



National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care

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Social partnership, civil society, and children's care system

Social Partnership is particularly common in smaller European countries which have no option but to develop strong internal coordination if they are to remain competitive in a world economy dominated by larger countries (Katzenstein, [1985](#)).

What is social partnership?²

Social partnership can be defined as “stable relations of mutual recognition, institutionalised co-operation and regulated conflict between organised labour, organized business and government” (Streeck & Hassel, [2003](#)).

Key attributes.

It is *stable*: there is an established system that spans sectors and outlasts any single government.

It involves *institutionalised cooperation*, meaning that in areas such as wage-setting and training, employers and unions work together to solve collective action problems such as ensuring a sufficient supply of trained workers.

It consists of *regulated conflict*, with specific calendars, forums, and representatives for contesting economic, labour, and other policy decisions, and a hierarchy of kinds of conflict, often with a strike as a last resort.

It is a social partnership is between *organised labour, organised business, and government*. (So it is not the same as lobbying, where anybody can choose whether to take a stance and compete for influence, or the individual labour market. It is organised into a small number of associations such as trade union confederations or employers' associations that can build up professionalism and trust.

It allows the control of inflation, maintains a relatively egalitarian income distribution, expands into innovative economic sectors by cushioning the costs of those in declining sectors, makes stable investments possible, and overcomes collective action and trust problems in sharing resources for innovation and training (Greer & Fannion, [2014](#); Culpepper, [2003](#); Streeck [1997](#)).

The impact of issues such as wages, workplace conditions, and equality on health should be clear.

In the case of care a social partnership works in two ways.

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One is through the inclusion of the care system in the broader economy, with negotiated wages and prices (and service-sector wage inflation thereby contained).

The other is unions and employers playing an often significant role in the governance of their sector.

The prerequisites of social partnership

Social partners such as unions and employers' organizations must exist, with strong legal protection.

Social partners must be organised, with very little fragmentation. If they are fragmented, then there is incentive for them to seek their own best deal.

Social partners must have actual tools with which to represent and organise their members.

Social partnership depends on institutional structures that create powerful social partners in civil society and it gives them a responsibility to work together.

It is the common belief of the social partners that their collaboration in pursuing long-term economic and social policy is beneficial to all. Specifically engrained in this position is the notion that cooperation and coordination are more efficient than open conflicts (Delapina, [2008](#)). Such a culture of cooperation grows when the main players are obliged to cooperate by the system in which they work.

In many of countries the institutional structures of social partnership are so deeply entrenched, and the care system and economy so built around them, as to produce a culture of cooperation. Wherever a culture of cooperation exists, there will be some tough institutional or social constraints underpinning it.

Social partnership in running care systems

Social partners influence within social politics is widespread and diverse, covering everything from their ability to take insight and review legal documents to holding diversified administrative roles (Hofmarcher & Quentin, [2013](#)). Partners hold positions for example advisory boards and committees of the administrative departments. For example, a social partner can be on the advisory board determining whether allowances for carers should be increased or decreased. When looking at labour collective agreements are negotiated on the employer side by representative bodies providers and trades unions.

A high degree of labour market centralisation means that wages, terms and conditions can be coordinated. This means partners join together to preserve profit and wage restraint. Representation of employers and employees mean that neither can distort the entire economy. Wage compression and strong union advocacy produces a level of social equality that most research on the topic would suggest is beneficial to social cohesion.

At setting level there is often a works councils that is highly integrated into the trade unions, but a local bargain never offsets a central one (Barth & Zweimüller, [1992](#)).

Four core goals of the social partners that display their wide-reaching effect and influence.

Participation in policy-making

In the legislative system, representative organizations can evaluate proposed legislation leading to recommendations for the law-making bodies, naturally in the interest of the social partners.

In addition, representatives have the ability to draft texts for legislation that are directly in line with the interests of the social partners (health care, pension, labour laws, etc.).

Because the social partners hold seats in the various commissions, advisory boards and committees, they can influence a broad spectrum of policies. For example, they can leverage the decision-making process in areas such as: training and qualifications, registration, inspection, trade and labour market policy and public promotion and funding programmes.

