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**Research Report**

## Social contracts and the UN's "Common Goals": Conceptualising a new role for international organisations

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## Social Contracts and the UN's “Common Goals”

### Conceptualising a New Role for International Organisations

Markus Loewe & Tina Zintl

#### Summary

Researchers, policymakers and the representatives of international organisations increasingly use the term “social contract” to describe relations between societal groups and a state. The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, for example, has declared that “now is the time to renew the social contract between Governments and their people and within societies” in his report *Our common agenda* (UN, 2021, p. 5). Likewise, the Director General of the International Labour Organization (ILO) has recently issued a report *Towards a renewed social contract* (ILO, 2024).

The question is whether all those applying the term “social contract” have a common understanding of its meaning. We suggest defining a social contract as the “entirety of explicit or implicit agreements between all relevant societal groups and the sovereign (i.e. the government or any other actor in power), defining their rights and obligations toward each other” (Loewe, Zintl, & Houdret, 2021). Today, all countries with some form of government have national social contracts, but there are wide variations between them. For instance, some social contracts are more inclusive than others, giving more rights to society. Some treat different societal groups differently, depending on their respective power and the interests of the government. And, crucially, only some social contracts consider, at least to some degree, the interests of those who are, by definition or because of their limited power, unable to voice their concerns in any renegotiation of the social contract – children, future generations, the environment, foreigners and marginalised social groups.

The UN Secretary-General’s report rightly complains that people in many countries feel increasingly alienated from the social contract (UN, 2021, p. 22) and that social contracts ignore the rights of future generations. In many countries, social contracts give rights to some influential groups in society to use available resources without consideration for less powerful groups, future generations and environmental concerns.

International organisations thus have four important roles to play. First, they can support the national process of *social contract renegotiations*: ease the dialogue between all interest groups inside member countries, encourage the involvement of less powerful actors and provide neutral and open fora for the negotiations. Second, they can engage in a *dialogue with member states* that are reluctant to reform social contracts, emphasising that such reform can mitigate or help to prevent terrorism, violent protest and mass migration. Third, international organisations can prepare themselves to *get involved when shocks happen* in particular member countries and use the momentum to foster substantial reforms. Fourth, international organisations should continue building *supra-national social contracts*. All too often, the parties of national social contracts negotiate unsustainable rules at national level that, for instance, expose workers to health hazards or harm the environment, with the argument that they have to be able to compete with other countries. International agreements are therefore important to establish minimum norms and standards, prevent a race to the bottom and reinforce multilateralism.

## Introduction

In 2021, the United Nations Secretary-General published his vision for the future of global cooperation in a report entitled *Our common agenda* (UN, 2021). He declared that “now is the time to renew the social contract between Governments and their people and within societies” (UN, 2021, p. 5). A whole chapter of the report deals with the issue without, however, elaborating in detail on the meaning of the term “social contract”. Likewise, the ILO’s plea for human-centred economics (2024) envisions “a robust social contract” without clearly defining it. In the following, we (i) propose a concept to fill this gap in conceptual clarity, (ii) discuss the reasons why the calls by international organisations for new social contracts are justified, (iii) make suggestions for the shape of such a new concept and how it could come into being and (iv) consider what role the United Nations (UN) system and other supra-national organisations can play in such a process.

## Conceptualising social contracts

To our knowledge, the term “social contract” was first used by European state philosophers in the 17th and 18th centuries: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and others. From their perspective, a social contract is something good by definition because it helps to overcome what they call the “state of nature” without a state, which is marked by anarchy and lack of security. People are willing to accept a government that provides for peace and security, based on a social contract concluded between free people. The state is thus formed by participatory action of citizens entering such a contract, which is meant to provide property rights, public peace and security in society (Hobbes, 1651; Locke, 1689). Yet, these state philosophers neglected the fact that different societal groups have different concerns and hence different interests in the state. Affluent people want the state to deliver, first of all, *protection* of their lives and property against internal and external threats. They are interested in a powerful police and army. Less privileged people, in turn, aspire mainly to

the *provision* of some degree of social justice: financial support during crises and some sharing of welfare. And the state philosophers also did not strongly emphasise how important political *participation* is for all social groups in order to assert their interests.

