

EU Dialogue, Local Solutions

Report of the Kick-Off Webinar on 2nd December 2020



Joint project by the European
social partners in local and regional
government



with the financial support of the European Commission



15 Years of European Dialogue in Local Government: three agreements explored at launch of EU-funded project

Violence at work, gender inequality and the treatment of migrants regularly grab headlines. Yet less attention falls on local governments, who do much of the work in communities to tackle these issues, whilst also facing the specific challenges presented by how inequality, violence and migration affect their own workforces.

For fifteen years, representatives of workers and employees in European local and regional governments have come together to find solutions to the problems facing local administrations. Over that time, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), representing employers, and the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) have negotiated a number of agreements to improve the working lives of employees in local government and deliver better public services to citizens. Agreements on third-party violence and harassment, migration and gender equality rank highly on their list of achievements.

To mark a decade and a half of the social dialogue committee and to raise grassroots awareness about the resources provided by European dialogue, the two social partners have launched a project to promote their work in three key areas: third-party violence and harassment at work, gender equality and migration. Employers and trade unionists from three countries presented their own experiences during a webinar held in December 2020. French organisations addressed third-party violence and harassment at work. Representatives from unions and employers in Sweden presented their work on gender equality. Finally, trade unionists from Spain dealt with the issue of migration and local services. These three countries will go on to host thematic seminars in 2021, where participants from around Europe will be invited to discuss the topic focussed on by each country.

European Commission Thanks Social Partners

Mads Samsing, co-president of the social dialogue committee, welcomed the participants and introduced a brief presentation from **Sven Matzke**, Deputy Head of Unit for Social Dialogue in DG Employment at the European Commission.

Mr Matzke began by thanking union members and employers for their incredible efforts during the covid-19 crisis and highlighted the important role played by social dialogue in ensuring the resilience of European economies and societies. In recovering from the crisis, 'the role of social dialogue is more important than ever', he stated, adding that it would be at the heart of the Commission's approach to the post-covid recovery. He also pointed to a proposed directive on minimum wages and ongoing work to reinforce the European pillar of social rights as signs of the Commission's long-term commitment to European social dialogue. Finally, Mr Matzke underlined that the Recovery and Resilience Facility represents an excellent opportunity to support the digital transformation of public services and stressed the importance of a proper social partner involvement in implementing the RRF. He also highlighted the role of social partners in the new European Disability Strategy and the European Child Guarantee to be announced in the coming weeks by the Commission.



Tackling Third-Party Violence in French Local and Regional Government

Dominique Pognon, from FDSP CGT, began the presentation from the French social partners by introducing the [multi-sectorial guidelines on third-party violence and harassment at work](#), signed by European social partners in local and regional administrations, health, retail, private security and education in 2010. These guidelines create a framework for defining and tackling third-party violence at work across distinct sectors of the European economy. A follow-up study and further additions to the guidelines have since sought to strengthen the text which has also been complemented, in 2019, by an [ILO convention on violence and harassment at work](#) which specifically deals with the issue of third parties.

In France, new protections for workers in local and regional administrations were introduced into legislation in 2016. Together, these new safeguards are known as functional protection. 'Local authorities are meant to defend any worker against verbal, physical, psychological abuse or even insults which they might be victims of,' explained **Didier Pirot** from FO-SPS. 'The authorities are also meant to remedy possible damages, and the authorities can get from the perpetrators of the acts a series of funds and the authorities can act directly, if needed, through being the civil party.'

However, despite this robust legal framework, many employers are still not aware of their responsibilities within the doctrine of functional protection. Other avenues are open to workers who do not receive the support to which they are legally entitled. For example, since 2018, a pilot including 40 *départements* has instituted Compulsory Prior Mediation for some instances of harassment. A constitutional body, the Defender of Rights, has also existed since 2011 and can be used in cases where authorities do not apply the mechanism of functional protection. Unfortunately, it remains underused.

Unions in France are looking at ways of strengthening Health, Safety and Conditions at Work Committees. These bodies are currently consulted on instances of violence and harassment by third parties, but their opinions are not binding. Strengthening the role of these committees is one possible remedy to the incomplete application of functional protection.

Over two million people work in local and regional authorities in France, undertaking a great variety of roles. According to **Sabine Martorell**, from the AFCCRE employers' association, 30% of these employees have been subject to violence at work. Despite this, local and national initiatives to address the problem have come late, compared to the European guidelines. However, innovative prevention initiatives now exist in many areas, including the *départements* of Ardèche, Drôme and Gers. Small municipalities, like the commune of Saint Laurent Nouan, in central France, are also making big strides by setting out clear protocols for what to do if a worker is threatened in person or over the phone.

