

# **Trade union implication in the sustainable development: global position and contingent situations.**

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## **Introduction**

According to us, it matters to situate the sustainable development in relation to the social responsibility and to the question of the different actors. It is in this particular context that we will analyse the relationship between the trade unions and the sustainable development in Belgium. We will show the involvement of the trade unions in relation to the three areas which define the sustainable development: the environment protection, the work quality and its organization and the benefit notion. This implication depends on the relations between the actors: state, company, workers (notably the trade unions). The question of sustainable development is culturally rooted and is linked to a certain conception of the economy and of the social contract. Obstacles are liable to appear during the appropriation of the sustainable development by the trade unions. Management question is important and among others the one of corporate culture and the one of the negotiation. The trade union involvement depends on particular situations and specific contexts. We will therefore show that a systemic and contingent approach to the problem is required.

## **Definition of sustainable development**

The sustainable development as introduced by United Nations in 1987 is a model of development able to meet the actual needs without compromising the ability to address next generations requirements. Other definitions may appear, sometimes mentioning more specifically the environment, and sometimes highlighting the development of future generations. However, the concept of "sustainable development" is based on 3 main pillars: social development, economic development and the environmental aspects (Brégeon, 2004, p. 78).

Sustainable development is based on the following principles (ibidem., p.83):

- Precautionary principle;
- Responsibility principle;

- Participation principle;
- Equity and solidarity principle;
- Preventive integration system;

Precautionary principle implies anticipating and finding solutions in a context of uncertainty. Responsibility principle involves taking into consideration the responsibility of all the actors involved in the process: citizens, companies, and governments. Participation principle emphasizes the participation of the various actors in the responsibility-making process. Information, transparency in the decision-making process, consultation and dialogue should be in the agenda. One of the main principles of sustainable development is equity, associated with solidarity between generations and people. Preventive integration implies anticipation, more by producing in a sustainable way, rather than taking corrective measures to reduce negative consequences of non-responsible activities.

Therefore, sustainable development is based on three major dimensions associated with three types of responsibility

- Economic efficiency to create profit/ value or value under certain conditions ;
- Sustainable environmental practices (Planet/ natural capital);
- Social equity (People/ human capital)

Three types of actors are highlighted: citizens and organizations; governments; companies.

## **Sustainable development and trade unions**

In Belgium, there is an agreement between trade unions highlighting the importance of environmental protection and the quality of work. The environmental aspect is unanimous. Some differences may arise between trade unions about the actions to be carried out (strikes, work stoppages) in order to ensure employment and the quality of work conditions. Some trade unions or political parties are waiting for a long-term commitment from multinational companies, others accept faster the reopening of the work sites focusing on short-term employment and postponing long term negotiations later.

The defense of maintaining the tool is part of the sustainable development approaches that allowing jobs development. Similarly, negotiations about CO2 quota ensure the quality of the environment.

Indeed, the objective is to "combine harmoniously »: economic growth, which aims to satisfy, particularly, the needs of poor people, human progress: social, educational, cultural, democratic, etc..., protecting and safeguarding the environment " (Regards FGTB, 2002).

At the European level, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC, 2006) states: "The ETUC is determined to adopt a wider ranging approach on sustainable development. It sees the integration of economic, social and environmental objectives not as conflicting requirements but as complementary elements of a broadly defined improvement in job quality and development. The main trade union concern is to integrate social objectives into global strategies". At the national and international levels

“workers and unions want to be fully recognised as major players in sustainable development strategies” (European Trade Union Confederation, 2006b).

The unions want to include actions related to sustainable development in collective agreements. The question social clauses is posited and linked to it, the question of interference in the management of companies located abroad (Bérout, 2003, p.25)

### **The trade union perspective**

The trade union tradition is intrinsically linked to sustainable development, the answer to current needs and the preservation of future generations, to the extent that it seeks to protect employment security, welfare at work and production tool. Some positions will be evoked.

In Belgium, trade unions tend to resist to all precarious measures. However, the dilemma remains during the negotiations (such as the recovery of the high furnace) where sometimes the possibility of revival is related to a requirement for more flexibility at the employment level. Each measures could be discussed in terms of sustainable development. However, we can notice the unanimous position regarding the need of sharing wealth, the protection of the environment and the well being of individuals.

### **The recovery in the steel activity analyzed in terms of sustainable development**

The question is then to consider the presence of these criteria in the business negotiations, based on specific situations.

