

## SOCIAL DIALOGUE IN THE TRANSITION PROCESS OF A MINING REGION

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**Purpose:** The aim of this article is to discuss the results of qualitative research concerning the inclusion of stakeholders in social dialogue conducted as part of the transition process of a mining region. The subject of social dialogue is the joint shaping of professional relations, working conditions, wages, social benefits as well as other matters of socio-economic policy that are in the area of interest of various stakeholders. Dialogue plays a particularly important role in the transition process of a coal region and in the departure from traditional branches of industry.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The qualitative study in the was carried out in 2022 and 2023 as part of the Regional Observatory of the Transformation Process project (ROPT). It composed of 8 focus group interviews and 5 individual in-depth interviews in eight subregions of the Silesian Voivodeship.

**Findings:** Social dialogue is a mechanism for reconciling opposing interests in socio-economic relations. This papers findings share information about the quality and course of this process as a crucial for the effective involvement of stakeholders.

**Originality/value:** The new and the value of the paper is regarding social dialogue efficiency to prepare people for the changes that arise from the transition process.

**Keywords:** transition, transformation, coal regions, social relations.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

### 1. Introduction

Social dialogue is the basic mechanism for reconciling opposing interests in socio-economic relations. The subject of social dialogue (SD) is the joint shaping of professional relations, working conditions, wages, social benefits as well as other matters of socio-economic policy that are in the area of interest of various stakeholders. At the European Union level, social dialogue is defined as discussions, consultations, negotiations and cooperation with the participation of organisations representing social partners, including employers and employees

(EC, 2021). European social dialogue constitutes a part of the European social model, serves as a form of influence exerted by European social partners on the European social standards, and plays an important role in managing the affairs of the European Union. Three basic facts attest to its significance in shaping the common future of the European Union:

1. It is included in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (EC,2012).
2. It is supported by the laws of the European Union.
3. It is acknowledged as key action within the European Pillar of Social Rights, the main goals of which also include better and more numerous jobs (EC, 2017).

In Polish legislation, SD is firmly grounded in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997), and it is also expressed in the law on the Council for Social Dialogue and other institutions of social dialogue of 24 July 2015 (Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 2015). Practice saw the formation of a definition that binds social dialogue with common professional relations, particularly collective agreements in a workplace. Social dialogue is referred to as the overall common relations between trade unions and employers' organisations. It encompasses the bilateral or trilateral relations between the aforementioned parties and state authorities such as the government and its agenda, local government or state institutions. Social dialogue is the process of constant interaction between participants in order to reach an agreement in matters of control over variable socio-economic factors at macro and micro scale (Polish Ministry of Family and Social Policy, 2023).

The Silesian Voivodeship constitutes the largest mining area of the European Union, and it is subject to the energy transition process that entails a transition from an economy based on traditional fossil fuels towards a sustainable, low-emission circular economy. In this scope, political decisions taken at the level of the European Union play a key role, as expressed in the provisions of the European Green Deal and related policies: the EU Green Deal Investment Plan and the Just Transition Fund (Drobniak, 2022). Strategic documents of the local government of the Silesian Voivodeship that refer to the transition process are drafted to address these challenges, including: the Development Strategy of the Silesian Voivodeship Śląskie 2030 (Marshal's Office of the Silesian Voivodeship 2020), the Regional Innovation Strategy of the Silesian Voivodeship 2030 (Marshal's Office of the Silesian Voivodeship, 2021), the Territorial Just Transition Plan of the Silesian Voivodeship 2030 (Marshal's Office of the Silesian Voivodeship, 2022), the Technological Development Program of the Silesian Voivodeship for the years 2019-2030 (Marshal's Office of the Silesian Voivodeship, 2011).

