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I.6. SUSTAINABLE WORK OVER THE COURSE OF LIFE: A NEW PARADIGM FOR DECENT WORK

Changing the world of work and searching for responses to contemporary challenges

The latest significant worldwide experiences – triggered from one side by digitalization, globalization and technological progress, and from the other by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate and demographic crises – have shown that our world is changing irrevocably. This unstoppably caused essential changes in our world of work (Eurofound 2022), leading, as scientists point out, to the re-commodification of work and consequently endangering the dignity of working people. There is nothing detrimental about this, as since the dawn of time the world has been driven by various mechanisms and imbalances that are exacerbated by the changes and transformations permanently taking place. Therefore, it is important to realize a very simple and unquestionable truth: that the occurrence of changes cannot be stopped. Accordingly, changes need be balanced with adequately developed mechanisms and instruments. What does this mean for the working community and the world of work? In the authors' opinion, first of all this means the need to become responsible for necessary adjustments and rebalance instruments in these new realities. It is challenging and ambitious to act adequately in the present time without compromising the abilities of future generations. This means the responsibility for decent working conditions for present cohorts, together with decency towards future generations. As a result of new challenges in the world of work, a demand for a new quality of protection for decent working conditions becomes obvious. Does the concept of decent work meet the requirements in this range, and are the international labor standards developed so far sufficient?

It is difficult to disagree with the International Labor Organization's (ILO) statement that today "we are witnessing a world of work that is changing at an unprecedented pace and scale" (ILO 2019, p. 8). It is a worrying fact that the difference between what workforces are expecting and what they experience performing work is deepening like never before. Widened inequalities arising from the diversification of types of employment, the development of digital work platforms and

new work relationships make job security and the protection of workers begin to become scarce goods. The response to preventing imbalances in a changing world by considering the interests of both present and future generations is contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, launched during the UN General Assembly in 2015 (hereafter – Agenda 2030, SDG) with detailed goals as milestones to be achieved. Decent work and the four pillars of the ILO Decent Work Agenda (1998) constitute its integral part. Accordingly, decent work plays a crucial role in achieving goals that are fundamental for the worldwide community strategy aimed at protecting humans' decent living, and decent work is explicitly mentioned in Agenda 2030.

Even if the area of employment is treated as only one of the elements influencing quality of life (Budowski, Jany and Schieff 2020, p. 8), its impact on human life and the wellbeing of all members of society is huge. Everyone would agree that as work constitutes a part of everyone's daily lives and is crucial to a person's dignity and development as a human being, economic development should include the creation of jobs and working conditions in which people can work in freedom, safety, equality and dignity and "international labor standards are there to ensure that it remains focused on improving the quality of life and dignity of men and women" (ILO 2019d, p. 13). The risk of commodification of human work resulting from contemporary changes in the world of work threatens the fundamental rights of people at work and causes great danger for the principle of decent work.

Working conditions cover different factors and threats, such as exposure to risk, non-standard working hours, and work intensity (Vendramin and Parent-Thirion 2019, s. 33). They have a strong influence on working people's lives and their ability to perform work during their life cycles, and constitute the main factor that allows them to sustain the ability and capacity to work. As the adjective *sustainable* is applied to something that is "able to be used without being completely used up" (Fleuren *et al.* 2020, p. 2), particular attention should be paid to the issue of the right to work, which is "interpreted as work that must be decent for a meaningful application of the right" (Rombouts and Zekić 2020, p. 355). This means the right to work in a safe, healthy, just and favorable working environment, in which the problem of balancing the personal and professional spheres becomes an important element of human wellbeing that greatly influences working ability and is strongly correlated with the retention of people at work. Consequently, working conditions not only determine the dimension of the prosperity of individuals through the course of their lives, but simultaneously is strongly reflected in the decent lives and wellbeing of future generations, thus having strong social and societal outcomes. The terms of sustainable social and economic development are important to note here, as the proportion of working and nonworking society members resulting from outflows from work interact with the state's economic prosperity and development objectives. Eurofound's research plays a practical role in determining whether working and living conditions are adequate, and it has made a very significant contribution to the concept of sustainable work. This does not mean that we omit the progress and outputs of the scientific literature. For more in this dimension, see Kira et al. (2010, p. 617), who define sustainable work as work "[work that …] promotes the development in employees' personal resources underlying their sustainable abilities to work" (Fleure 2019, pp. 72–74).