The term “social contract” may have been coined by European thinkers but the idea behind it is well known in many parts of the world. For instance, the *Mahāvastu*, a canonical Buddhist text from the second century, identified that “people [...] decided to appoint one man from among them to maintain order in return for a share of the produce of their fields and herds” (Al-Basham, 1954, p. 83). Contractarian thought in the Muslim world goes back to the holy Qur’ān itself, which establishes a sacred contract (*‘aqd*) between Allah and the *muslimīn*, who submit to the *amīr al-mu’minīn* (leader of the believers) as Allah’s representative on earth. This reciprocal solidarity between individuals and the community leader was also described by 14th century Muslim thinker Ibn Khaldun (Krieg, 2017).

The question today is much less whether a country has a social contract or not. All countries with a functioning government have some kind of social contract. The issue is rather (i) what the respective tasks of government and society are in these different social contracts (Heydemann, 2007; Kaplan, 2015) and (ii) who and what decides whether a given social contract is effective and beneficial.

Various authors have therefore focused on ways to improve social contracts or replace them with better ones. However, many of them have a very specific understanding of what a “better” social contract would be and are strongly led by their own convictions (e.g. Al-Razzaz, 2013; Devarajan & Mottaghi, 2015; Shafik, 2021; Weale, 2013; ).

We suggest, instead, defining social contracts in a non-normative way as the “entirety of explicit or implicit agreements between all relevant societal groups and the sovereign (i.e. the government or any other actor in power), defining their rights and obligations toward each other” (Loewe, Zintl, &

Houdret, 2021). Societal groups can be social classes, ethnic or religious communities, interest groups, groups of employees, populations in different geographic regions, genders or age cohorts, and other groupings that people belong to, feel part of or identify with. In terms of labour markets, for example, this can be private and public entrepreneurs in their function as employers, workers and employees, the self-employed, the unemployed and people outside the labour force. The term “society” would hence include not only civil society but also the private sector and citizens as individuals.

The involved parties judge the quality of their social contract by the quite different items they exchange, which can be grouped into several categories. Governments can deliver the “three Ps” (see Figure 1):

- *Protection*: individual and collective security against internal and external threats (such as military offenses from inside or outside the country, criminality, terrorism or state terror) in addition to legal security (such as the enforcement of human and civil rights),
- *Provision*: extension of economic and social services, including education, health care, social protection, employment, infrastructure (communication, transportation, utilities), a good business climate (including competition on markets) and resources (e.g. water, land).
- *Participation* by society in political decision-making: free, fair and secret elections, open public debates, free mass media and other information channels (Loewe, Zintl, & Houdret, 2021).

In exchange, citizens (societal groups):

- recognise or at least tolerate the government in power
- pay taxes
- invest in public goods (serve in the military, engage with the local community etc.).

