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No cause for celebration on 1 May

When will we see the emancipation of Arab trade unions?

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When will we see the emancipation of Arab trade unions?

Bonn, 30 April 2018. As in other nations, International Workers' Day will also be celebrated in Arab countries this year – with a great deal of pomp and ceremony, official parades and, perhaps, the formal announcement of a wage increase for public service workers. Putting aside for one moment the ongoing excitement in many places about Arab socialism, however, there is not much cause for celebration on the labour markets in North Africa and the Middle East. A key reason for this is the lack of effective trade unions able to carry out their role in shaping labour-market policy.

Unemployment levels in North Africa and the Middle East are alarmingly high, particularly among university graduates and young people. And this despite the fact that many women (just like workers in the informal sector) do not even appear in the unemployment statistics since the employment rate among women is the lowest in the world. The Arab Spring, which took place a whole seven years ago, was triggered by the precarious socio-economic climate and the lack of credible institutions to remedy the situation. Since then, the economic position of most of the region's countries has deteriorated instead of improving. According to surveys, employment and income generation were identified alongside domestic security as some of the most pressing problems by large swathes of the population in Arab countries.

Even Tunisia, the class leader in terms of political liberalisation, is struggling with economic difficulties, in spite of the fact that the UGTT union and employers' association UTICA made a significant contribution to the creation of a new, freer political order in their role as lead negotiators in the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet. Indeed, they won the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts.

Arab trade unions find themselves in an extremely difficult position. On the one hand, this is due to their corporatist legacy from the times of Arab socialism, when they largely functioned as compliant mass organisations in the service of autocratic rulers. On the other hand, the concept of trade unions is a highly political one in the Arab region: In a context far removed from Western multi-party democracy, trade unions offer a legal framework for political organisation, even in the face of a state of emergency, a ban on meetings and curtailed press freedoms. As such, it is barely surprising that Arab potentates see in trade unions potential opposition ringleaders

and attempt to curb their influence, by violent means if necessary. Even Italian researcher Giulio Regeni, who examined the Egyptian trade union movement, fell victim to repression.

Correspondingly, it is not only German development policy actors who are cautious and restrained when it comes to addressing the trade union issue. Development cooperation projects focusing on employment are primarily concerned with combating unemployment among young people and women through training initiatives and business support (through micro-loans, for example). Measures that directly seek to influence the way the labour market is organised, for instance by supporting the Tunisian social pact, are few and far between, though all the more important from a development policy perspective. The main task of trade unions is to represent employees' interests and communicate negotiation outcomes to workers in order to help bring about a properly functioning labour market. Both of these roles are essential when it comes to getting the overdue new social contract off the ground in the Middle East and North Africa. Employers and state actors must allow employees to be involved more in decision-making processes. In return, Arab employees must recognise negotiation outcomes and develop realistic expectations especially with regard to the jobs available in the public sector and the accruing social security benefits.

Like state repression, old boy networks and the irresponsible assertion of individual interests also put labour-market policy gains at risk. Membership of a trade union or employers' association has so far often been interpreted merely as an investment in one's own *wasta* (Arabic for "connections"). This kind of nepotism and apportionment of blame for the woes of the local labour market is counter-productive. Instead, greater emphasis needs to be placed on cooperation between state institutions, employers' associations and, of course, trade unions. Such cooperation should be geared towards addressing problems on the labour market, free of political bias. With a little courage and tact, German development policy actors can familiarise Arab partners with the German model of employer and employee federations and thus contribute to more inclusive economic development. So, on this International Workers' Day there is still a great deal left to do, for the Arab world and for those supporting its development.