



# SMEs, restructuring, innovations and social dialogue

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**RENEWALS**

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**IRENE network and Renewals project**

Born during a seminar held in Dublin in 2003, IRENE (Innovative Restructuring- European Network of Experts) is a network bringing together independent experts – academics, practitioners, managers, social partners, consultants – from various countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands, United Kingdom). It is open to new partners. Working on social and economic dimensions of restructuring in Europe with a view to promote responsible and therefore innovative practices, the IRENE network has achieved or contributed to a range of EU projects such as MIRE, AGIRE, HIRES, HIRES PUBLIC, ARENAS etc..) as well as to the Green paper published by the EU on restructuring (2012) or the report issued on the same topic by the European Parliament (2013). IRENE opened recently its website [www.responsible-restructuring.eu](http://www.responsible-restructuring.eu). Beside new projects and studies on restructuring, IRENE will deliver on a regular basis policy papers based on its works.

Having started in 2012, the Renewals project is an EU funded project focusing at innovations arising in times of crisis for restructuring in two areas, SMEs on the one hand and public sector on the other. This project was based on case studies and workshops conducted by IRENE network members. The project results are presented in two Workshop Cahiers.



## General Introduction

In its first policy paper, the IRENE network presents its main conclusions drawn out of its EU project “Renewals” which focused on innovations arising in times of crises in restructuring and social dialogue practices in a world usually neglected by restructuring studies: SMEs !

Based on several case studies, on workshops having brought experts from many EU countries (North, aCentral, East and South), but also on previous studies achieved by network’s members, our study points out issues to be discussed more in-depth, particularly the diversity and complexity of SMEs, the specificities of their often “silent” restructuring as well as the strengths and weaknesses of public support and social dialogue. Describing innovations taking place in terms of organisation and management but also in dialogue, well-being and professional transitions, our paper emphasizes main conclusions related to:

- Different and strategic thinking
- Putting an end to exemption clauses
- Adopting specific job transitions schemes and support for SMEs
- Developing a new dialogue with and within SMES

However our work does not stop here. Issues related to SMEs, restructuring and social dialogue are broad and we achieved only a small part of the work. Therefore some proposals for further activities and research are included in the final section.

### I. SMEs: a complex and interdependent world

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) form the backbone of the EU economy – accounting for 99.8 per cent of non-financial enterprises in 2012, which equates to 20.7 million businesses. Defined as enterprises with fewer than 250 employees, provided that they are independent (of other enterprises) and do not have sales that exceed EUR 50 million or an annual balance sheet that exceeds EUR 43 million, SMEs are statistically classified in three categories: medium-sized (50 to 249 employees, 1,1% of the businesses), small (10 to 49, 6,5% of the businesses) and micro enterprises (less than 10, representing with 92,2% the overwhelming majority of businesses). In employment terms, SMEs represent two third

of all employees (an estimated 67.4 % of jobs in the non-financial business economy in 2012), especially in activities like are repairing, construction, real estate, accommodation and food services, professional and technical activities and distributive trades.

What most SMEs have in common is the system of action, which includes a number of key specific characteristics starting with the role of the manager/owner. Often heavily “committed” both in the history and management of the business, he is also deeply involved in “interpersonal” aspects of employment and labour issues with the workforce. This encourages him to go “all out” and sometimes to “dig in” when facing problematic decisions. Several manager “profiles” are possible here, ranging from the family-owner to the omnipotent/omnipresent manager (source of



potential fragility for the business) but including as well the strategic manager (who deals with external contact), who delegates day-to-day management decisions to a team. However, what could be considered in some cases as a handicap can also be an advantage: in SMEs a high degree of proximity exists between the decision-making processes and the implementation of the chosen actions. The command chain is short or even non-existent. Communication can be more direct between those taking the decisions and those implementing them. Decisions are often quickly applied to all processes.

Deriving from increasing outsourcing, subcontracting - 17% of all SMEs in the EU are engaged as subcontractors and more than half of them act as contractors - but also from the fact that many SMEs belong de jure or de facto to groups (and not only to large groups), SMEs are and become more and more interdependent - among themselves as well as from large companies - making them often vulnerable especially when they have a very limited number of clients.