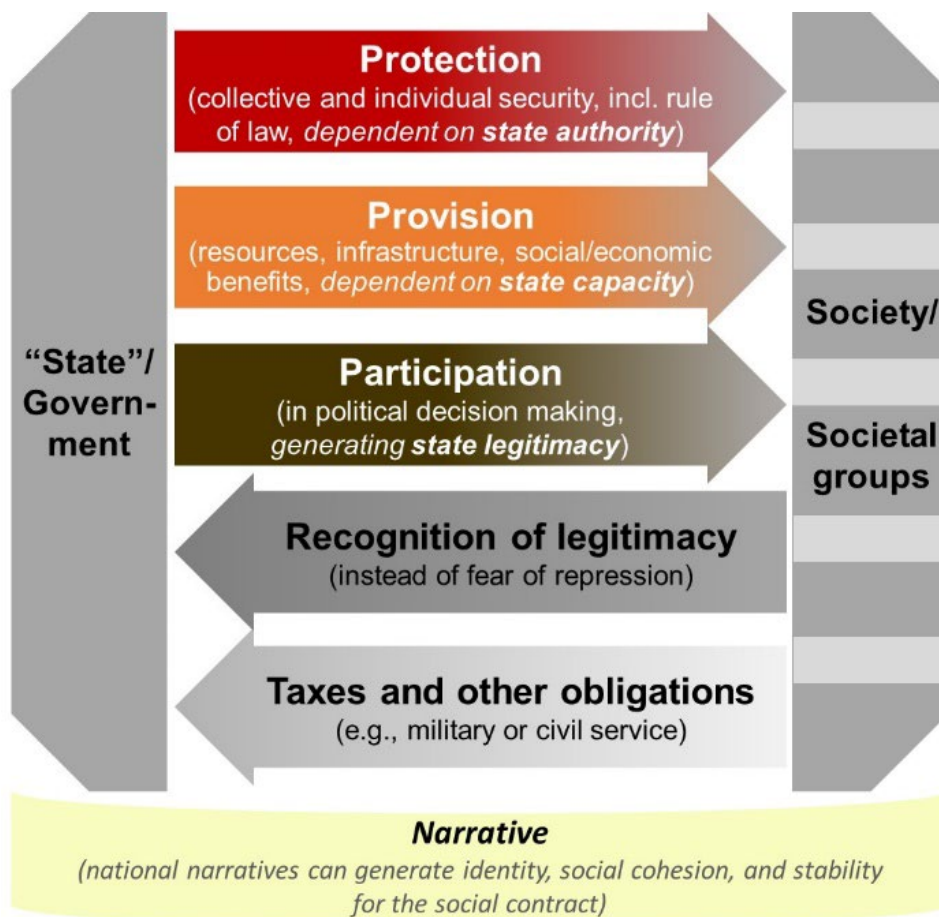
This give-and-take lends the government legitimacy. In the reverse case, if the government, the

citizens or both fail to deliver their duties, they might turn to repressive or violent means in order to stay in power or make their voice heard, respectively.

The main goal of any social contract is thus to establish a reasonable degree of certainty as to the expectations of government and societal actors regarding their respective rights and obligations towards each other, thereby contributing to the stability of state–society relations. A social contract could thus be considered as a good one if it is effective in achieving this goal (Loewe et al., 2024).

Alternatively, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an internationally endorsed framework of orientation and could therefore also serve as an objective indicator for the quality of social contracts. According to the UN Secretary-General, “A vibrant social contract guarantees the conditions for people to live a decent life, leaving no one behind and enabling all to participate in society, as promised in the 2030 Agenda.” (UN, 2021, p. 27). However, while the SDGs can give us some orientation, they are not very helpful for comparisons between different social contracts because some countries may do better with respect to some SDGs while others do better with respect to other SDGs.

Therefore, we suggest a system-immanent logic. It is based on the postulation that social contracts are meant to serve, first of all, the involved parties: the different societal groups and the government of the concerned country. From an outsider’s perspective, we can assume that any increase in all three Ps constitutes an improvement for the population, and that comparing the three Ps across different social contracts (see Figure 2) can provide an orientation of their main characteristics. However, only people inside a country can decide what is most important if there is a trade-off: more protection, more provision or more participation. Likewise, the contracting parties have to negotiate themselves how additional amounts of the three deliverables should be distributed across the population.