The analyzed company was marked by the closure of one of its two high- furnaces. In 2007, many negotiations allowed the definition of new project plan for the high- furnace. For the trade unions, the main idea was to maintain the production tool and try to boost employment par restarting the steel activity. This was a sustainable development approach underlying the defense of the steel activity and the employment. The different stakeholders accepted to play their game. In 2008, long negotiations were necessary to find an agreement about who would pay the authorized pollution's quotas. At this level, a non-agreement could fail the project (Robert, 2009).

Unfortunately, the crisis prevented the reopening of the high- furnace and it freezes to operations for the both high-furnace. The current revival of the sector allows the possible reopening of one of the two high- furnaces. Lengthy negotiations have been taken in February 2010 to find an agreement between public authorities, company's representatives and trade unions. Public authorities have decided to extend to the company pollution quotas as long as the reopening of the two high furnaces, but this requires the company's commitment.

The analysis of the situation in the automotive sector (Perrat, 2009, p. 12) allows identifying different points of negotiation, also found in the case of steel sector:

- Contract of employment, flexibility, working conditions;
- Public intervention;
- Evolution of demand, strategic decisions;
- Technology investment;
- Social demands;
- Societal requirements in terms of sustainable development.

The importance of time and space in the trade union's approach of negotiations in the automotive sector is also crucial here. It concerns the development of a whole region, depending, however, of the world developments. The connection with time combines short-term to medium-term and long-term (ibidem):

- Contract of employment, flexibility, working conditions (very short term) ;
- Public intervention (short and medium term) ;
- Evolution of demand, strategic decisions (medium term)
- Technology investment (medium and long term) ;
- Social demands (medium and long term)
- Societal requirements in terms of sustainable development (medium and long term).

It is a system's approach involving social, economy and environment. The relationships between elements change the balance. The system is fragile and can be broken at any time.

## **One systemic approach**

### **The sustainable development as a system**

#### **The company as a system**

The company's situation is like a system "that oscillates between opening and closing" (Desreumaux, 1998, p.24). Thus, over time, there is an alternation between order and disorder. This allows the survival of the organization. In order to survive, the company must "evolve according to events and changes occurring in its environment" while maintaining a certain order.

However, the position of the different stakeholders and the negotiation of the different points of view, suggests also that the organization would not be defined as a set of well-defined limits, but as a set of "contracts' nodes" between the contractor and all stakeholders involved in the process, without being more than this sum of contracts.

### **Difficulties of ownership for trade unions**

According to Perrat (2009), in the automotive sector, trade unions are facing new questions, those about energy and technology constraints. These modifications bring institutional changes and also change in the hierarchy of relationships. Trade unions are facing internal changes, mainly related to middle management turnover.

Unions must master new issues and negotiate with new actors. Three elements are highlighted:

- The time mentioned above: short, medium and long term
- The space: international - national – regional – local professional organizations - businesses;
- Governance: institutional structures that coordinate the actors' actions; global, national, regional and by sector governance, or within the company (Perrat, 2009).

New business models are established and new questions appear. The issue of long-term employment is debated during the negotiations: the objective is to promote flexibility in exchange for maintaining employment. Some sectors encourage the outsourcing associated with job creation and flexible work. The role of unions is sometimes challenged.

As we have seen in Belgium, the two major unions join forces around the issue of environment. They participate with NGOs at international summits. They follow innovative projects. They want to be associated with sustainable development in the business.

## **Conclusion**

Sustainable development focuses on meeting the current social, economic and environmental needs while insisting on the importance of respecting future generations. However, the environmental aspect seems to occupy a privileged position in the thinking related to sustainable development. This response must be ethical and democratic; it must follow different principles and involves citizens, associations, governments and businesses.

Nowadays, each company must take into account the external pressures (legal aspects, necessity of social responsibility, and value of citizenship) and internal pressures (stakeholders' considerations: unions, workers/ employees). Every enterprise faces a specific situation. The company is then required to implement changes and better consider the wellbeing at work. Associated with social responsibility, certification's procedures introduce new procedures in the company.

At the Belgian and international level, trade unions support a sustainable development involving also the social perspective. Within the businesses, the unions want to be part of the thinking related to sustainable development. Their action is important in the negotiations upon the economic development and the maintaining of the employment's quality, as shown in their engagement to keep the steel business in Belgium.

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