The social partners' work promotes acceptance of public policies and creates quicker and smoother decision making. Participation in general is conducive to better and more legitimate public policy (Greer, Wismar & Figueras, [2016](#)).

Economic influence

Collective agreements are written contracts between the collectively contracted employees and the employers that determine the working conditions for entire professional groups.

Every year these must be negotiated in addition to the yearly salary negotiations that need to be fixed.

Self-management within the social and health care system

Care systems reflect and are strongly influenced not only by underlying norms and values that any given society may have, but also by deeply rooted social and cultural expectations of its citizens (Lameire, Joffe & Wiedemann, [1999](#)), for example, solidarity and self-governance

Social partnership manages tensions between private and public sector workers. Care systems are not enabled in liberalised economies. An example can be how knowledge and training can be delivered nationwide to a stated quality thereby giving and assurance of a resilient base for the delivery of care.

There is institutionalised cooperation between labour, business, and government, all of which are involved in the economic and social policy make-up of the country (Nowotny, [1993](#)).

The specific involvement of the social partners concerning care can be seen in the establishment of, and the process of defining targets. All the relevant political and social partners are actively involved in its creation.

Children Looked After are included in the effective problem-solving mechanism as equal social partners through a representative body into the social partnership.

Social Partnership and Public Procurement Act (Wales) Act 2023

From [Explanatory briefing: Social Partnership and Public Procurement \(Wales\) Act 2023 | NHS Confederation](#)

The Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act SPPP draws together four key principles.

- 1. Social Partnership

Social partnership refers to a way of working which brings together employers and workers to discuss issues and develop solutions. The Welsh Government believes that social partnership can be used to implement solutions for challenges facing Wales and requires an environment that encourages participants to be open with each other.

Preceding the Act, a ‘Welsh way’ of conducting partnership working as the best means of finding solutions has been encouraged. This way of working is underpinned by the principles of meaningful and open collaboration. This is not to deny that every issue will achieve a solution by this way of working, but that the benefits can develop trusting relationships between employers and employees.

There are beneficial impacts of adopting a social partnership approach, including reducing inequalities and a creating a motivated workforce. It can also support behavioural change which could lead to improved outcomes for public services.

- 2. Socially Responsible Procurement

The [Welsh Government](#) described procurement as “one of the most important levers we have to support the more equal, more sustainable and more prosperous Wales”.

Specifically, socially responsible procurement means purchasing goods, works and services in such a way that improves economic, social,

environmental and cultural wellbeing. It uses the public purse to drive beneficial outcomes for the wider society.

The measures contained within the Act support the delivery of socially responsible procurement and includes contract management duties for major construction and outsourcing procurement.

The Welsh Government was assured that its decision to agree to the UK Government legislating on procurement procedures on behalf of Welsh Contracting Authorities in its Procurement Reform Bill would not hinder the Welsh Government's ability to set its own policy priorities for procurement. There are several areas where the Act interacts with the Procurement Reform Bill such as in terminology and definitions, in the bodies covered by the Bills, and in establishing mechanisms for oversight and accountability.

- **3. Fair Work**

Fair work is defined within the Act as “a range of potential activities undertaken by employers in agreement with the workforce, which contribute to well-being and improved public service delivery”.

The Act also amends the well-being goal of “A Prosperous Wales” within the WFG Act, replacing ‘decent work’ with ‘fair work’. This action was recommended in the Fair Work Commission’s 2019 report.

- **4. Sustainable Development**

The Act defines sustainable development as “doing things now in a way that takes into account the impact on people living their lives in Wales in the future”.

The WFG Act also contains a definition which states that sustainable development is the process of improving wellbeing in Wales, aimed at achieving the well-being goals. The sustainable development principle requires those subject to the Act to act in a manner which seeks to ensure

the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Conclusions

Social partners are civil society. They show what civil society is capable of when the political and legal institutions create incentives and organisations for stable cooperation and managed conflict, and over time this way of working creates a culture of consensus and problem-solving.

Establishing, maintaining, and adapting social partnership requires the meaningful collaboration of government and civil society.

It is a policy decision, which takes strong unions, strong employers, and a state that can enable them to work productively.

It involves institutional change. It is not easy. It is a coming together of parties to demonstrate what a collaboration between strong civil society and the state can achieve.