**Figure 1: Deliverables in social contracts**

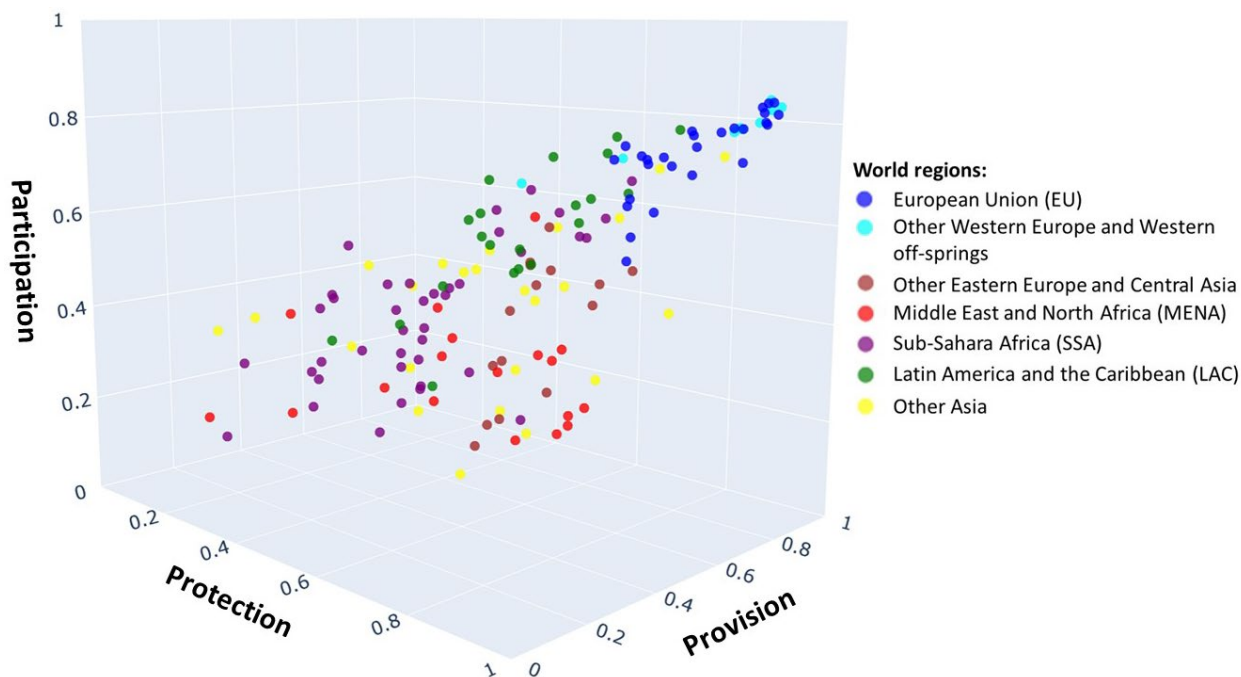
Source: Loewe, Zintl, & Houdret (2021)

This definition and three Ps framework, which was created in 2021, is fully in line with the starting point of the report published by the UN Secretary-General: “I see three foundations for a renewed social contract fit for the twenty-first century: (a) trust; (b) inclusion, protection and participation; and (c) measuring and valuing what matters to people and the planet.” (UN, 2021, p. 22). The “trust” in the UN Secretary-General’s statement tallies with the recognition/toleration of the government by citizens in our concept (institutional or horizontal trust) as well as the mutual toleration of citizens and societal groups (interpersonal or vertical trust) as a sign of inclusionary social contract. The “inclusion, protection and participation” mentioned by the UN Secretary-General (UN, 2021, p. 22) corresponds to “provision, protection and participation” in our concept.

## Need for a social contract renewal

While social contracts nowadays exist in almost all countries worldwide, they differ a lot across time and space. The level of *protection*, *provision* and *participation* granted by governments varies according to the negotiating power of the contracting partners. Figure 2 displays the three Ps of countries in different world regions according to a recently established social contract index, which is based on indicators measuring the inputs of governments into protection, provision and participation (Loewe, El-Haddad, & Zintl, 2024). It reveals that some governments deliver the three Ps in large quantity and quality while others fall short with regards to one or more of them. This may lead to grievances in society and hence political instability known as “state fragility” (Loewe & Zintl, 2021).



