



Social dialogue in the agri-food sector: the preliminary results of the E.A.T.S. project

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Tag: #socialdialogue #agriculture #foodindustry #collectivebargaining

On May 23 and June 6, 2023, the first two national workshops of the project [E.A.T.S. - Empowering Agri-food chains through social dialogue](#), co-funded by the European Commission and coordinated by FAI-CISL (*Federazione Agricola Alimentare Ambientale Industriale Italiana* – Italian agricultural food environmental industrial trade union federation), were held in Rome and Madrid, respectively. The project, which **focuses on social dialogue in the agri-food sector, witnessed the participation of employer and trade union organizations** active in Italy, France, Spain, Bulgaria, Greece and North Macedonia, as well as research partners (CNR – Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Fondazione ADAPT and Fondazione FAI-CISL).

During the meetings, **the preliminary results of the research activities carried out during the first 10 months of the project were presented**. Those activities have been deepened through desk research and the administration of a questionnaire to trade unionists and representatives of employer associations in the countries concerned. Here is a summary of the main evidence.

Desk research

Following an analysis of the regulatory framework and the main ways in which social dialogue is developed in the different countries in which the research partners operate, **the desk research revealed different national "models" of activity of industrial relations actors**.

Looking specifically at the **agri-food supply chain**, despite its relevance in terms of the creation of sustainable agricultural practices and the implementation of rural development, even at the international level (through sustainable supply chains), **a structural fragility of social dialogue in the sector has been noted across the various countries examined (compared to what happens in other economic sectors)**.

The reasons for this phenomenon can be, on the one hand, the presence **of national legislative frameworks in the different EU member states that are often not favourable to social dialogue in the agri-food sector**, and on the other hand, **structural elements of weakness of the actors in the field, such as the widespread fragmentation of employer organizations and the modest representativeness of trade union federations in the agri-food sector**.

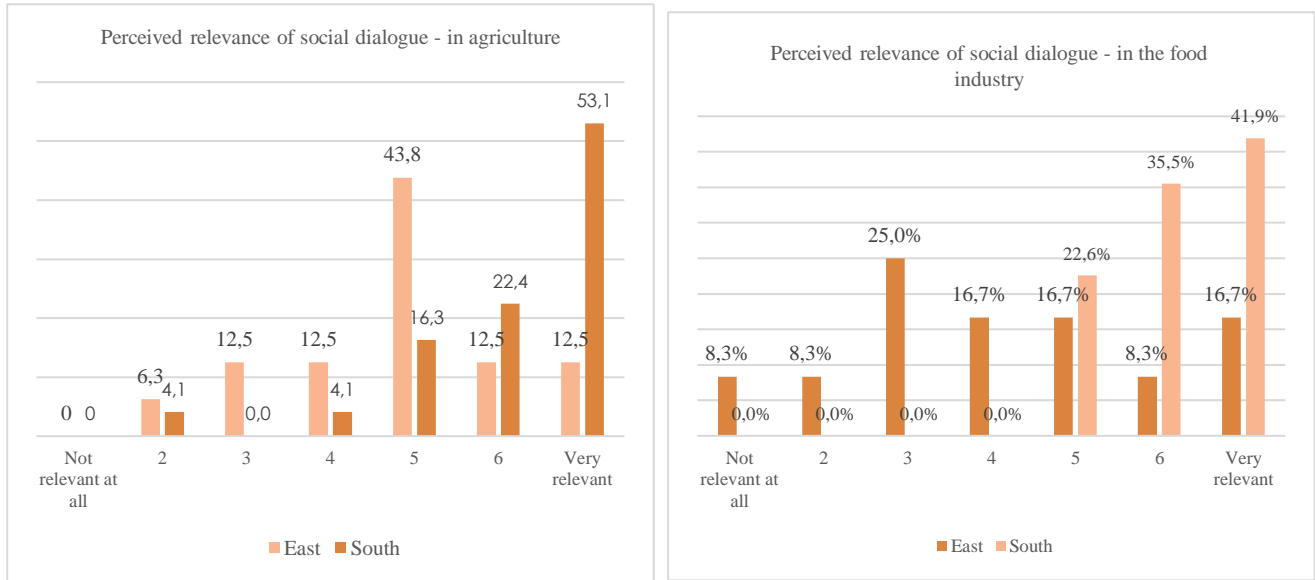
Despite this, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that **social dialogue is an essential tool for balancing crisis management and for defining effective solutions to impact the complex challenges that characterize the sector**, which inevitably make trade unionists' and employers' representatives activities in this field more complex. One can think, for example, of the **introduction of shared rules on seasonal work, migrant labour, the fight against informal work and gender inequality, and initiatives to extend access to social protection for certain categories of excluded workers**.