The carbon neutrality goals adopted by the European Union pose an extraordinary challenge to the Silesian Voivodeship in terms of carrying out a just transition<sup>1</sup> (Kiewra et al., 2019; McCauley, Heffron, 2018), which will require changes at the social, economic and

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<sup>1</sup> Just transition is a process of systematic and gradual changes that in the extended perspective make it possible to base a region's economy on modern branches of industry that are neutral to the environment. It will have a direct influence on about a million people who work in the mining industry and in branches related to it. More: Kiewra, Szpor, Witajewski-Baltvilks, 2019; McCauley, Heffron, 2018.

technological level. The process concerns not only the mining industry, located primarily in the area of the Silesian Voivodeship, but also other sectors whose future is strictly related to mining (Frankowski, Mazurkiewicz, 2020). From the perspective of mine personnel and mining-related companies, the transition of the mining industry will lead to a considerable transformation of the job market, which will give rise to new risks, such as the temporary difficulties and limitations of scale in the business activities conducted by the mining-related companies, as well as limited employment and in some cases the closure of these companies (Ślimko, 2018). The scale of the problem can be attested by the results of conducted research, according to which the number of mining-related business enterprises ranges from about 370 to over 900 companies that provide 110 to 130 thousand stable jobs. The consequences of the mining industry shutdown for the mining-related companies over the next 30 years may include the termination of an estimated number of jobs ranging from 26,667 (optimistic variant) through 50,580 (likely variant) to 75,876 (pessimistic variant) (Ingram et al., 2020). Terminating employment in the mining sector will lead to breakdowns or shifts of entire value chains (Magretta, 2014), therefore the key stakeholders in the transition process need to be prepared for the upcoming changes. Using the instruments of social dialogue is incredibly important in this process. Considering the importance of the energy transition for the future of the Silesian Voivodeship in terms of the socio-economic factor, it becomes necessary to develop adequate mechanisms supporting this process in order to limit its negative impact (Frankowski et al., 2021).

## 2. Methodology

This article presents the most important results of the qualitative research conducted by the Central Mining Institute, concerning the involvement of stakeholders in social dialogue in the transition process of a mining region. The research was carried out in 2022 and 2023 as part of the Regional Observatory of the Transformation Process (ROPT) project. The primary goal of the ROPT project is to support and enhance the management of the socio-economic transition process in the region.

Social dialogue can be understood from the angle of two perspectives:

1. From the institutional perspective, as a statutory task resulting from the provisions of the 24 July 2015 law on the Council for Social Dialogue and other institutions of social dialogue.
2. From the perspective of a broader social process, as a method for conducting communication, reaching compromise and sharing information among the interested parties.

As part of this research, the analysis encompassed the broader definition of social dialogue as the basic factor for the functioning of social life, involving the possibility of engaging various stakeholders in the socio-economic and energy transition processes. Such an approach is also significant given the fact that effective dialogue serves primarily to support all the involved parties, including the social party as well as the particularly strong and representative employers' and employees' organisations that participate in the dialogue process. Dialogue plays a particularly important role in the process of coal region transition and departure from traditional branches of industry, making it possible to pursue practical compromises and to balance decisions, especially in a topic as important as transition, thereby facilitating its social acceptance.

In recent years, qualitative research has become increasingly more popular in social sciences (Konecki, 2000; Kostera, 2003), allowing the researchers to gain better knowledge and understanding of the perspectives presented by the experts (Konecki, Chomczyński, 2012). The basis for accomplishing the research goal was the triangulation of research tools (Hammersley, Atkinson, 2000; Konecki, 2010), which encompassed: desk research, focus group interviews (FGI) and individual in-depth interviews (IDI).

From September 2022 to February 2023, 8 focus group interviews (FGI) and 5 individual in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted in eight subregions of the Silesian Voivodeship, per the NUTS3 classification and the specifics of the ROPT project: Bielski, Bytomski, Częstochowski, Gliwicki, Katowicki, Rybnicki, Sosnowiecki and Tyski.

The FGI participants were 142 experts representing local government administration, industry companies, industry organisations, labour market institutions, local self-regulatory organisations and local development agencies, the social party, including business-related institutions, NGOs and many more. The focus group interviews were complemented with 5 individual in-depth interviews with experts representing diverse social environments, professions and professional experience, who participate directly or indirectly in the transition process and serve significant professional or environmental roles in the transitioning areas.

The research group selection was based on methods of non-probability sampling, involving groups of respondents from various circles of stakeholders engaged in the transition process. The term "stakeholders" was introduced in 1984 by R.E. Freeman, who stated that a stakeholder is any person who influences or is influenced by a company, institution/ or organisation's activity (Freeman, 1984). Based on the report "Supporting the Preparation of Territorial Just Transition Plans in Poland" (PWC, 2021), it was assumed that a just transition stakeholder is any entity or category of entities/persons, who have an influence, are influenced by or claim to be influenced by the just transition process, and therefore play a specific part in it.