**Figure 2: Protection, provision and participation in countries worldwide (around 2019)**

Source: Loewe, El-Haddad, & Zintl (2024)

The UN Secretary-General holds that symptoms of state fragility are increasing in many countries: “There is a growing disconnect between people and the institutions that serve them, with many feeling left behind and no longer confident that the system is working for them, an increase in social movements and protests and an ever deeper crisis of trust fomented by a loss of shared truth and understanding.” (UN, 2021, p. 22)

These trends can be due to various factors. Societal groups in some countries may have the impression that the social contract is not working for them anymore, and governments should reflect what they can do to relieve these concerns. In some countries, better *protection* is the main issue because people are vulnerable to growing threats such as wars, terrorism, macro-economic shocks and extreme weather events due to climate change, and cannot take effective measures against such risks. In other countries, better *provision* is more important because governments have reduced their spending on social and economic services, or different groups of the population have benefited in a selective or

discriminate way. Inequalities have risen with the effect that some social groups feel increasingly excluded (Bussolo et al., 2019), in particular groups such as women (Zintl, 2023), people of old age or with handicaps, people in rural areas, or working poor or long-term unemployed with little education. Here, governments might consider investing in more equal opportunities such as access to education, health, markets and resources as well as social protection that prevents people from falling into or being stuck in poverty.

In other countries, yet again, better *participation* is needed. It is a key state deliverable because people feel alienated from the national social contract if they do not have a say in it – in particular if they believe that only a small elite has a say. Some governments discriminately take the interests of those influential groups into consideration, which might be able to form resistance and opposition. Equal and meaningful political *participation* is also a vehicle to enforce the request of different societal groups for better *protection* and *provision*.

Labour markets are an interesting example of a field in which the interests of all contracting parties have to be brought to the fore, and a compromise on who delivers what must be found. The parties are the government, public and private companies, workers and employees and their families, the self-employed and the unemployed. The government is supposed to deliver, once again, *protection* (e.g. safety at work rules, protection against unfair dismissal), *provision* (e.g. training of workers and employers, unemployment benefits, protection of fair competition, enterprise finance) and *participation* (e.g. social dialogue, responsive industrial policymaking, freedom of collective bargaining). However, employers also have a duty to *protect* their workers against health risks, *provide* them with fair pay and working conditions and grant them the possibility of at least limited *participation* in enterprise decision making, which can improve the sense of responsibility of workers. Workers, on their part, need to accept management decisions, and to contribute by fulfilling the agreed-on work tasks. Their representatives in works councils, boards of directors and trade unions, in particular, have a responsibility for the long-term development of their companies and the whole economy and should therefore not exaggerate their wage and working condition claims. The social pacts are thus “mini-social contracts” that the bargaining partners have concluded and, at the same time, are an expression of explicit social contract regulations for the labour market.

As in other policy fields, the main problem is that some actors are not sitting at the table when the social dialogue takes place. This holds for the unemployed and people outside the labour force – but also sometimes the self-employed, informal employees in general and the dependants of workers. In some countries, one of the negotiating partners takes the interests of these groups into account and brings them into the negotiations. For example, in some cases, trade unions who typically represent formal sector workers and employees sometimes speak also on behalf of the dependants of their members or the unemployed.

Sometimes, the self-employed establish their own associations to make sure they are heard. Government also should make sure that the interests of these groups are not forgotten – in addition to those of people outside the labour force such as students or people with handicaps or of an older age group. However, one group is often neglected even in countries with a high level of political participation: future generations.

In many policy fields, the interests of future generations are also not taken into account because they cannot participate in ongoing social contract renegotiations. In other policy fields, some negotiating parties interpret the interests of future generations in their own interests, e.g. to justify decisions on spending cuts in infrastructure projects in order to decrease the national debt. The problem is thus systemic and inherent in the institution of the social contract. The problem is particularly virulent in decisions taken on the design of social insurance (where the active population often finances the pensions of older generations) or reinvestment in infrastructure, education systems or climate change mitigation and adaptation. Part of the dilemma that humanity faces in terms of climate change and other environmental degradation is that future generations are not a party in today's social contracts, and yet today's social contracts have long-term effects on generations yet to be born.

