

RESEARCH PAPER

Social dialogue in apprenticeship reforms in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire: Reality or wishful thinking?

Christine Hofmann*, Cyr Davodoun, Euphrèm N'depo

¹ILO's Africa Skills Hub, Regional Office for Africa, 01 B.P. 3960 Abidjan 01, Côte d'Ivoire

²Benin Chamber of Trades and Craft, Cotonou, Benin

ABSTRACT

This contribution examines the extent to which social dialogue has effectively structured and influenced recent apprenticeship reforms, particularly those related to informal apprenticeships, carried out in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire over the last ten years. It analyzes the degree and quality of involvement of social partners and other stakeholders in the introduction of dual apprenticeship and traditional apprenticeship certification (CQM/CQP), the robustness and consistency of the institutional frameworks governing consultation, the organizational and technical capacities of the actors, and the quality of the dialogue processes mobilized in the design, adoption, and implementation of the reforms. It finds that social dialogue constitutes a real but uneven mechanism for governing reforms. Despite important advances in reforms, the influence of stakeholders remains asymmetrical: The State retains the power of arbitration, employers control access to apprenticeship positions, while trade unions and craft sector representatives have more limited technical and institutional resources.

Key words: apprenticeship, social dialogue, governance, West Africa

INTRODUCTION

Social dialogue is not only one of the four strategic objectives of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda and a means for

social justice. It is an essential ingredient of effective skills and labour market reforms—not only on paper but in practice (*Global Deal et al., 2020*). The ILO's Recommendation No. 208 on

*Corresponding Author:

Christine Hofmann, ILO's Africa Skills Hub, Regional Office for Africa, Plateau, Immeuble CCIA, 01 B. P. 3960 Abidjan 01, Lagunes Region, Côte d'Ivoire. Email: hofmann@ilo.org.

Quality Apprenticeships (2023) emphasizes that well-functioning apprenticeship systems require strong governance frameworks grounded in social dialogue. Social dialogue includes all types of negotiation, consultation and exchange of information between or among representatives of governments, employers and workers and hence regulates divergent interests through pluralistic but organized industrial relations (Flanders, 1970; Schmitter 1974; Standing, 2008) based on free, independent, representative and capable organizations of workers and employers.

As reconfirmed by recent International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates (International Labor Organization, 2024), most apprentices in countries with large informal economies are trained outside formal regulatory frameworks, often with limited quality assurance and recognition of skills. Several countries have aimed to introduce quality improvements and strengthen formal arrangements through qualifications, standards, contracts, or access of apprentices and master craftspersons to further learning (Akoojee & Werquin, 2026; Hofmann *et al.*, 2022). Benin and Côte d'Ivoire serve as examples to show in how far social dialogue has structured and influenced recent apprenticeship reforms over the last 10 years.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The paper asks if social dialogue has been a real mechanism for co-defining, co-designing and regulating reforms, or

has it been limited to a formal consultative function with no substantial impact on strategic direction, normative choices, and their operational implementation. It adopts a comparative qualitative approach based on a systematic documentary analysis of the legislative and regulatory texts relating to apprenticeship reforms in both countries; an examination of national frameworks for social dialogue and vocational training in light of relevant ILO standards, in particular Conventions No. 87, 98, 144, and Recommendation 208 on Quality Apprenticeships; semi-structured interviews with representatives of relevant ministries, employers' and workers' organizations, trade and professional associations, chambers of trade, and other actors; an analysis of the processes used to identify key moments of influence, negotiation, or exclusion of social partners in the different phases of the reform cycles (design, normative adoption, implementation, evaluation).

The analysis is based on a conceptual framework linking multi-level governance, institutional capacities, and the procedural quality of social dialogue.

RESULTS

The results show that, in both countries, apprenticeship reforms have been driven by a strong political will to modernize apprenticeship systems, with an emphasis on building on existing apprenticeships, improving the quality of training, and improving labour market prospects of young people.

Social dialogue and apprenticeship governance

Both countries have used existing national social dialogue mechanisms to advance apprenticeship reforms, leading to the adoption of regulations that introduce strengthened and better structured apprenticeship systems, apprenticeship contracts, financial compensation, end of apprenticeship qualifications (Trade certificates called CQM and Vocational certificates CQP), and dual training approaches in both countries. These established formal mechanisms have been complemented by additional dialogue spaces, including some that were less inclusive of key actors. However, in line with theories on industrial relations and pluralism, social dialogue is judged not merely on the existence and inclusiveness of consultations and negotiations among stakeholders with divergent interests, but on their capacity to modify rules and practices, and reach compromise between the state, employer organizations, trade unions, chambers of commerce, professional sectors, technical and financial partners, as well as stakeholders from the craft sector and the informal economy.