### **3. Research results**

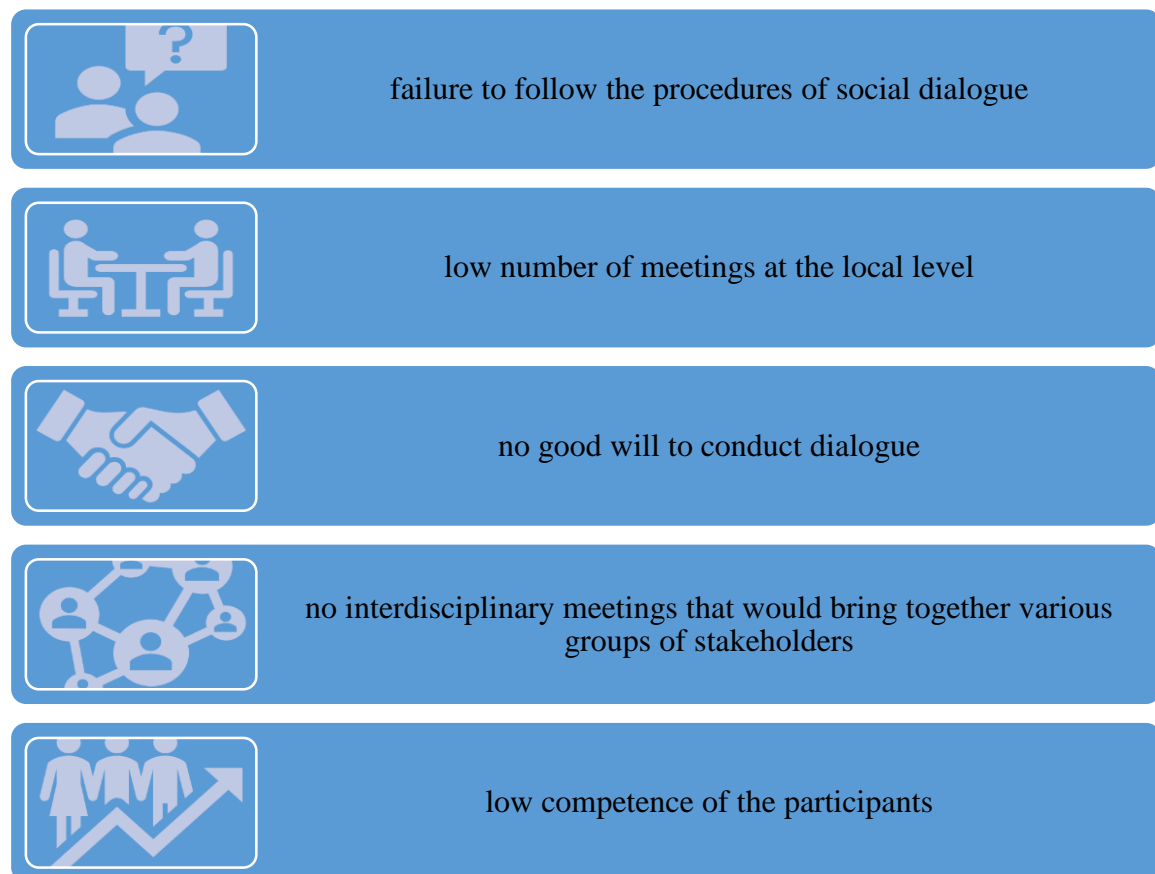
#### **Social awareness of the transition process**

During the qualitative research, the participants of the FGI and IDI interviews were asked an opening question whether there is a sufficient level of social awareness regarding the transition process in the region among the population of the Silesian Voivodeship. All the participants gave a clear answer that the level of social awareness regarding the energy and socio-economic transition in the region is insufficient and that a constant dissemination of knowledge on the topic is required. They noted that there are differences depending on the size of a district and its type, that is whether it is urban, rural or urban-rural. According to the experts, rural districts are characterised by the lowest level of awareness regarding the transition process, and its perception is primarily based on mine closure and economic criteria such as the rising costs of power and heating. Therefore it can be concluded that the notion of transition pertains primarily to renewable energy sources and the loss of jobs in the mining and mining-related sectors.