## 2. What makes restructuring different in SMEs ?

### Drivers and forms

Restructuring in SMEs is motivated by a combination of company external and internal drivers. While the external drivers, such as the development of demand, public policies, globalisation or technological progress are the same as for large companies (but partly with different effects), the company internal ones are very specific for SMEs. Examples are the entrepreneur's ambitions fostering business expansion, diversification or internal reorganisation, limited financial or staff resources driving outsourcing, cost cutting or efficiency improving activities, dependency on

few clients or suppliers necessitating changes pushed upon them or the change in ownership resulting in new management approaches and business ideas.

Restructuring in SMEs is often characterised by a combination of different events rather than being an isolated one. Internal restructuring such as the adaptation of internal processes or structures, diversification or business transfers is the most common restructuring form for SMEs. Bankruptcy/closure or procedures to avoid such is also prominent among the SME population, as is business expansion (including internationalisation for which, however, SMEs in general show lower engagement than larger firms). Outsourcing is of increasing importance, but still at rather low level, particularly in the New Member States where SMEs are traditionally receivers of outsourced services rather than outsourcing themselves. For mergers/acquisitions, relocation, offshoring/delocalisation hardly any information related to SMEs is available across Europe.

Moreover, restructuring in large companies often strongly affects SMEs in the region or the value chain where this large company is a player. Small and medium companies are partly performing tasks and activities which used to belong to the core business of big enterprises: outsourced services like catering, transport, security, customer care. On the other hand they can be part of the 'flexible peel' around a company, safeguarding key employment within this company. Often it is not easy to decide on the effects of restructuring at the core company within SMEs around or serving as supplier or service provider.

### “Silent restructuring” and specific consequences

Another striking point consists in what many observers call “silent restructuring”. Even if there are



more SMEs going bankrupt – and therefore dismissing in many case all of their employees – even if altogether; dismissals related to restructuring come more from SME than from big corporations, companies and people affected are not in the focus of our societies, in terms of media coverage, in terms of public policies or public funds available, in terms of social partners agenda. Those characteristics have several effects when restructuring occurs:

- In SMEs much more than in big companies, restructuring is managed in a very reactive way and lacks of mid/long term strategy. And when highly dependent from big companies involved themselves in restructuring, SMEs are left to manage all economic and social consequences;
  - In most cases, SMEs employers hesitate before initiating restructuring activities. The too long continuity of their operations may result in long-term losses and risk of bankruptcy, instead of initiating a process of restructuring that could enhance the economic viability of the firm.
  - For the same reasons, especially in manufacturing sectors, they try to maintain employees as long as possible in the company and to delay at maximum painful decisions related to dismissals. Dismissal as an ultima ratio is probably more effective in SMEs than in big ones but consequences in terms of sustainability might be variable;
  - Once decisions are made there is very little - or no - space for any internal discussions or consultation and there are very limited resources to support people having to leave the organization. Most SMEs have limited possibility to utilize internal to reemploy workers to other parts of the organization, when jobs are shed.
- All this may have significant detrimental effects on employment but also on individuals' health and abilities to cope with as well as to find a new job.

### **3. Social dialogue and public support**

#### **Coverage and formal/informal dialogues**

In terms of social dialogue, relations between the management, the staff representatives and the staff as a whole in SMEs are usually not particularly formal and are based on interpersonal contact. This special relationship between owner/managers and employees can be regarded as a strength if things go well (inspiring atmosphere, good personal contacts, the SME as a family), but it can also be a weakness when survival is at stake. Thus, the case studies illustrate that many SMEs are unable to 'use' social dialogue in a productive and innovative way.

In 2009, 20% (at best) of SMEs had work's council or formal employee representation. The elected representatives lack training and are often unable to fulfil their "early warning" role concerning economic matters or working conditions. Trade union representation is usually low and badly organised. However, in several countries, SMEs are included in sector - and/ or territorial - collective agreements, but these are often not specific to SME employees; sometimes they are less favourable. Therefore, social dialogue within and around SMEs has no real similarities with what can be seen in larger organisations.