Matthieu Fayolle from CFDT Interco, in concluding, recalled how the French legislation has only addressed third-party violence as part of the broader issue of violence at work. However, following the tragic murder of school teacher, Samuel Paty, there has been an increased focus on third party violence against public servants. Increasingly, directives from central government to municipalities deal with the issue directly. Fayolle also underlined the urgent need for general



measures against gender-based violence to be applied to the specific circumstances faced by public servants.

In France, it has been difficult to measure the impact of European agreements, and specifically CEMR and EPSU's 2010 guidelines 2010, on local and regional authorities. Both employers and unions see this project as a vital opportunity to make this assessment as much at national as at European level.

Gender Equality and Local Administration in Sweden

Similarly, in Sweden, both unions and employers in local and regional government see the project as an opportunity to take stock but also to continue and deepen the cooperation between EU social partners. In terms of gender equality, the Swedish area of focus in the project, a lot has been achieved both in Sweden and at European level. For the social partners involved in the project, the [Revised CEMR-EPSU Guidelines for Drawing Up Gender Equality Action Plans in Local and Regional Government from 2017](#) remain a milestone. However, even in a country like Sweden, renowned for equity between men and women, much remains to be done. Men still earn more money than women do. Women have less opportunities than men on the labour market. A larger proportion of women work part-time compared to men and women take a lot more parental leave than men do.

Malin Looberger from the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) described how the Swedish social partners deal with equality, diversity and non-discrimination as a single issue. Inequality, she stated, is bad for society and workers but also bad for local and regional governments as employers. Higher sickness absenteeism among women has an impact on employers through higher costs. As such, all social partners have a responsibility to identify inequality and resolve the problems it causes. SALAR has developed a nine-point programme to address labour-market inequalities. It addresses sickness absenteeism, equal wages and career paths, as well as seeking to increase the wage spread for female-dominated professions, to encourage more equal take-up of parental leave between men and women and to prevent gender-based harassment at work.

Eva-Lotta Nilsson, from the Swedish union, Vision, outlined how the Swedish social partners tackle these issues through collective bargaining. The trade unions are particularly concerned with wage spread and wage development. The objective is to ensure that female-dominated jobs have space for progression and career development and that the skills acquired by workers over time are reflected in their pay. Working time is also a big issue for both sides. The trade union Kommunal has an agreement with the employers' organisation, called 'The Full-Time Journey', aimed at making full-time work the norm. This is of particular relevance to women who disproportionately work part-time and therefore benefit most from the increased pay and career development offered by full-time employment.

The Swedish gender equality agency provides a wealth of materials on gender equality at work, including in English, available at includegender.org. Resources in English are also available at [SALAR's website](#).



Assessing the Impact of Covid-19 on Migrant Integration through Local Governments

The third and final issue to be dealt with by the project is the integration of migrants, which was addressed in detail by CEMR and EPSU's 2014 [Joint Guidelines Migration and Strengthening anti-discrimination in Local and Regional Governments](#). Local and regional authorities act as both providers of integration services for migrants and refugees and as employers who can help improve labour-market integration and participation for migrant workers. In Spain, the responsibility for integration is shared between local, regional and central governments. However, municipalities are often not given sufficient support when it comes to providing invaluable local services that aid integration, like language classes and care and education for minors. Faced with the added challenges of covid-19 to local services, the Spanish union Comisiones Obreras (FSC-CC.OO) is launching a campaign to highlight the extreme pressures faced by workers in social services, particularly those used by migrant populations who also face increased hardship due to the pandemic. **Joan Gasell**, general secretary of the local government union in Catalonia, explained how they have begun work with the Council of Psychologists to identify the problems highlighted by the pandemic, listen to workers about their experiences of working during covid-19 and develop clear demands in response. Both organisations believe that this increased pressure on certain kind of services, which in turn puts added pressure on migrant service users and workers providing the services.

Historically, added **Juan José Regatos**, who is working on the project for FSC-CCOO, social services had provided care to those migrants in a regularised situation and as well as to those who had presented irregularly in the country. But during covid-19, migrants with no documentation were being left without care by the system. Even minors were not being provided with schooling. This generated more pressure on the employees in public services leading to pressure at the workplace, unease and also a bubble of poverty and segregation in some areas where we had previously seen good coexistence between the local population and migrants. This, in turn, adds to pressure on the local administrations, creating a vicious cycle. These are some of the tensions that the project will seek to explore, with the first conclusions likely available by the end of 2021.