#### **The state of social dialogue with the stakeholders**

When asked the question whether social dialogue is being conducted with various transition stakeholders, the FGI participants above all expressed the opinion that there is no dialogue on the national level. The research participants claim that there are procedures and instruments available for conducting social dialogue, but they are not employed in a manner that would guarantee the appropriate participation of all the stakeholders, especially ones such as e.g. non-governmental organisations or trade unions.

A part of the experts believe that there is no social dialogue on the national level because there is no will to conduct joint communication on the long-term process involving the planning and introduction of changes. Especially the representatives of the social party, that is trade unions and non-governmental organisations, see problems in conducting dialogue respectful of the equal rights of all the parties. The reasons for these problems are depicted in Fig. 1. On the other hand, the experts representing the local government stressed the problem that the dialogue is irregular and limited, in many cases, to information exchange and consultation on already drafted documents.



**Figure 1.** Reasons for limited social dialogue in the transition process, author's analysis.

### **Involving stakeholders in social dialogue on just transition**

The FGI research in the Gliwicki, Katowicki and Bytomski subregions noted the opportunities presented by the large agglomeration with an advanced communication network enabling greater mobility, which is missing in other subregions such as Częstochowski or Bielski. The proximity of major cities, considered centres of growth and innovation (e.g. Gliwice or Katowice), means that a part of the districts need not be concerned by the changes, but smaller districts that are away from these centres will have to face the negative impact of the transition process, such as the closure of major workplaces. Therefore the experts believe that the residents of small mining districts need to be particularly prepared for the changes, since it is the people who are the subject of transition. To achieve this, they propose above all:

- raising social awareness,
- sharing knowledge on the transition process through the exchange of good practices,
- seeking dialogue and cooperation at a local level.

The next question regarded the course of the ideal involvement of stakeholders in social dialogue to establish a socially effective and responsible system of transition management in mining subregions, based on dialogue and open communication. According to the participants, for the transition process to be effective, it is necessary to plan all action before the final closure

of a mining plant. The plans should primarily concern the retraining of employees and changing the use of the infrastructure and mining land, factoring in social participation, as well as determining the options for financing the changes. Another suggestion offered by the experts is to simplify and shorten the procedures for transferring the post-mining land to the districts and for introducing changes in the area development plans. It was stressed multiple times that the organisation of regular interdisciplinary meetings for local authorities, company management personnel and lower-level employees is crucial for the future of local communities in mining districts. An institution managing financial means is a significant partner in such meetings, and the role and activity of such was assessed positively. Regardless, action such as the following is still expected:

- exchange and dissemination of knowledge on the transition directions,
- frequent and regular meetings concerning various aspects of transition,
- promotion of the opportunities offered by the Just Transition Fund in mining subregions.

### **Social contract**

The participants devoted great attention to the social contract (MAP, 2021) concerning the transition of the hard coal mining sector signed on May 28, 2021. The contract constitutes the basic transition instrument for the mining industry and was reached as a result of dialogue conducted between the government and the mining companies and trade unions. The experts stressed that the contract secures the interests of mine employees in the perspective of the planned dates of mine closure. However, they indicated the lack of its notification at the European Commission, the change in the geopolitical situation related to the war in Ukraine as well as the likely necessity of revising the provisions of the contract. Some of the experts also expressed concerns that the social contract will eliminate a significant group of workers from the labour market, even though they could still function as part of it. Therefore the planning and introduction of changes for the empowerment of human resources is necessary, as was defined e.g. in the Development Strategy of the Silesian Voivodeship 2030 “Zielone Śląskie”.

The experts representing trade unions stressed that they are aware of their role in the social dialogue process, but they believe that their demands are typically not considered outside the social contract. At the level of autonomous dialogue (bilateral, non-formal and undertaken without the participation of public authorities), the trade union representatives indicate the lack of direct dialogue with the employer and the lack of access to information e.g. on the financial situation of a company as well as the deficient sharing of such data, plans, visions, company development strategies, or the involvement of trade unions in such a process. The employee organisation representatives spoke critically of the relations with mining-related company management. The experts claim that they sometimes learn of planned changes at the workplace from media, and they are not invited to meetings with the management, therefore as a result the union leaders and members of their organisations are underinformed. Another aspect stressed

by the union members was the necessity to empower their competence as social dialogue participants.