#### **Social dialogue in times of restructuring**

As Eurofound mentions, "not seldom legislation or agreements between social partners do not cover restructuring in smaller companies, as the number



of employees involved per company is too small to create obligations and traditions for restructuring oriented social dialogue". This specific situation in SMEs makes it difficult for trade union involvement and participation in restructuring processes. Consequently, social plans are rare and mainly a topic for social dialogue in big companies restructuring.

The specific industrial relations situation for SMEs makes it difficult for them to develop innovative measures for restructuring through social dialogue. Cases where trade unions threaten to strike in order to protect the jobs of their members, rather than taking the survival of the companies into consideration illustrate why and how managers were hesitant to sharing information to their workers representatives, either because of identity and authority reasons, or simply because they regarded social dialogue as a foreign intrusion. This means that constructive and trustful dialogue between social partners is more difficult to create and sustain.

Since many SMEs do not have local trade union or employees representatives at the work place, it is often the sector or the territorial trade union representatives who have knowledge and experience of how to use the measures provided. Therefore the interpretation of how to manage redundancies or to find alternatives to avoid them often comes from these representatives. On the one hand, the measures agreed upon through social dialogue provide a form of leverage for trade unions, a way to make a difference in the local workplaces and for their members. On the other hand, the employers are limited by the information provided by the local trade union representatives and are not always aware of the alternatives to dismissals and legislative requirements that are available to them. However, despite those difficulties, the comparison of different national experiences shows that social dialogue can contribute to the development of measures to manage restructuring, not only in times of crisis, but also on a longer term basis.

### **Support to SMEs in restructuring**

Support for workers and professional transitions are most often covering only large companies, and not to the same extent the small and medium sized enterprises. There are several possible reasons for this structural exclusion of SMEs:

- Legal restrictions on collective redundancies: in many Member states, rules for collective redundancies are only valid for companies with a staff over than a low threshold exposing small and micro firms' employees to job insecurity and threat of job loss without legal and practical protection. Furthermore, there are no incentives for employers to set up any measures, such as transition schemes or other forms of support for redundant workers in their social plans when they are implementing collective redundancies.
- Limited resources. Larger companies have resources available to provide redundant workers with transition support, even when economic conditions are difficult. For SMEs such resources are more difficult to mobilize and there is a continuous problem of timing of restructuring measures. In many cases, there is a tendency among SME managers to postpone restructuring measures, rather than initiating restructuring at an early stage, when there are resources available to finance it. Additionally, when large companies undertake restructuring and downsizing, usually no measures in social plans companies are addressed to subcontracting SMEs.
- Public pressure: Larger enterprises initiating redundancies are often pressured to provide measures to redundant workers, as a way to compensate damages caused in the local labour market. Smaller enterprises are not exposed to such public pressure and therefore do not initiate particular measures to support their dismissed workers on a voluntary basis.



- Lack of transparency and information about the available instrument. Since SMEs usually do not engage in restructuring activities on a day to day basis, they often do not have the experience or knowledge about the measures available to manage restructuring; SMEs employers do not always have information about the collective agreement and the availability of measures and support. Often a high level of administrative burden is more difficult to master for SMEs than for larger firms. Support based on a competition system can be disadvantageous for SMEs that can realise favourable outcomes only at a smaller scale or over a longer period of time.

- Eligibility: for tenders as well as for access to support measures, criterions might be difficult to meet for SMEs. Since services and measures included in support programs are not generally provided for workers with alternative work arrangements (fixed term contracts and part time employees), many employees in SMEs are not eligible to the services even if their employers are parts of the agreement. Thus, even if many employees are, the most vulnerable workforce are not covered by these restructuring measures.

The awareness of SMEs needs is growing across Europe. Small business acts have been voted and enforced. From a company external perspective, availability of suitable support, access to finance (including supportive behaviour by banks), level of administrative burden, and relationships to business partners as well as the general business environment are decisive for SMEs' restructuring. However, job to job transitions remain de facto uneasy despite interesting developments in some countries.