The other part of the dilemma is the absence of the environment itself in the negotiations. Animals and plants, for example, are not a party in social contracts either, with the effect that others negotiate solutions at their expense and the expense of the environment in general.

This insight has led UNRISD (2022) to call for the development of “eco-social contracts” that consider environmental goals just as much as social, economic and political ones. The idea is to take a longer-term perspective in the distribution of limited resources.

## Emergence of new social contracts

Most social contracts are amended from time to time to take account of changes in the framework conditions or the balance of power between the contracting parties. Social contracts are meant to stabilise state–society relations but this does not mean that the relations are static. Social contracts do fulfil their function best if they are flexible enough to take account of such changes in state–society relations. Otherwise, one of the parties might terminate the contract. For example, society could rebel against the government or even overthrow it. Or the government could superimpose a new social contract onto society and enforce it by repression, propaganda and other means. Propaganda can be a new narrative (see Figure 1), for instance presenting the case that only the government in office can save the country.

Every social contract should therefore be regularly reviewed for effectiveness and be amended if necessary. Ideally, this process involves all contracting parties, more and less influential ones, as the UN Secretary-General wrote: “I invite all countries to conduct inclusive and meaningful national listening consultations so all citizens have a say in envisioning their countries’ futures.” (UN, 2021, p. 4). What emerges from the negotiations can vary greatly from one country to the other as a result of differences in values and norms, the framework conditions, the challenges ahead and the composition of the contracting parties. International organisations and other foreign donors should respect the negotiation process and its outcome and refrain from imposing a one-size-fits-all solution on different countries. As already mentioned, social contracts are meant to serve the interests of their parties domestically and should therefore only be assessed by them alone: “The social contract originates at the subnational and national levels, and its exact architecture is unquestionably up to each society to determine. However, any social contract also has a global dimension.” (UN, 2021, p. 22)

Yet, the process tends to suffer from two shortcomings. First, as already mentioned, even some of the most affected parties – notably future generations and the environment – cannot participate. Second, in many countries not even core contracting parties are adequately involved.

Most problematically, many countries do not amend their social contract for long periods of time even though some of its parties are increasingly dissatisfied with it. Possible causes are (i) a lack of joint vision and agreement of the contracting parties (such as in Tunisia after the revolution in 2011), (ii) the resistance of powerful, internal spoilers (e.g. authoritarian governments that are able to co-opt influential societal groups and repress all others such as in Egypt, sadly both before and after the revolution in 2011) or (iii) pressure exerted by external spoilers (hegemons of the respective country such as Iran in Iraq or Russia in Libya) (Loewe et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the social contracts even in these countries change sometimes. This change comes often unexpectedly and abruptly because it tends to be prompted by unpredicted shocks: a global economic or domestic crisis, a pandemic, a natural catastrophe (earthquake, tsunami, etc.), an important event in a neighbouring country (such as the Yasmin revolution in Tunisia that triggered revolutions in other Arab countries), international sanctions, pressure exerted by foreign donors (such as the IMF’s conditionalities imposed on Turkey in 2000 or when US President George Bush Senior made further support of Israel dependent on peace talks with the Palestinians in 1992–93), or the military intervention of a foreign power (such as the US invasion in Iraq). These situations are critical junctures, where one or more of the contracting parties must react to the unpredicted shock. Often, they change their previous course and amend the social contract. Sometimes, though, observers expect such change but it does not take place (such as in Lebanon after the explosion in the port of Beirut). Critical junctures of this kind are the moments when international organisations have most



leverage to influence the decisions of domestic actors and thereby change the social contract (Loewe et al., 2024).

International organisations, and multilateralism in general, are perhaps most effective at reminding contracting parties of their responsibility to include the interests of future generations and the environment. Yet, the most organic changes in social contracts are made from within, ensuring ownership for the stipulated give-and-take. Despite their shortcomings, roadmaps and strategies might still be a promising instrument, even in autocratic systems, provided they fulfil two conditions: (i) they distribute the burden for (future) reforms equally between all living generations and between them and future generations and (ii) they are indeed regularly evaluated, reviewed and adapted if need be.