### **Social Dialogue instruments**

The participants were presented the social dialogue instruments below and asked to rate their effectiveness in terms of accomplishing the goals of just transition.

- trade union negotiations with the employer,
- signing a social contract/industry contract,
- information meetings for employees dismissed from mining plants (e.g. concerning retraining, options for starting employment at another employer),
- exchange of information and good practices at the management level among companies that dismiss and wish to employ mining personnel,
- information meetings for local mining district communities, concerning the upcoming changes and the future of the residents,
- social consultation of regional development documents, including local development strategies,
- participation in social dialogue institutions at a regional level (e.g. provincial councils for social dialogue),
- Local Development Strategies,
- exchange of knowledge and information during the sessions of the Regional Just Transition Team of the Silesian Voivodeship,
- establishing grass-roots partnerships to accomplish specific projects,
- public hearings concerning the planned action related to the transition process in mining subregions,
- lobbying, extra-institutional dialogue, e.g. participation in unofficial meetings and talks.

The experts participating in the research noted that they were overwhelmingly familiar with instruments such as the Council for Social Dialogue, both at a national and provincial level. However, action at a local level was deemed the most effective form of dialogue, given the knowledge of local stakeholders regarding the problems of a given community. Therefore, the most desirable forms of supporting local dialogue in the opinion of the participants included:

- stable cooperation in interdisciplinary groups, bringing together stakeholders from various groups and fields, determined by the directions of transition,
- supporting existing structures of cooperation and the exchange of knowledge, particularly in areas of small urban-rural or rural districts, such as village headman councils, country housewives' clubs etc.,
- supporting informal grass-roots movements of district residents,
- good practices and exchange of knowledge on the topic among regions in transition,
- study visits in areas where projects related to transition have already been accomplished.



At the same time, the necessity was noted to involve entrepreneurs in the dialogue as well as to understand their expectations and problems as entities with the best knowledge of the market and the current trends in the economy.

#### **4. Conclusions and discussion**

Issues of social dialogue are referenced in program documents concerning just transition on the European, national and local level. The planning process of the Just Transition Fund itself was established through dialogue between the European Commission and every member state. This led to the identification of regions (territories) that are likely to constitute areas facing the greatest negative social and economic impact of the transition, particularly in terms of the expected loss of jobs and the transformation of the manufacturing processes of industrial plants with the greatest intensity of greenhouse gas emissions. The document stresses that multilateral dialogue and exchange of information proved critical to guarantee collective progress and transparency, and to undertake the most effective action to alleviate the socio-economic repercussions of the transition (EC, 2020).

Dialogue, participation and cooperation with all the local and regional parties served as the basis for the work on the Territorial Just Transition Plan, which is a document of extreme importance for the transition process at the regional level. It emphasises that open communication and dialogue are the basis for cooperation between local government bodies and social and economic partners participating in the transition process, which serves to accomplish operational goal no. 4 that entails the effective and socially responsible system of transition management in mining subregions.

This also finds confirmation in GIG's research, where the experts see the primary purpose of social dialogue above all in the necessity to prepare people for the changes that arise from the transition process. To achieve this, the following is proposed in particular:

- raising social awareness regarding energy transition, including through regular interdisciplinary meetings concerning various directions of transition as well as the changes undergoing globally and in the immediate socio-economic environment,
- disseminating knowledge through the exchange of good practices from EU regions that have already accomplished their energy transition processes,
- seeking dialogue and cooperation at a local level.

However, the basic problem is the low social awareness regarding the transition process itself. Therefore the primary goal of SD in the transition process should be to raise social awareness, while the language of communication in this process should be diverse and adapted to specific target groups and their demographic and social characteristics, such as: age, education, qualifications, professional experience etc. In many cases, a barrier can also be found

in the lack of skill in conducting social dialogue, resulting from low social competence and insufficient knowledge of available SD tools.

As indicated by the GIG research results, social dialogue meant to facilitate reaching a compromise and meeting the needs of various stakeholder groups is limited and irregular. In order to establish a social agreement around the transition process in the region, the stakeholders of this process and the authorised parties must conduct transparent, substantive and regular social dialogue. All the forms and tools of social dialogue need to be applied for this purpose by engaging these stakeholders in particular who will be affected the most by the socio-economic impact of the energy transition process, and by communicating this to the communities of local districts that undergo mining transition.

