

3.3. Policy solutions via lobbying and social dialogue

Advocacy, lobbying and social dialogue, as methods for exerting policy influence on the way the COVID-19 issues are tackled, are obviously, and more than direct services, the main task of the employers' organisations. In that role of collective interest representation, they are unique and cannot be substituted by other consultants or service companies.

In these activities, the employers' organisations act as voice of business. Here they are at the core of their reason for existing: inform the authorities on the reality in the private sector, represent the concerns of the business world, and look for solutions in all the areas in which COVID-19 has an effect. And in doing so, involve the trade unions as a social partner representing the workers, understand the concerns, negotiate bilaterally some solutions and try to forge an alliance with trade unions to go jointly to the authorities.

The global outcome of these activities is hence clearly defined. Position and ensure that the employers' organisations is acting as the well informed, representative and credible voice of business which co-defines with the authorities and the trade unions the balanced solutions to mitigate and overcome the negative effects of COVID-19 on the economy, on employment and on the private sector.

It is correct that some companies will free ride and benefit from the efforts of the employers' organisations, which is only financed by the member fees of a limited group of companies. From an organizational viewpoint, concerns on free ridership are important. But at this stage, they are not a priority. Companies which will perceive, especially via strong communication, the leadership role of employers' organisations in proposing solutions, may be convinced by the intensity of the work and the quality to join. In many countries, lobbying and advocacy is the main and sometimes almost exclusive activity for employers organisations, and the employers' organisations succeed, by the preponderance of their place in the public debate, to continue to convince companies to remain or become a member. The life threatening consequences of COVID-19 on the economy are hence a unique opportunity for employers' organisations to show their capacity to intervene in policy for the good of companies.

This paragraph covers the ultimate stage of the lobby and advocacy process. The stage in which the employers' organisation attempts to exert effective influence on the contents of decisions.

The outcome is ideally the following. The employers' organisations are -and are perceived by the members and the public as- playing an active and even proactive important role in negotiating, co-determining and influencing the solutions at government level. Tripartite or bipartite for the issues related to COVID-19.

This outcome implicitly puts two methods to reach solutions, at the same level. Lobby, like direct influence of the employers and sometimes together with trade unions, on the government. And social dialogue. Direct with the trade unions bilaterally, or trilaterally with trade unions and government.

Whilst both methods have the same outcome, for example employers influence on solutions, the methods are different.

Lobby

In terms of main characteristics, this process does not differ substantially of a normal lobby process.

The main characteristics are there:

- Ensure access to the real decision makers
- Correct timing is important
- Knowledge of the issue, also in some technical detail, is essential
- Good communication and convincing skills which go beyond knowledge
- Mastering of negotiation skills are the add on with the other mentioned skills

- Precision in what has been “convened “ in the lobby process and follow up until that result has been produced in an official type of act
- Strong communication on efforts and achievements to the members and if possible to the public

Social dialogue

How can Social Dialogue be used by the employers’ organisations to influence the content of decisions in addition to lobbying to deal with the consequences of COVID-19?

This can be done by practicing the social dialogue, direct with the trade unions bilaterally, or trilaterally with trade unions and government. Social dialogue well practiced is an opportunity to come out of this crisis even stronger for employers’ organisations.

According to the ILO, Social Dialogue is defined as:

"All forms of negotiations, consultation or exchange of information between representatives from government, employers and employees about economic and social policy issues with a common interest". This includes both **bipartite** forms of social dialogue (employers and employees) and **tripartite forms** (employers, employees and government”.

In the current and urgent situation of COVID-19, Social Dialogue is a strong tool for influencing decision-making to position employers organisations, both bipartite and tripartite. Like lobby, this process does not necessarily differ from the normal Social Dialogue process. The need in this situation is even bigger than usual. Benefits for employers’ organisations are better influencing of the relevant stakeholders which are the government and trade unions. Clear common interests will improve a stable and positive climate between parties, more transparency and thus mutual trust. The common view of employers’ organisations and trade unions are much more influential for governments and also a better guarantee for successful implementation of measures for members of both employers’ organisations and trade unions. This is a large advantage over lobby and should convince governments to take Social Dialogue seriously.

Last but not least: the COVID-19 situation is a unique opportunity to stimulate the proper use of Social Dialogue to solve the enormous and unique problems together.

Seven golden rules for social dialogue can be listed:

1. The same principles as always are needed more than ever: trust between parties, dialogue about all interests at stake, creativity in finding solutions and reasonability in deciding.
2. Build trust between employers’ organisations and trade unions by transparency and formulating the common goals in this situation.
3. Use Social Dialogue to monitor the situation. The views of the other parties might be different from yours sometimes and can add value to your views.
4. Don’t come up with ‘sudden surprises’ for your parties in Social Dialogue. Take them along in your thinking process by using your Social Dialogue. Of course they won’t agree always with your way of thinking, but at least they know. If sudden surprises occur this will cause mistrust.
5. Build a dedicated agenda for Social Dialogue especially in this situation of COVID-19 with trade unions. Influence of common solutions of employers’ organisations and trade unions together are more difficult to neglect for the third party.
6. A strong position for employers’ organisations in Social Dialogue will be a great advantage for members in their playing field.
7. For the Social Dialogue process the main characteristics about knowledge and skills are the same as for lobby mentioned above.