The situation of social dialogue in reforms in Benin

In Benin, the reform took place within a relatively structured institutional framework, incorporating formal tripartite consultation forums like the National Social Dialogue Council. Social partners and in particular trade associations were involved at various stages of

the process, particularly in the drafting of strategic texts and certification mechanisms. Nevertheless, the analysis reveals that while trade associations actively contribute to the process, the power of initiative remains with public actors. The capacity for effective influence depends largely on their national organizations' technical and organizational resources, their ability to produce independent sector-specific expertise, and the ability of their members—craftspeople offering apprenticeships—to formalize their relationship with apprentices to be recognized as legitimate stakeholders. Although participation is institutionalized, it remains asymmetrical, with public administrations and technical and financial partners retaining a strong control over the reform agenda and expertise. Social dialogue has helped to strengthen the legitimacy and social acceptability of reforms, but its impact on certain structural choices remains limited (Bankolé et al., 2020; Davodoun, 2019).

The situation of social dialogue in reforms in Côte d'Ivoire

In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, the apprenticeship reform follows the general characteristics and framework for social dialogue (CIPC, CCT, and CNDS) and on a training-to-employment public-private partnership pathway initiated by the 2009 Framework Agreement and consolidated through a Joint Steering Committee in 2016 (Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 2009). The 2019 decree on apprenticeships with a new Technical Apprenticeship Committee (CTA) with

"tripartite plus" composition bringing together government, employers, chambers of commerce, professional sectors, and unions has refined this framework (Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 2019). In this context, social dialogue is not limited to a consultative role; it constitutes a mechanism for governing and regulating relations among stakeholders in the apprenticeship system. This structure demonstrates that social dialogue has become an institutional reality in apprenticeship reform and has contributed to the development of several normative and technical instruments—standard contracts, pre-remuneration, competency frameworks, CQP/CQM certification, and recognition of prior learning. However, its functioning remains marked by significant asymmetries in power and resources: The State retains the power of final arbitration and control over the regulatory framework; employers strongly influence the reform through their control of apprenticeship positions and training capacity; while trade unions and craft sector representatives have more limited technical, organizational, and informational resources. Consequently, while social dialogue has indeed influenced the legal and institutional formalization of the reform, its impact appears weaker on the operational aspects of funding, monitoring, regional implementation, and quality control of work-study programs (Kouakou, 2020; N'depo, 2026).

Comparative analysis

In both countries, the study highlights a gap between the formal architecture of

social dialogue and its actual capacity to produce inclusive and sustainable outcomes in the context of apprenticeship reforms. This gap is particularly evident in the varied influence of the social partners on structural choices and the redistribution of resources within skills systems. The involvement of key stakeholders varies by stage, level of organization, and whether consultations are broad or ad hoc. In some cases, operational progress on joint definition of skills and training standards, the training of workplace trainers, or the arrangements for certification has been achieved. Social dialogue has in these cases been more effective at the technical level than at the overall strategic level. In Côte d'Ivoire, the reform has not yet reached scale.

ILO standards on tripartite consultation and freedom of association provide a relevant frame of reference, but their operational implementation depends heavily on the capacities of the actors involved, the institutional culture of dialogue, the structure of professional organizations, and existing power relations. Social dialogue has generally contributed to improving the social acceptability of reforms, but its role as a lever for structural transformation of apprenticeship systems, particularly in their articulation with the informal sector, remains only partially realized.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, apprenticeship reforms in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire have greatly benefitted from social dialogue as a

coordination mechanism to balance divergent interests and find common ground in a complex skills ecosystem. The analysis showed, however, that social dialogue cannot be viewed as either a mere institutional facade or a fully consolidated mechanism of co-governance. In both countries, it has contributed to the formalization and legitimization of reforms through the development of legal frameworks, governance mechanisms, and technical tools related to apprenticeship, particularly regarding certification, harmonization of standards, and dual programs. However, the findings also highlight a persistent gap between institutional participation and effective influence on strategic decisions and operational implementation. Resource asymmetries, the central role of the state, the limited capacities of workers' organizations and partly of trade and professional organizations, as well as weak monitoring mechanisms, financing mechanisms that remain dependent on external resources, and limited involvement of local levels, limit the transformative impact of social dialogue.

These findings suggest several implications for public policy to turn wishful thinking into reality: Strengthening the technical and organizational capacities of social partners, further decentralizing governance mechanisms, improving funding and monitoring-evaluation mechanisms, and more systematically incorporating the voices of apprentices, master craftspersons, and instructors. For professional practices, the challenge is to move from a primarily consultative

approach to more effective forms of co-regulation of apprenticeship systems.

Finally, for research, this study highlights the value of comparative and multi-stakeholder approaches that allow for the analysis not only of formal structures of social dialogue, but also of power relations, concrete negotiation practices, and the gaps between prescribed reforms and actual implementation.

DECLARATION

Article version statement

This article has been reviewed and preliminarily edited. It is intended solely for use at the 10th Research Conference of the International Network for Innovative Apprenticeship (INAP). The final version will be published in *Vocation, Technology & Education* (<https://www.vtejournal.com>).

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