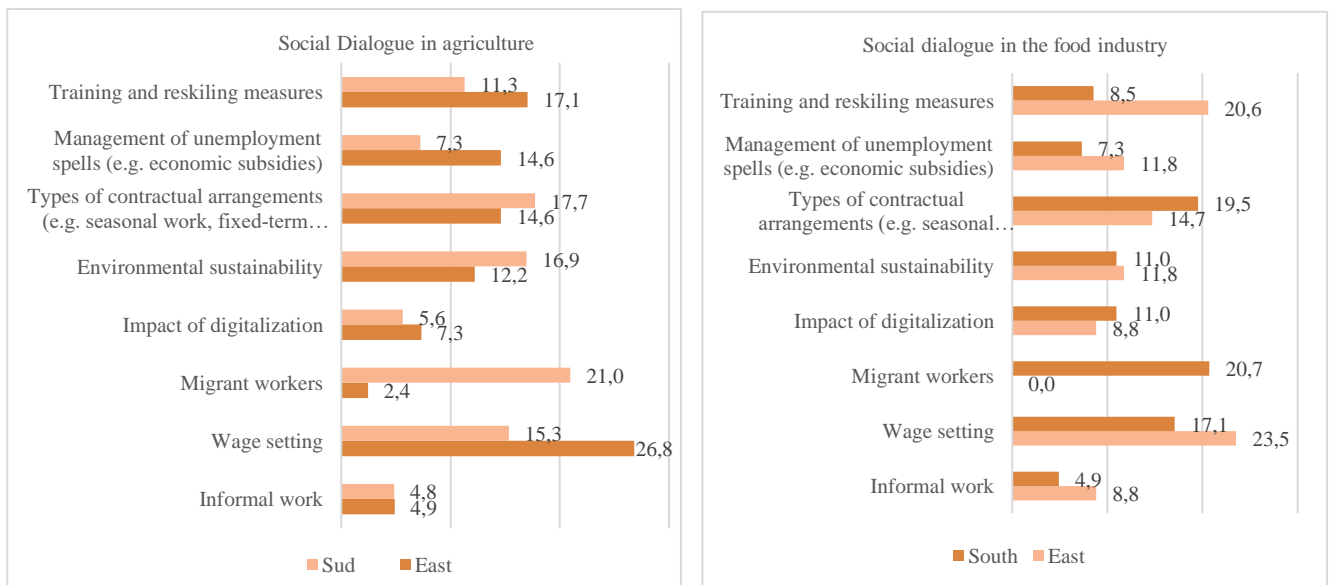
The survey

The main outcomes of the survey can be summarized in the following points:

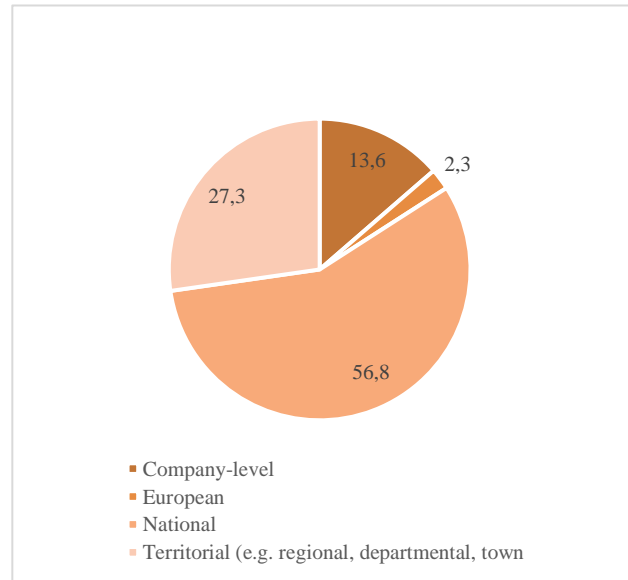
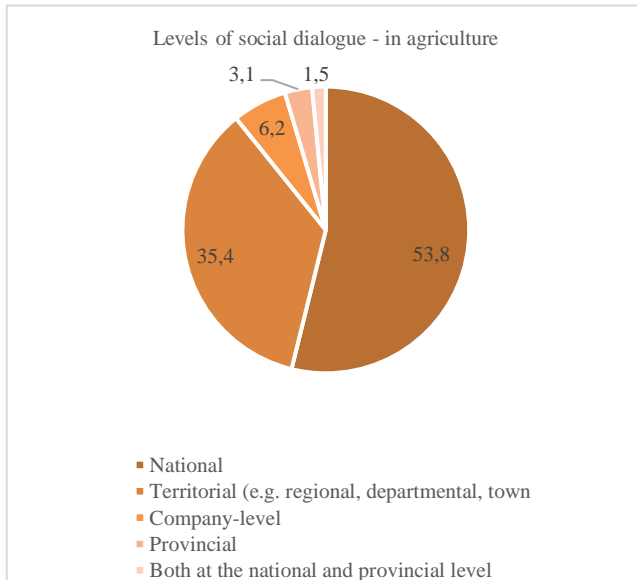
- The majority of participants perceived social dialogue to be very relevant in their sector of activity. However, **participants from Southern Europe generally perceived social dialogue to be more important than their Eastern counterparts both in the agricultural sector and in the food industry sector.**



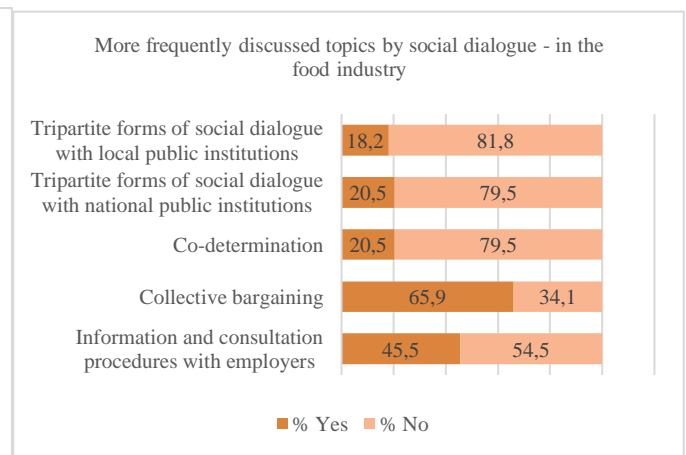
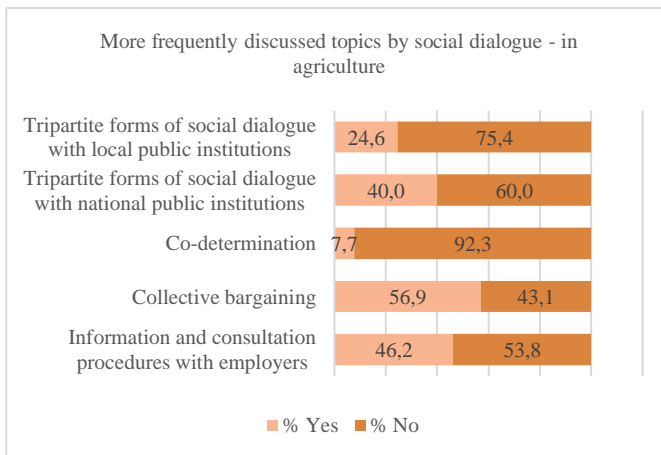
- **The most frequently discussed topics by social dialogue in agriculture and the food industry sector are types of contractual arrangements, wage setting and migrant workers** – despite the latter not being a very common topic among Eastern European respondents.