The correctness of this assumption finds confirmation in the principles of the Territorial Just Transition Plan for the Silesian Voivodeship. Using the instruments for the cooperation and inclusion of economic and social partners in the decision-making process as well as providing a cohesive system of information and promotion regarding the purposes, action and benefits of just transition is key for the effective implementation of partnership. Animating broad social dialogue within the scope of just transition is to be done through informational, educational and promotional action that will be primarily aimed at the potential beneficiaries of the program and the residents of the mining subregions (Territorial Just Transition Plan, 2022).

All the stakeholders who participated in the GIG research noted the lack of sufficient dialogue at the national level. The conduction of social dialogue is irregular and limited to information exchange and consultation on basic principles or drafted program documents. Due to this, the interviewed parties to the SD have no perception of actual influence on the transition process. At the same time, it should be emphasised that the research participants do not use the available SD tools to their fullest and do not engage in the process, therefore the existing opportunities and legal solutions should primarily be promoted as well.

Transition projects that are to result in major changes should be adapted to the specifics of a given district. Therefore the knowledge of the stakeholders should be complemented with ways in how the changes as part of the transition can be directed and used to empower the mining subregions and companies.

The importance of dialogue in the process of development policy implementation at the level of the Silesian Voivodeship, including the significant role of the Provincial Council for Social Dialogue and other consultative and advisory bodies working within the Marshal's Office of the Silesian Voivodeship, is stressed in the new development strategy of the Silesian Voivodeship – "Zielone Śląskie". On the other hand, the lack of skill in conducting dialogue is perceived as a barrier in establishing and maintaining new relations, which is particularly visible in the context of certain groups' social competence (Marshal's Office of the Silesian Voivodeship, 2021). The interviewed experts believe that interdisciplinary cooperation in the context of the socio-economic transition is currently being conducted in the Silesian

Voivodeship, but its level depends on the location of a given district undergoing mining transition and the level of its socio-economic development, which has a negative effect on the situation of small and remote districts.

There is no consensus among the transition process stakeholders due to the divergence of goals and interests. Solutions for motivating the stakeholders and facilitating the pursuit of common interests should be sought and promoted, e.g. by establishing cooperation networks. By undertaking challenges related to the transition process and seeking new opportunities of development, the local administration bodies of districts in transition and the local provincial government should establish cooperation networks of various stakeholder groups in order to deliver solutions that offer compromises and benefits for all the parties involved (win-win strategy).

The energy and socio-economic transition process also requires the greater involvement of entrepreneurs in social dialogue at the local and regional level, particularly small and medium enterprises belonging to various branches of the economy, and not only the mining and mining-related industries, the goal of which would be to better inform employers and simultaneously also to better understand the interests of employees. Great emphasis should be placed on motivating entrepreneurs by exposing the opportunities presented by the transition process. Another suggestion offered by the experts is to simplify and shorten the procedures entailing e.g. the transfer of the post-mining land to the districts or the introduction of changes in the area development plans.

The key conclusion obtained from the conducted research is the necessity to develop various forms of supporting social dialogue at the local level. The most desirable forms of this support include:

- stable cooperation in interdisciplinary groups bringing together various stakeholder groups and concerning various substantive issues related to the energy and socio-economic transition process of the Silesian Voivodeship,
- supporting existing structures of stakeholder cooperation and information exchange in the transition process, particularly in small rural or urban districts located in the 7 mining subregions of the Silesian Voivodeship that can apply to the Just Transition Fund, such as village headman councils, country housewives' clubs etc.,
- supporting informal grass-roots movements of mining district residents,
- good practices and exchange of knowledge on the topic among mining regions in Poland and the EU,
- study visits in areas where projects related to transition have already been accomplished.

It should be concluded that the primary purpose of social dialogue in the mining region transition process is above all to empower the involvement of various stakeholders at different stages, which grants the potential for a greater perception of agency and social adaptation to the upcoming changes. Therefore, the basic challenge in terms of SD efficiency will concern elements such as the identification of stakeholders, the regularity of social dialogue, the method

of involving stakeholders at various stages of transition as well as the ability and competence to conduct dialogue on different levels.

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