

Sustainable work throughout the life course: National policies and strategies

Executive summary

Introduction

Sustainable work over the life course, according to the working definition set out by Eurofound, means that 'living and working conditions are such that they support people in engaging and remaining in work throughout an extended working life'. Making work sustainable throughout the life course requires that two domains are addressed: (a) the characteristics of the job and the work environment and (b) the characteristics and circumstances of the individual. It demands accommodation and adaptation between these two domains as both evolve over time, where work corresponds to the abilities, needs and personal circumstances of the worker throughout the life course. Work that is sustainable enables more people to enter the labour market; it also enables people to continue working throughout their life and into older age.

This report focuses on national policies that help to achieve sustainable work in 10 Member States. The study looks at how these policies are being implemented, whether they are integrated into a coherent framework, and whether they are complementary or contradictory.

Policy context

European countries face a number of societal and labour market challenges that might be resolved by designing work so that sustainability is at its centre. Their populations are ageing and the workforces to support them are shrinking. There is also a trend towards more precarious jobs, new forms of employment are emerging, and in many cases, the number of jobs available is decreasing in the context of the recent economic crisis. These changing circumstances generate additional pressures on European social protection systems and impose a number of barriers to achieving the smart, sustainable and inclusive growth promoted by the Europe 2020 strategy. As a result, the issue of how to ensure that

people can participate in the labour market and continue to do so until an older age has become central in all EU Member States.

A wide range of public policies can contribute significantly to making work sustainable. Relevant tools include legislation (for example, labour law and occupational health and safety regulation), social protection systems (providing, for example, unemployment, family and disability benefits and parental leave), public services (including employment, education, health and lifelong learning services), public infrastructure (such as childcare and elderly care) as well as financial and other incentives for companies (to adapt the workplace, for instance).

Key findings

- An all-encompassing approach to policies that embrace the relatively new concept of sustainable work was found in the Netherlands, Sweden and, to some extent, Belgium. In other countries, however, some key features of sustainable work are covered through concepts such as quality of work, decent work and good work (Germany), well-balanced work (Poland), good-quality employment (Lithuania) and quality of working life (Finland).
- Eurofound has previously defined four dimensions of quality of work and employment: earnings, prospects, intrinsic job quality and working time quality. To make work sustainable, all four dimensions are important, both at the level of the job and at the level of the specific needs and circumstances for the individual. Many of the policies identified cut across these dimensions. For example, active labour market policies cut across the themes of inclusion, employment protection, prospects and earnings, skills development and work–life balance. This

implies that actions both at the general level (job quality for all) and actions that address specific issues or groups (such as the labour market integration of certain groups) are needed.

- Policies derived from a wide spectrum of social angles and addressing a wide range of issues are vital to making work sustainable. However, inter-institutional coordination of these policies is a big challenge, and interaction between different measures needs to be considered. Approaches to sustainable work are too fragmented, leading to gaps and inconsistencies across and within policy areas.
- A strong role taken by the social partners is significant in successfully pursuing strategies contributing to sustainable work and creating a favourable working environment. Nevertheless, much depends on the institutional and legal frameworks in which the social partners operate and the extent of inclusion such frameworks provide, as well as the room for manoeuvre in the economic context.
- The study underlines the importance of policies that create the framework conditions but also allow for development of company practices that lead to more sustainable work. These are shaped by the way in which government regulation and collective agreements are applied in practice, whether the workers' voice is heard (or not) and how worker participation evolves.
- A gender mainstreaming approach is essential for sustainability of work for all. A clear gender bias in some policies means that women face more barriers to sustainable work. In contrast to this, certain policies were identified that create an encouraging context for a more equal take-up of care responsibilities over the life course and a smoother interaction between work and private life.

- Various changes in labour market and employment systems have occurred in response to the economic crisis, but its adverse effects on sustainability of work have not necessarily been considered. The lack of jobs has made some transitions more difficult, particularly for young people and older workers.

Policy pointers

Introducing the term 'sustainable work' into the policy agenda would help to enrich policymaking. In fact, the concept of sustainable work could connect different policies into an overarching agenda with a long-term goal: adapting work to the worker and their situation throughout the life course so that workers remain healthy and active in the labour market for as long as possible, and achieve a proper balance between work and private life.

Member States have been discussing or adopting horizontal strategies aimed at dealing with demographic ageing, protecting workers' health or addressing skills shortages. Often these have been primarily discussion frameworks. It is important that they are followed by specific policies with budgets, implementing agencies and oversight of results.

There is no trade-off between horizontal and issue-specific policies. Adopting overarching sustainable work strategies might help mainstream relevant ideas. These need to be coupled with inter-institutional coordination between relevant ministries and policy actors to plug policy gaps and address inconsistencies. A coherent policy framework aimed at making work sustainable should aim for a holistic approach ensuring that different thematic policy frameworks feed into each other.

There is no one-size-fits-all prescription: each Member State must consider how it fits and adapts to the changing economic context and challenges. This could lead to 'sustainability-proofing' of policies, in the sense that new policy measures in a particular field and the overall policy body would be accompanied by ex-ante and ex-post impact assessments of their impacts on sustainability of work for men and women throughout the life course.

Further information

The report *Sustainable work throughout the life course: National policies and strategies* is available at <http://bit.ly/SWStrategy>.

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