## **4. Innovations**

While SMEs have been heavily impacted by the crisis in terms of company mortality, job reduction and employment, innovative and less painful solutions are also taking place. Our project identified different kind of such improvements which could be classified in two categories:

### **Management, strategic thinking and alliances**

To avoid job losses and to limit the risk of brutal change, it is necessary to tackle these issues sufficient-ly far in advance. Restructuring – and especially those linked to the crisis- act as revealing and catalyst or factors and pushed some companies to switch from a reactive position to a more proactive and anticipatory one like it happened for example in the Region Nord-Pas de Calais thanks to the consultancy service put in place in the by the French ARACT. Companies benefiting from that tool must still have sufficient resources and room for manoeuvre available; their first challenge lies in the capacity of all stakeholders to work together to come up with new development plans for the company. The second one is to build up a new organisational structure making effective use of existing skills within the company or by developing new ways of working. Very often, the corporate recovery project has been built on differentiation through shortening lead times, improving quality, innovation, complexity and responsiveness.

A similar approach has been adopted by the leader of the Dutch painting company Olijslager. Anticipating important changes already before the crisis, he decided to break with the past. He gave responsibility to employees to contribute to improvements. Options for changes, developed with staff members were immediately turned into realisation.



In his own words: “At a quarter past five we took some Chinese food, we grabbed the flipchart and came up with improvements. This helped us building trust within the layer below the directorate. These middle managers got more involved. I appreciated their contribution and was genuinely interested. I gave the staff a lot of information. Our projects were always performed by two or three persons. The number of complaints decreased and thus the return on investment improved incredibly. Olijslager has had a works council and the general manager was happy with its role in the change process: ‘Consequently they would send back questions which were the responsibility of line managers. They controlled the transparency of the answers to the questions put forward’. However, trade unions were not been involved actively in the change process. The general manager does not regret their absence: “it is a big advantage, since this kept barricade behaviour outside the company”.

Innovations may also arise not in a single company but between them as it happened for Mécaloire in France. Created in 2010 as a business alliance to face the constant decline of the metal industry since decades, Mécaloire, which gathered 30 companies at the beginning, affiliates now more than 150 SMEs employing altogether around 3500 people and with an average company size between 10 and 15 employees.

The cluster addresses the relative lack of access to the internal (and export) markets of its members and reduces administrative burdens. Moreover, as subcontracting develops in metal industry, it is also a way to avoid bad manners and low tariffs from prime contractors. Funded by public subsidies, Mécaloire allows its members to build common projects and to reduce the crisis impact on turnover, on commercial development and on all business aspects. Among main innovations for their members, the cluster introduced:

- Working groups and communities meetings dealing with processes, products or integrated solutions and welcoming buyers or providers from big groups and SMEs.
- An agreement related to anticipatory management of jobs and skills signed in 2011 with public authorities and involving 20 companies. It aims to map jobs, skills and know-how, especially those submitted to shortages, to plan employment and training needs at the local level and to improve HR management especially in very small companies. This allows common contracts to be signed by several SMEs, mutual help in case of jobs shortages, staff sharing arrangements or access to better HR practices.

### **Dialogue and well-being**

In the Italian case of Teuco, a very interesting aspect consisted in taking issues of well-being together with the survival of the company and the preservation of jobs through an “Organizational wellbeing strategy”. Here, social partners, while convening that they were facing a structural change, wanted to preserve and develop people knowledge and skills in order to be ready when the crisis would be overcome, through educational actions, involving a significant percentage of the staff, affected by dismissal or not. Following HIREs and PSYRES recommendations about fairness, social support, and communication managers, middle managers, victims- people dismissed – and survivors- those remaining in the company - were all involved in specific actions and workshops. Employees and workers, from different departments, of both gender, and varying in age have been involved in training about change management, team-work, creativity and self-commitment. This allowed all active staff to get internationally recognized high-level certifications, which facilitated both the process of internationalization as well as potential internal or external placement and replacement.



Social dialogue at sector and territorial levels might play also an innovative role to support SMEs and their employees in the crisis.