Conclusion: the Impact of Covid-19 and the Next Steps

A lot has changed due to the pandemic. The project itself has had to adapt to this new reality. More importantly, the experiences of workers and employers in delivering local services around Europe has shifted dramatically. The pandemic has doubtless had its impact on the three areas of concern to the project. Covid has exposed and accentuated many of the gender inequalities around childcare and unpaid domestic work. Although, some women, as shown by a recent study in Sweden, have also found homeworking has made it easier to combine professional and home obligations. In France, the pandemic has exposed fault lines in the relationship between the population and the police who have been called on to enforce lockdown regulations, putting them in increased risk of third-party violence. Some responses from the government, like recent legislation before the French parliament, have, however, proved controversial,

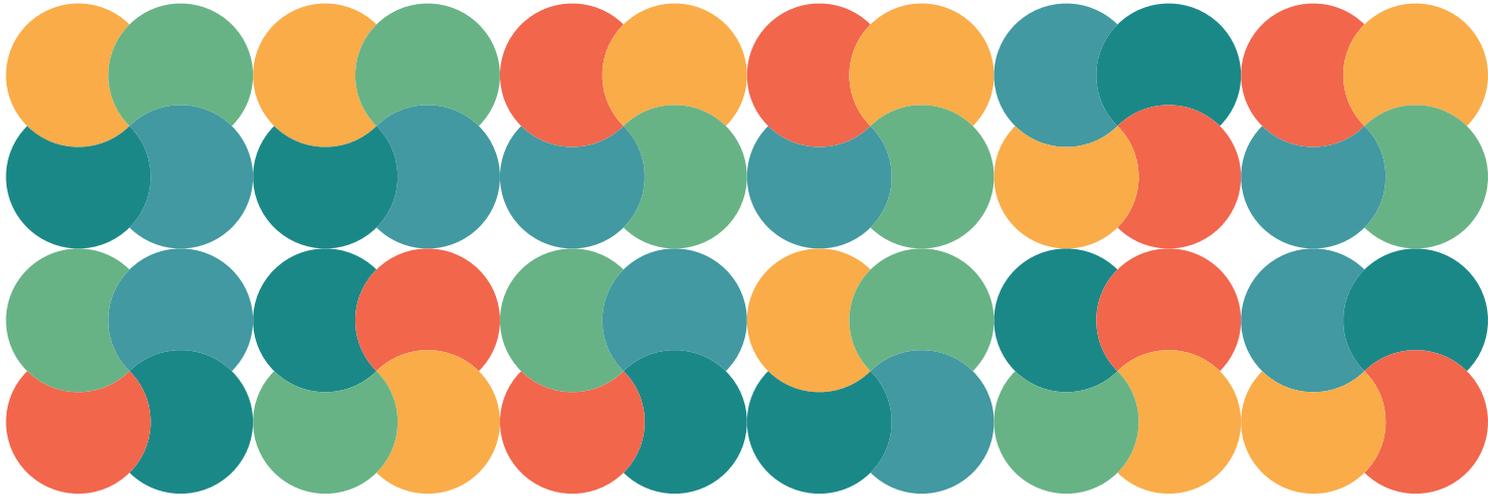


despite good intentions. Meanwhile, in local authorities, the suspension or limitation of face-to-face services has created anxiety and frustration amongst citizens which, in some cases, has led to greater violence towards workers.

The pandemic has created new challenges and exposed existing problems for local authorities across Europe. Whether gender equality, third-party violence or the integration of migrants, covid-19 has underlined the urgency of unions and employers finding common solutions to ensure good working conditions for employees and quality services for citizens. As the project now investigates these three topics in detail, the hope is that local solutions can inform national and European policy and that, in turn, this European dialogue can sow successful ideas and good practice in new and fertile terrain across member states.

Malin Looberger, co-president of the social dialogue committee, in closing this initial meeting, set out the way forward: 'With this project, we of course would like to collect concrete tools and concrete work on the connection between the European level and the national, local and regional levels. We would like to try to find a link and find the red thread between our sometimes very nice documents from the European level and how that can actually be used on a local and regional level. We'd like to also share good examples with each other and ask for and find links,' she added.







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