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# ISSUE BRIEF: SOCIAL DIALOGUE IN THE BEET AND SUGAR SECTOR

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## ABOUT THE ISSUE

Social dialogue consists of an organized and structured dialogue between employers and employees' representatives on all matters related to the social impacts of the companies' activities. It is also a means of involving employees in important decisions for the company, especially when those can impact the workforce. The EU sugar sector benefits from the experience of more than 40 years of dynamic and vibrant social dialogue at European level, replicated and nourished by the experiences of national and company-level social dialogues. The compulsory Code of Conduct on Corporate Social Responsibility, agreed in 2003 and implemented ever since, is one of the most visible and stronger symbols of the social partners' commitment to promote good working conditions, in particular when the need to improve companies' performance is at stake. Hence, social dialogue has been key to ensure a socially adequate transition in difficult times such as the 2006-2009 EU sugar market reform and will continue to do so as the sector prepares itself to face the challenges of further reform in 2017.

## ON THE FARM

While there is no specific social dialogue dedicated to beet growing activities, over the past 50 years the European Social Dialogue Committee for Agriculture (ESDCA) has regularly brought together employer (Employers' Group of Agricultural Organisations in the EC, COPA-COGECA) and worker representatives (the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions EFFAT) from EU Member States to discuss the social problems faced by workers in the agricultural sector and to develop, call for and implement joint solutions to these problems. This has allowed the implementation of good practices above the EU social standards.

In 10.8 million farms across the EU-28, the agriculture sector employs some 22.2 million people, or - converted into full-time work equivalents (measured as annual work units) – the equivalent of 9.5 million full-time workers (Eurostat Farm Structure Survey 2013). The majority of agricultural workers are self-employed, but the sector is also characterised by a high number of seasonal or casual workers. Currently around 140 000 farmers grow sugar beet on their farm every year as a rotational crop. The average beet area is around 12 ha/grower.

The ESDCA is currently focusing on:

- consequences of the CAP for the future of employment
- vocational training (Agripass –Eures)
- the situation of seasonal workers
- accident prevention, taking particular account of musculoskeletal disorders.

## IN THE FACTORY

Established in 1969, the social dialogue in the sugar industry has brought together the European Committee of Sugar Producers CEFS

and the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions EFFAT for over 40 years. In Europe, the sugar industry employs some 37,000 workers and indirectly generates 180,000 jobs (subcontractors, transport).

Despite fundamental economic and social changes related to the reform of the European Common Market Organisation for sugar since 2006, no major labour conflicts have erupted. This illustrates the commitment of the social partners at European, national, sectoral and company levels to back up the work reached in the European social dialogue. It also shows that social dialogue is a source for the development of innovative good social practices across Europe.

The Social Dialogue Committee in the EU Sugar Sector is currently focusing on:

- the future of the EU sugar regime and social consequences
- corporate social responsibility
- analysing the socio-demographic features and challenges of its workforce EU-wide
- an assessment of the sugar code of conduct in the light of ISO 26 000 and the new UN Business Human Rights Framework
- major external/internal challenges facing the European sugar industry.

## PROMOTING GOOD WORKING CONDITIONS, IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

The partnership builds upon key social standards of the CSR Code of Conduct of the EU Sugar Industry.

Since 1998 the European social partners have signed more than 12 joint positions on social and economic matters.

In February 2003 they took a further step forward by launching a compulsory Code of Conduct on Corporate Social Responsibility, which came into force on 1st January 2004 and was one of the first European codes of conduct of the social partners on CSR at sectoral level.

Established through a voluntary initiative, the CSR Code of Conduct is compulsory in its implementation, covering eight minimum standards, from human rights and working conditions to business relations and choice of suppliers. It is illustrated by some fifty examples of good practice. These are regularly updated on the common website: [www.sugardialogue.eu](http://www.sugardialogue.eu) and joint annual implementation reports are published.

Companies submit to the social partners' organisations examples of good practices as a "source of inspiration for continuous improvement". An example is "good" if:

- It is better than statutory requirements (beyond provisions required by law)
- The national social partners do agree upon the example.

The CSR Code of Conduct is assessed in the sugar industry in accordance with ISO 26 000 guidance on social responsibility and the 2011 UN framework on business and human rights.

Social dialogue in the EU sugar industry has shown that promoting good working conditions can be done even when the need to improve companies' performance is at stake. Social dialogue has also been key to ensure a socially adequate transition in difficult times such as the 2006-2009 EU sugar market reform and will continue to do so as the sector prepares itself to face the challenges of further reform in 2017.

#### CASE STUDY: PARTNERSHIP WITH EU-OSHA'S HEALTHY WORKPLACES CAMPAIGN.

*“Stress is the second most frequently reported work-related health problem in Europe and is believed to be the cause of more than half of all lost working days.”* (EU-OSHA)



#### ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN

The Healthy Workplaces Campaigns (HWC) are the world's biggest workplace safety and health campaigns.

These decentralised campaigns are coordinated by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), whose Governing Board is made up of representatives of governments, employers and workers from EU Member States, and representatives of the European Commission. The campaign focuses on the importance of assessing and managing stress and psychosocial risks in the workplace. Its key aim is to help employers' and workers' representatives, managers and workers to identify and manage stress and psychosocial risks in the workplace.



Effectively tackling psychosocial risks creates a healthy work environment in which workers feel valued and the workplace culture is more positive, and, consequently, business performance improves.

[www.healthy-workplaces.eu](http://www.healthy-workplaces.eu)

#### RELEVANCE FOR THE EU SUGAR SECTOR

Forthcoming changes of the sugar CMO will no doubt produce long-wave social consequences that social partners need to anticipate very quickly and that will require extra efforts to elaborate and organize socially acceptable responses.

Preserving workers' mental health and well-being will be important to tackle those changes. Workers and companies will both need a healthy, challenging but supportive work environment that stimulates workers and encourages their development and performance to the best of their ability.

CEFS and EFFAT, together with their members present in 21 sugar-producing EU Member States, promote the EU-OSHA campaign in order to increase awareness about how to best prevent, detect and manage stress and psychosocial risks at work.

#### WHAT'S NEXT

The social partners in the sugar industry are joining forces to highlight the range of professions in the sector and to promote and support their members in bringing their stories and good practices to light. The sugar industry certainly has a strong social and economic impact on local communities, in particular in the rural areas of the EU where it recruits and retains strong talents. As the beet and sugar sectors face further reform of the EU sugar market in 2017 – whose impact is being felt well before that deadline – social dialogue at every level (national, European or company) will play a key role in ensuring a socially adequate adaptation and management of that new and highly competitive context.

#### MORE INFORMATION

[See Good Practices](#)

#### Part C – Social Practices (Agriculture & Processing):

1. Labour relations
  - 1.3 Effective social dialogue
  - 1.4 Social partners
2. Employment
  - 2.4 Restructuring
5. Stakeholder relations
  - 5.4 Local economy & communities