This is the case in Sweden where job security foundations and councils, set up by social partners offer since years quick and effective support quick to employees and managers from all companies, whatever their size: dismissed workers from SMEs (or small workplaces) represent the lion share of participants in those foundations (80 % of transition support beneficiaries from the job security council for blue collar workers were previously employed in SMEs). The job security foundations and councils are organised according to the different occupational areas in which collective bargaining is negotiated, in this case the blue collar workers and the white-collar workers respectively. The Swedish case does not only provide services to SMEs, it works as a form of insurance policy, where all employers share the risk, both small and large companies. Last but not least, this Swedish experience offers permanent and stable help to companies and workers and was not linked to the crisis.

By contrast, the cases of Italian ELBA and Dutch ACO were more linked to the crisis, more specific in terms of sector or territorial coverage and more specifically focusing at SMEs.

The relevance of ELBA (Ente Bilaterale Lombardo dell'Artigianato) experience in the Lombardy craft sector is mainly due to the social partners who wanted to move bipartite body from a "useful tool" to a "central tool" in order to promote both competitiveness and social cohesion since 2010 agreements. Extending, among other, short time schemes to small and macro companies, they set up very efficient incentives for those companies to join previous agreements and benefits. On the other hand, increased contributions allow to better fit with both employees and employers demands both in facing crisis and in

welfare, while actual co-financing required by the new shock absorbers system introduced by the 2012 labour market reform and gradually implemented since 2013 still display inadequate funding from both employers and employees.

In the Netherlands social partners in the construction sector set up the ACO (Anti Cyclish Opleiden) which eased for all companies in the sector (mainly SMEs) training through sector training funds. Conceived as anti-cyclical tools – to be used during work short times and activities reduction – they allow retraining, up grading of skills in many companies. Companies' staff affected by the economic crisis could retrain or acquire specialised skills. Many SME's participated in the scheme. More than half of these employees – among them many older workers – closed modules for a recognized vocational diploma. But this experience, planned to last for 2 years, stopped before recovery took place and therefore did not save all companies which used it. Part of the trained employees went consequently to unemployment.

## **5. Conclusions, recommendations and proposals**

### **Learning from restructuring of SMEs**

Restructuring is recognised as a recurrent and continuous process. But learning from restructuring experiences of SMEs seems to be very rarely organised. Therefore monitoring of the restructuring process and its effects is necessary to create a learning process among the actors involved in such a way that experiences and shared diagnosis can contribute to a "virtuous circle" of anticipation of changes and sustainable socio-economic development strategies.



Therefore we suggest developing:

- Specific education and training on restructuring for both SMEs managers (often left alone), employees representatives and employees, not in copying what is done for bigger players;
- Systematic monitoring of restructuring processes of SMEs throughout the EU;
- External frameworks able to support SMES in time of restructuring (for social dialogue, employment and job transitions schemes etc.).

#### **Taking in account the diversity and the dependency in pro-SMEs policies**

The general discourse on SMES has been mainstreamed in the EU and in most countries specific policies have been adopted and enforced to stimulate SMEs and their developments. However, our work point out that thinking small is not enough! SMEs are a much diversified world and the size - with huge differences between micro and medium size companies - is just one factor among others. In view of this multi-faceted reality, does it make sense to keep targeting SMEs as a whole-pack, other than for administrative purposes?

Additionally, one fact is still often neglected: that is the dependency variable, with includes dependency towards large groups or interdependency between SMEs. Public – but also private or company – policies have to take in account this diversity, complexity and interdependency, especially in restructuring operations: ex ante restructuring assessment along the value chain, mutual support for both dismissals but also recruitment and training, sharing of information and innovation have to be strongly encouraged in order to make our present and future ecosystems economically, environmentally but also socially sustainable and attractive.