Eurofound's working definition of *sustainable work over the life course* means that working and living conditions are such that they support people in engaging and remaining in work throughout an

extended working life. One of the inherent steps toward achieving sustainable social cohesion and development goals is to ensure the protection of fundamental rights at work with adequate attention paid to measures counterbalancing contemporary challenges, considering new threats as their consequences increase work insecurity and reduce social protection. The occurrence of new workforce profiles and the increase in the number of groups that are chronically insecure in employment according to age, sex, disability, and poor health factors cannot be underestimated. The fulfilment of the expectations of different groups of working people and respect for their rights means respect for their dignity, and has a double-edged effect. The perception of work – or, more precisely, the culture of work and its ethos, as perceived through the individual prism – also grants work perception the potential to create benefit or harm for future generations. Ensuring respect for international labor standards and fundamental rights at work undoubtedly becomes of primary need for the sake of the present and future world of work. The question arises as to whether this aim can be achieved without clear rules demarcating obligations and responsibility. The response to this is well-known and does not need clarification.

The strong correlations of both concepts – decent work and sustainable work over the life course, with sustainable development goals in mind – raises discussion around the state of sustainability in labor law, including questions about its legal framework, legal definitions, their practical importance, implications and importance for the realization of the fundamental rights according to new threats. Assigning the concept of decent work such a major role in achieving the goals of sustainable development may raise doubts in the context of the lack of its legal guarantees, and voices have claimed its shortcomings and weaknesses as inherent in it being only a political agenda and a broad, overarching goal for labor law. Indeed, the needs of labor law effectively correspond to this goal. Moreover, labor law needs to be in line with the key issues for decent work such as the protection of human dignity at work and the de-commodification of labor (Weiss 2019, p. 1).

This discussion focuses around the issue of how the labor law shall react to new changes and threats arising in the world of work to prevent the re-commodification of labor with which we have recently been confronted (Weiss 2019, p. 11). The authors touch on the issue of whether the concept of decent work is keeping up with ongoing changes and challenges or whether it needs to be redefined adequately in the given context. As the organization of work and working systems (the definition of *work*, *employee* and *employment relationships*) is evolving (ILO 2017b), the concept of decent work requires parallel evolution considering the development tendencies, changes in working conditions and transformations currently appearing in the world of work. These transformations are not favorable to people at work and do not meet their expectations – whether by raising obstacles to enter the labor market or retaining them at work over longer segments of their lives. The matter of core labor rights as components and means for achieving decent work for all in challenging new circumstances remains open, as new threats are arising.

The analysis of the links between the concept of decent work and sustainable work over the life course are expected to bring a response to the question of increasing the practical relevance and effectiveness of decent work as the fundamental basis for achieving the sustainable development goals.

For this aim, the authors provide a discussion around the new paradigm for decent work embedded in the framework of the analysis of Eurofound's concept of sustainable work over the life

course (2015), as the latter is recognized to be an important mechanism of achieving sustainability during the working lives of community members. This concept also aims to engage and retain people in work throughout their extended working lives by bringing a new quality to the creation of working conditions that contributes to the wellbeing of both individual and society and stimulates inclusive and sustained economic growth. The role of labor law is also referred to as an instrument to counteract broadly understood imbalances in the labor and employment area. As such, labor law brings communities closer to the goals of sustainable development, for the achievement of which decent work has been assigned a special role. Following the above assumptions, the authors decided to detach this debate from the pathetic slogans that populate this area, instead redirecting efforts towards the issue of the practical implementation of fundamental rights at work in changing working circumstances that are intertwined with modern patterns of work and the resulting threats.

Decent work in the framework of sustainability

Decent work as an inherent step toward sustainable development

The term *sustainability*, as Fleuren *et al.* point out, means the "use of a resource over time, without the utility value of that resource being negatively – and preferably positively – affected by its use" (2020, p. 2). The Agenda 2030 embraces three dimensions of sustainability – economic, social and environmental, including joint problem solving. It puts people and the planet at its center, giving the international community a framework for tackling the many challenges that humanity is confronted with. Their huge number is accumulated in the world of work as the main area where the lives of society members are organized, and where economic, social and environmental aspects intertwine with each other. The initiative launched by the Agenda 2030 (2015) confirms the burning, undeniable need to strengthen efforts through the participation of organizations specialized in the promotion and defense of decent work standards.

