

The Workings of the Social Partnership

The Social Partnership of Barbados has won acclaim regionally and internationally as a unique and successful governance model. Representatives of Government, labour and the private sector combined to form this tripartite body, which operates under an agreement known as the protocol. The Social Partnership works towards developing a mechanism of effective leadership and to provide a platform for consultation, dialogue and collaboration to take place with different stakeholders, in an effort to enhance the economic and social development of the country.

The social partnership model as instituted in Barbados, is characterized by the fact that it is expected to function on the basis of trust, openness, accountability, transparency and the sharing of information among partners. These are desire elements of the partnership which, if followed and maintained, will serve the useful purpose of ensuring that many of the emerging adverse economic and social challenges can be mitigated through prompt action that is underpinned by clearly developed strategies. The social partnership is meant to be a body that is charged with collective action. It therefore should not be perceived as a body which operates on a timetable of convenience or as a tool that is controlled by any of the partners, as this opens the door allows for manipulation to take place.

Whereas the social partnership arrangement at the higher level involves the three main pillars of the society in government, labour and capital, it is also to be noted that at the lower level, the social partnership has a place in the relationship which exists between employers and trade unions. They are called upon to work together in promoting and the building out of an enlightened, efficient and productive workforce. At this level, trust, openness, accountability, transparency and the sharing of information among partners remain pivotal to the development of a successful and productive relationship. It must be borne in mind that effective communication is most desirable to the success of the partnership. This will aid the build out of a harmonious industrial relations environment, which is enabled through workers' participation, engagement and empowerment.

Employers and the representative trade union organizations should have the understanding that as social partners, they are formed into a group which is

expected to cooperate in a working relationship, so as to achieve mutually agreed goals. It must also be recognized that the partnership may consist of relations between labour and management, which involves employers and trade unions with or without direct government involvement. The one take away from this social partnership arrangement is the fact that it allows for all stakeholders to promote dialogue, enables them to work together for the good of the enterprise, and by extension, the good of employees.

It is evident that there is a place for the existence of a social partnership in the practice of industrial relations. As already established, it is meant to enable dialogue to take place amongst government and the two other principal social partners in labour and the private sector. There ought to be an open-door policy to engaging in the process of consultation and dialogue, recognizing always that this is the key to promoting consensus-building. Another element which is fundamental to the operations of the social partnership, would be the institutionalization of democratic principles in its work.

Government, labour and the private sector should in their deliberations remain focus on the pronouncement of the International Labour Organization (ILO) that the social partnership should work towards securing decent work, safe conditions of work, living wages, basic social security, gender equality and fair income distribution call for better global governance and the universal application and enforcement of international labour standards. It is to be understood that this effort is aimed at promoting the protection of workers through social dialogue and the establishment of workplace standards. The idea is to ensure that minimum international labour standards which are adopted by international governments and the social partners, are observed.