## Options of international organisations

International organisations that are willing to ease the process of social contract amendments on the national level have four options: to support national processes of social contract renegotiations; to engage in a dialogue with member states that are reluctant to reform social contracts; to prepare for turning unexpected crises into windows of opportunity; and to develop supra-national social contracts.

*Social contract renegotiations:* The first option is to inspire and support the dialogue between all interest groups within member countries, encourage governments and more powerful societal groups and organisations to involve also all those actors that have not participated in social contract negotiations yet. International organisations should also facilitate the actual negotiations. In particular, they could offer to provide neutral and open fora for the discussions between the different parties and support all of them in a neutral way in the building of negotiation capacities. Tunisia is an example of a country where this happened for a couple of years. Different agencies have supported the government, the political parties, the

employers' associations and the trade unions in their preparations for a dialogue on economic and social reform. The International Labour Organization (ILO) is in a particularly favourable position to ease the social dialogue as a central part of social contract renegotiations. Being a tripartite organisation itself, it can easily encourage governments, employer associations and trade unions to set up social pacts in the interests of their countries that also incentivise or provide the model for changes in the larger social contract. Other international organisations have significant roles to play as well. UNESCO can, for example foster national dialogues on education reforms that involve all parties: governments, child welfare organisations, parent initiatives and others. In addition, international organisations can make suggestions on the selection of priority policy fields where reform might be easy and beneficial for everybody. In these fields, they can underpin local priorities with international expertise.

*Dialogue with member states:* The second option is to have a dialogue with the governments of member countries that are reluctant to reform the social contract at all or fast enough. International organisations can use the argument that some reform can be in the interest of all involved parties in that it might prevent the discontent of dissatisfied groups from erupting into acts of terrorism, violent protests, demonstrations or even civil war. It might also reduce the brain drain caused by well-educated, enterprising and agile people emigrating – exactly the people countries need most.

*Get involved when shocks happen:* The third option is to be prepared for the fact that any kind of shock puts the contracting parties in a country under pressure with the effect that they have to react. In these moments, international organisations have a role to play to remind key decision makers about their responsibilities and grasp the window of opportunity to change their course towards sustainable paths of development and an inclusive process of social contract renegotiation. At the same time, shocks often place high demands on resources that the government

sometimes cannot meet. This can seriously damage the social contract, and international organisations and other donors have a potential role in mobilising resources for coping with the situation.

*Supra-national social contracts:* The fourth option is to develop supra-national social contracts that respect the sovereignty of member countries but establish sustainable solutions for international cooperation. The parties of social contracts on the national level often try to negotiate solutions that enable them to compete with other countries. As a result, they are reluctant to take environmental and social goals seriously into account – fearing no consequences because neither the environment nor underprivileged groups have an influential voice in the negotiations. Far too often, it is easy for other contracting parties to argue that socially just and environmentally friendly solutions are too expensive and hence hamper the ability of the national economy to compete with other national economies. Therefore, Sadiq and Tsourapas (2023) call for a “transnational social contract” regulating, for example, labour relations on a global level. The ILO was established as the risk of such an economic “race to the bottom” was

recognised. While the production factor, capital, is relatively mobile, workers, especially those with limited education, are not. Back in the late 19th century, this dilemma led to the first initiatives for the foundation of an international organisation that would define minimum social standards of production. Later established as ILO, its role was perhaps never more contemporary than it is today. If it succeeds in establishing at least elements of an international social contract for the labour market and the sphere of production that sets social and environmental rules, it allows the parties of national social contracts to take the interest of the environment, less well-represented and future generations more into consideration. Other international organisations need to establish additional elements for the international social contracts that can grow and develop further, and turn the world into a set of actors with clear rules on everyone’s rights and obligations, and certainty in their expectation of a mutual give and take. International organisations are best positioned to turn the tide of single-handed national responses into inclusive and just social contracts within the planetary boundaries.

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