The challenges of globalization have underlined the indispensable importance of international labor standards as the legal components of the ILO's strategy for governing globalization, promoting sustainable development, eradicating poverty and ensuring that everyone can work in dignity and safety. In the Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization (2008), it was highlighted that, in achieving the ILO's objectives in the context of globalization, the Organization must "promote the ILO's standard-setting policy as a cornerstone of ILO activities by enhancing its relevance in the world of work and ensure the role of standards as a useful means of achieving the constitutional objectives of the Organization" (ILO 2019, p. 12). In today's globalized economy, international labor standards remain an essential component of ensuring that global economic growth goes in-hand with fundamental rights at work and may be beneficial for all.

As the anthropocentric prism is also characteristic of the concept of sustainable development, Agenda 2030 shows the global importance of the universal principle of decent work as a precondition to eradicating poverty and improving the quality of work and jobs, living conditions, and so on, leading to quality of life and the wellbeing of all members of society. Accordingly, decent work also constitutes the starting point for achieving economic and social development organized in the

framework of sustainable, inclusive and sustained growth. Indeed, it should also lead to greater emphasis on social sustainable development as development that meets the needs of present and future generations. In the above approach, providing decent work appears as the main determinant for improving quality of life and constitutes the fundamental background.

The importance of decent work in achieving sustainable development goals is strongly highlighted and expressed by Goal 8 of Agenda 2030, which aims to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. This brought decent work back to the policy debate, raising its profile at the international level (Piasna *et al.* 2020, p. 7). The detailed tasks involved in achieving the above include numerous actions, approaches and proposed indicators (European Commission 2018, pp. 93–94; Piasna *et al.* 2020, p. 8). Particular attention is directed to the protection of labor rights and the promotion of safe and secure work environments for all workers, including specific groups such as migrant workers, women migrants and precarious workers. Even though the above target is situated in point 8.8, it is, in fact, the flagship initiative to which the other listed tasks to be fulfilled correspond. Strong emphasis is placed on the promotion of development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services (8.3). Moreover, it is expected to undertake immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labor, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers (8.7). Some of these targets were also included in the calendar schedule. For example, it was expected to substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training by 2020, and by 2025 to end child labor in all its forms. It was also assumed that the following would be achieved by 2030: full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including young people and persons with disabilities; equal pay for work of equal value (8.5); and the design and implementation of policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and productivity (8.6, 8.7, 8.9). Given the above, additional actions were planned. Namely, they hovered around increasing support for developing countries and the development and operationalization of a global strategy for youth employment and implementation by 2020, via the Global Jobs Pact of the ILO (8a and 8b). As highlighted in the literature, UN targets relating to SDG 8 do not fully correspond with the ILO's Decent Work Agenda (Liukunnen 2021, p. 27). It is also difficult to disagree with the notion that only some of them are directly pertinent to decent work. Piasna *et al.* (2020, pp. 7–8) point out that "for Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth, most of the targets, however, focused on economic efficiency and sustainability, and thus on the quantity, not the quality, of jobs." According to the authors, only three targets – namely 8.3, 8.5, 8.8 – pertain to decent work, and they address informal employment, earnings, occupational injuries and compliance with labor rights.

Notwithstanding the above arguable reservations, key aspects and issues of decent work are also widely embedded in the targets of the other sixteen goals of the Agenda 2030 (ILO 2021; Rombouts and Zekić 2020, p. 355). Decent work strongly corresponds in particular to the first, third, fourth, fifth, and sixteenth goals, highlighting the aspects of ending poverty, ensuring healthy living, the promotion of wellbeing at all ages, inclusive and qualitatively good education and the promotion

of lifelong learning, achieving gender equality, and promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, and constitutes an inseparable component of the holistic concept of sustainable development.

It is important that the elements included in the content of goal 8 of the Agenda 2030 are aimed at the promotion of decent work alongside such objectives as sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, and full and productive employment for all groups of workers. As Rombouts and Zekić (2020) point out, the Agenda 2030 "contains the most comprehensive roadmap until now concerning a global – economically, environmentally, and socially – sustainable future," with decent work as one of the "crosscutting and main elements of its social pillar and figures prominently in SDG 8" (p. 355).

It is important that the idea of inclusivity is placed at the heart of sustainability, while, in line with its aim, the Decent Work Agenda highlights the social dialogue and collective labor rights in dealing with inequalities (Liukunnen 2012, pp. 26–27). The decent work concept creates, in this respect, a framework for the growth of not just any jobs, but emphasizes their creation as quality jobs. Fostering quality of work (working conditions, jobs, employment) shows the inseparable nature of decent work and its close mutual correlations with progressive social cohesion and economic development that is directed to improving people's lives. The international labor standards reflecting the essence of decent work are there to ensure that economic development remains simultaneously focused on improving worldwide quality of life and the dignity of humans (ILO 2019, p. 13).

