improving social dialogue is the best way to establish fair working conditions, enhance productivity and more generally promote inclusive economic development that would benefit workers, companies and society.

## An on-going commitment to social dialogue

On 21 July 2017, the ILO, the Government of Tunisia, UGTT and UTICA signed a memorandum of agreement for the implementation of the ILO Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP) in Tunisia for 2017-2022. The Programme, entitled “The social contract, an innovative example of DWCP for Tunisia” involved all tripartite partners. It will serve as a framework for the ILO to provide support to tripartite partners and assist with the implementation of the various reforms considered by the Tunisian Government among the five priority areas identified in the social contract. The ILO continues to work with the tripartite constituents to operationalise the National Council for Social Dialogue.



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Ouided Bouchamaoui, President of the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Crafts (Utica); Nouredine Taboubi, Secretary-General of Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT); Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General; Mohamed Trabelsi, Tunisian Minister for Social Affairs at the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding for the promotion and implementation of a Decent Work Country Programme, July 2017.

## Conclusion

Social dialogue has therefore been instrumental in regulating socio-political relations in the course of Tunisia’s post-revolution democratic transition. The process of national dialogue created the basis for a

transition and has proved to be very valuable as a strong protection against extremism, in a country where social democracy was trying to find its place.

The Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet in 2015 has fundamentally highlighted the importance of such a social revolution. In an extremely challenging environment of political and social instability, the Quartet forged national dialogue with the different political forces and achieved an agreement on a roadmap that included compromises that led to the stabilisation of the political situation and the establishment of a democratic system, underlining the major role played by social partners as well as civil society in bringing about a peaceful democratic transition.