#### **Supporting strategic thinking and alliances**

Affected by “silent” restructuring, SMEs are much more reactive than proactive in times of crisis and restructuring. And the lack of proactive or anticipatory strategies can be very painful for both companies and workers. SMEs are requested not only to cope with crisis but also to develop and rethink their models. Therefore

- Strategic thinking, including not only owners and managers, but also employees and internal skills, often neglected, needs to be much more developed and supported by public policies – at national or regional levels – as well as by employers’ organisations.
- The role of a third party (consultant, mediator, etc.), if not manipulated by competitors or main clients, could be crucial as well as that of peer to peer frameworks. An easier access to it could be welcome
- Alliances of SMEs – through clusters, clubs etc.- which have been proved to be successful and despite obstacles due to the traditional individualistic entrepreneurial culture, need to be much more promoted and supported. And that especially in times of globalization and cross national mobility.

#### **Taking away exemption clauses and developing specific frameworks for job transitions**

In times of crisis, job losses in SMEs represent a large share. But there are still too many SMEs excluded from benefits of job to job transitions schemes, many of those – to heavy, not quick enough - having been conceived and set up by large companies and not applicable to most SMEs. Furthermore, in the EU, SMEs have been exempted of many clauses, especially



in the employment and social field. This way of thinking, largely disseminated, is based on heavy and unnecessary administrative burden or red tape. But to what extent are those exemptions de jure working positively for SMEs de facto? For example, if social dialogue hampers in small companies by lack of obligation, this works out badly in times of restructuring. And where no support is provided to SMEs workers in job transitions, equal chances for job transitions are not offered.

This can and shall be overcome and several interesting experiences show that it is perfectly possible. Eliminating such exemptions could strengthen SMEs if other and specific ways to SMEs are taken. It will be an incentive to be more innovative and better equipped to face increased competition. In that respect

- the directive on collective redundancies should be revised in order to be more inclusive in terms of companies' size as well as in terms of contracts' termination forms (open ended, fix-term, temporary...)
- the meaning of transitions has to be considered in a wide sense: if employment is an important issue, this is not the only one and organizational well-being is, to that extent, a useful concept for both SMEs and workers.
- professional transitions should prevail over financial compensations. Legislation, social dialogue and SMEs practices have to address this issue in order to be consistent in investing in the human capital. Remaining financial compensations should be reorganized:
  - by making financial support systems more sustainable and not linked to the crisis.
  - by encouraging voluntary or collective insurance systems.

### **Improving dialogue and partnerships in times of restructuring**

Despite the fact that social partners roles, when existing, have been proved to be successful, structured social dialogue is not the strongest point in SMEs culture and there are plenty of good and bad reasons for that. However, dialogue is not absent but rather informal. Developing and structuring (social) dialogue among SMEs requires taking in account its culture, their strengths and weaknesses, their interpersonal and their flexible characters. In many cases, it cannot be "deducted" from large companies' traditions and schemes but needs trust and a spirit far away from barricade behaviour as well as being embedded in the diversity of SMEs cultures and opportunities. Even trade unions can play a positive role, if they accept to play the SMEs card, in providing expertise and sharing experiences.

Therefore the way to represent SMEs stake holders is necessarily innovative and making improvements in this area could be developed in two ways, internal and external:

- Within companies, by improving internal communication and, especially, timely sharing of information. Fair communication, procedures and equal treatment should be ensured, for those who will leave the organizations as well as for those who will stay.
- Outside of companies, by developing stable territorial/sector frameworks - the most promising developments if conceived for those companies - for consistent dialogues between SMEs managers and SMEs employees and other interested stake holders. What about an obligation to inform regional social partners



in advance of restructuring to come? What about a regional/sector framework providing collective funding for social plans and job to job transitions?

### Proposals for further activities and research

This IRENE policy paper does not cover all issues related to SMEs, restructuring and social dialogue. More in depth analysis and sharing of experiences, especially innovative ones, are needed. Therefore we suggest to conduct at national as well as at EU level activities focusing on:

- Value chains and dependency of SMEs towards large groups restructuring and ways for reducing their negative impacts,
- New collaborative relationships between SMEs and shared best HR practices,
- Innovations at local and sector levels arising in terms of support to job transitions and social dialogue,
- Changes in relationship to management, work and employment from the young generation and opportunities for SMEs.

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