



# Opportunities and challenges for sustainable work in Europe. Face to face with Greet Vermeylen (\*)

Interview by Federica Romano

- 1) Making work sustainable over the life course is one of the main issues related to the future of work. What are, in your opinion, the key elements of sustainability?

Sustainable work means achieving living and working conditions that enable people to work longer over the life course. Working population is getting older and there is a heavy pressure on social protection systems, so what we are trying to see at Eurofound is what needs to be done for workers in order to stay longer into the labor market. When we talk about sustainable work, we take into consideration two aspects: first of all, job quality, quality of the work environment and other elements of working conditions that have an impact on health and well-being of workers, such as motivation or work-life balance. The second aspect related to sustainable work is how you can make sure that, throughout the working life, the circumstances and situations of workers are really taken into account. This can have to do with working time regulation but it might also have to do with motivation: if you have a really bad work environment, sometimes continue to work is so hard that certain actions need to be taken. What we say at Eurofound is that for work to be sustainable there should be actions that take into consideration particular circumstances of individuals, to make sure that people can work longer. This is a little bit the idea behind capability theory: those who want to work should be able to work. For instance, disabled people can work but maybe certain aspects in the work environment need to be adapted or maybe the working hours need to be adapted. The workplace is really crucial and usually working time arrangements could help to reconcile working and private life. I think these are the two main elements to focus on, but there are also other issues related to sustainability. For instance, with digitalization of work you might lose your job because it doesn't exist anymore, so it is important to reflect on how you can retrain people and on how you give them different skills.

- 2) Does the implementation of sustainable work policies differ across EU Member States? If yes, in which way?

Yes, it differs quite a lot. First of all, *sustainable work* is a term used by Eurofound but there are some other terms, which are covering more or less the same topic. Only in Sweden there is a clear policy strategy on *sustainable work*. In the Netherlands they talk about *sustainable employability* while in Belgium there is the definition of *workable work*. In other countries it is common to find the *quality of work* agenda that includes most of the themes related to sustainable work, such as health and safety, working time policies, training, work organization etc. These policies vary very much from country to country. Even Sweden, that has a sustainable work agenda, might not go

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equally far on all the subjects. Some elements could be good in a country and certain elements could be better in another one. I think it is important trying to find what is the package that works and which are the things that are not working well. And I also think that in all the countries the systems are changing constantly and there are always laws that are evolving. Sometimes austerity measures are taken and they might have an impact on the regulation of work and it might not always be that good for sustainable work.

Eurofound tried to map a little bit what exists in Europe but it is an extremely wide kind of thing. For instance, what we saw on reconciliation policies is that parental leaves are different from country to country, whether they are paid or not and how much time, or whether the fathers are encouraged or not. Also at the end of the careers we saw that a lot of people get out from the labor market earlier to take care of either the grandchildren or the elderly parents. If there are no workplace practices or no policies and you can't take some time off or reduce your working hours, people just have to stop working because somebody needs to take care of those necessities. In most of the countries they try to deal with how do you combine care and work but for others there is a lot less clarity on what is available and policies are not so far going. In the Netherlands they introduced a really interesting measure: you can apply for care leave also for a friend or for a neighbor. So, for instance, you can ask for care leave or reduction of working hours to take care of a neighbor who has health issues. It is quite interesting actually because this measure is not only for your direct relatives but it might also go a little bit further. The employer normally needs to agree with it, there is some kind of leeway. Plus also you cannot constantly change your mind: you have to be a little bit organized to some extent. A deeper reflection on how to do this is needed. Sustainable work is really trying to reflect on how to make sure that as many people as possible can work and have the facilities to work, but combining it with their private life.

- 3) A sustainable work system requires an increased individualization of career paths in order to foster better and longer working lives. Do you think that the industrial relations actors can have a major role in promoting a system of job evaluation based on individual's ability and needs? If yes, how?

First of all, you could reflect on the individualization of rights over the life course. Whatever workplace system you have, I think it is really interesting that social partners are involved into it. Just having a guarantee that there is a mechanism of collective rights at company level, it's really important. This means that, at the workplace, you have a certain strategy - for instance on flexi time or teleworking - that is discussed and organized at company level. Eurofound studies on sustainable work reported that, in some cases, also the social partners at a higher level are involved in it, with a reflection on what makes work sustainable at federal level or cross-industrial level. For instance, it is what they did in Belgium. They had what they called a round table on *workable work* in which they tried to reflect on certain policy measures. I'm not sure whether the outcome was successful or not, but at least there was the attempt of trying to make sure that the social partners were involved in the reflection on how to ensure that work is good enough for people to continue to stay in the labor market. Also in Sweden the social partners were heavily involved in the reflection on work organization and the development of learning capabilities. The social partners in Sweden have always been very important actors on this issue, which is now called *workplace innovation*, while before it was called *employee driven innovation* or *sustainable work systems*. This kind of reflection is mostly driven by the social partners. For me sustainable work is also that: it's about how do you build your skills throughout the life course.

- 4) What are, in your opinion, long-term challenges relevant to sustainable work in Europe? How it is possible to overcome these challenges and transform them into opportunities for competitiveness and inclusiveness?

The long-term challenges for sustainable work are really related to the individualization of career paths. First of all, it's important to reflect on how to create the conditions in which people want to continue working until a later age. Maybe you need also to consider certain exceptions, giving allowances to people working in bad conditions so they can retire earlier. That is a social justice choice that you can make as a society. Eurofound did some work on *arduous work* trying to find what is the correct definition which gives justified reason for people to retire earlier. Another important element is the reflection on the role of social partners and on who do they cover and on how they can find new groups. At workplace level as well, it's important investing on the quality of work and workplace innovation: this has to be considered not just as a cost but as an investment. Awareness is also important: you cannot oblige employers to implement sustainable work practices but we saw that there are better results in those countries where there is more involvement of workers, not only collective but also individual involvement. In particular, workplace innovation is really related to sustainable work: this is one of the ways that could be an opportunity for both competitiveness and inclusiveness. If you create a workplace for very diverse workforce with different shapes, forms and capacities, you have not only a healthier workplace but a healthier society as well.

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