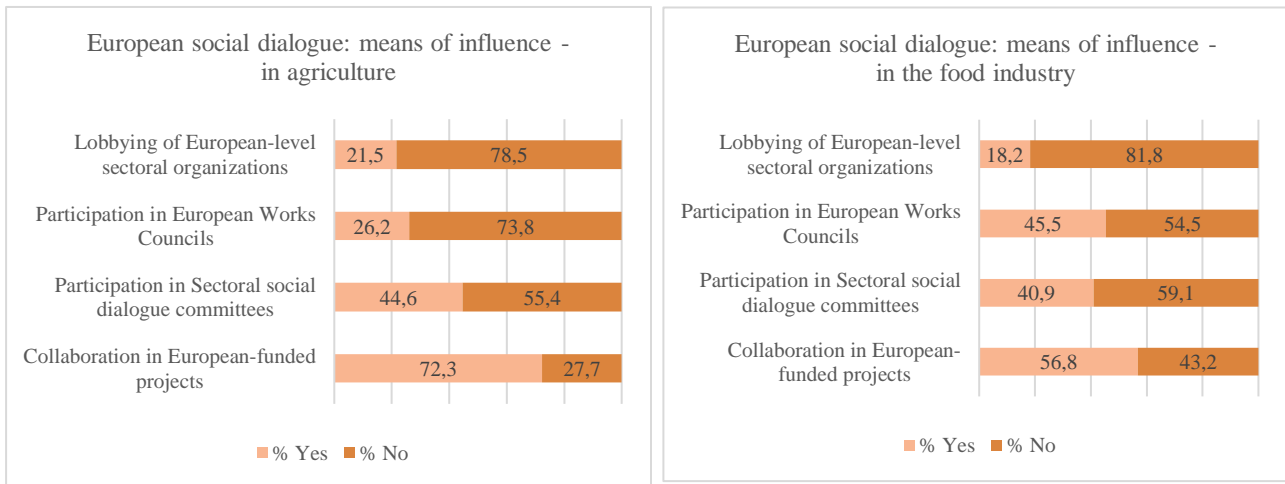
- **Social dialogue in agriculture and in the food industry sector appears to be mostly carried out at the national level.** Local-level social dialogue is more widespread in agriculture compared to the food industry sector, while **company-level social dialogue plays a marginal role in both sectors.**



- The main social dialogue practices carried out by respondents active both in agriculture and in the food industry sector were **collective bargaining, information and consultation procedures with employers and tripartite forms of social dialogue carried out with national public institutions.**



- European social dialogue was generally perceived as more relevant by respondents active in both surveyed sectors, who reported **how the collaboration in European-funded projects is the most influential instrument in steering national social dialogue initiatives**; however, Southern European respondents shared more positive views of the relevance of the European social dialogue in their national context, while the responses coming from Eastern European respondents were more diverse.



Some final considerations

What we have tried to summarize, considering the space limits in this article, is just some of the evidence that has emerged in these first months of research, and discussed at the two national meetings.

There will be time, in the coming months, to deepen those findings, and especially to **discuss them with national experts in the field at the upcoming workshops, which will take place between 2023 and 2024 in France, Greece and Bulgaria**. They are opportunities to promote social dialogue practices in a sector (or rather a supply chain) traditionally less discussed in industrial relations studies and research. However, as some early research findings already show, **also in the agri-food sector practices of particular interest for a shared management of the challenges that characterize the ever-changing world of work can be found**. European-funded projects, from this point of view, can represent an opportunity to bring them together.

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