Decent work, alongside other targets, constitutes a way of fostering an integrated approach to achieving higher-order goals such as poverty eradication, human development and inclusive growth. Hence, decent work has a global dimension for fostering such entire overarching community goals as social cohesion and social justice by promoting opportunities for work that are productive, with: a fair income; a secure work environment; social protection; better prospects for personal development and social integration; freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in decisions that affect their lives; and equality of opportunities and equal treatment for all women and men. Consequently, decent work sums up the primary needs and expectations of people in their working lives and later.

Decent work has multidimensional connections to the achievement of sustainability in terms of economic, social and environment changes (ILO 2018). According to the ILO, the notions of decent and sustainable work are used together (2019d), and decent work drives sustainable development aiming to achieve all of its goals by ranking access to new quality jobs as a priority (2021, p. 3). The ILO Centenary Declaration (2019a) contains many references to sustainability, repeating the text of SDS' 8th Goal and showing strong linkages between decent work requirements and sustainable development (Rombouts and Zekić 2020, pp. 329, 355). The arguments around decent work as essential for sustainable development were provided in analyses of ILO documents and in its correspondence to the Agenda 2030 goals that are linked directly or indirectly to workers' rights (Rombouts and Zekić 2020, pp. 323–333). Consequently, as explorations show, the concept of decent work as one of the leading goals of sustainable development should settle the framework of job quality (quality of work and quality of employment), fostering efforts towards the creation of decent working conditions in challenging circumstances driven by globalization, digitalization, increased inequalities and work insecurity. At the very beginning, this poses the question of the content

and legal framework of decent work, as well as the implementation and enforcement of the rights contained, which is analyzed below.

How sustainable is decent work?

Goal 8 of the Agenda 2030 aims to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. According to the ILO, "decent work is indispensable to efforts to reduce poverty and a mean for achieving equitable, inclusive and sustainable development in all countries, developing and developed." As indicated, in social terms, decent work for sustainable development means "that such jobs must be open to all equally and the related rewards have to be equitable." Acts of "inequality and discrimination provoke frustration and anger and they are a recipe for social dislocation and political instability" (ILO 2007, vii). As decent work is treated as the driver of sustainable development, the concept in itself has contributed to the sustainable development goals. This statement motivated the authors to answer the question of how sustainable decent work is. The analyses provided in this chapter give arguments for its fairly deep deficiencies in the above aspect.

The sustainability of the decent work approach is explicitly mentioned in the Agenda 2030, the ILO Global Commission Report (2019d) on the Future of Work, and the ILO Centenary Declaration (2019a). As Rombouts and Zekić highlight, the relations between sustainability and work are also at the heart of the ILO Future of Work Initiative, and as stated in the 2019 Report of the Global Commission of the Future of Work, "increasing investment in decent and sustainable work" in line with the Agenda 2030 is a priority. Indeed, the ILO Centenary Declaration (2019a) outlines key principles for a decent and sustainable future of work (Rombouts and Zekić 2020, p. 320). According to the ILO (2019), "decent work is not merely an objective, but it is a mean of achieving the specific targets of the new international programme of sustainable development" (p. 13). Decent work is also treated as having both functions – i.e., being a substantive norm in international labor and human rights law on the one hand, and being a specific set of key policies of the ILO, the Decent Work Agenda, on the other (Rombouts and Zekić 2020, p. 320). The Decent Work Agenda, as Rantanen *et al.* (2020) point out, contributes substantially to the implementation of the UN 2030 Strategy, but needs strengthening in the implementation of some dimensions, including occupational health, as safe and healthy working conditions are fundamental to decent work (pp. 11, 23, 29). We fully agree with Rombouts and Zekić (2020), who highlight that "decent work requirements are increasingly linked to sustainability objectives and will be used together in many future economic, social and environmental policies" (p. 321), but to achieve them profound improvements are required.

Despite such an important role, decent work is mentioned only fragmentarily and occasionally in few binding legal documents, and has typically been included in soft-law declarations, policy agendas and strategies aimed to promote fundamental human rights and the dignity of working people recently adopted by the ILO (2022a, 2022b), including the ILO Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation No. 205 (2017a).

This discussion is now directed towards providing a response to the question of whether the concept of decent work involves a proper response to the ongoing changes and challenges in the world of work, and as such corresponds to the needs and expectations of today's working population and serves as a sufficient means for the implementation of the sustainable development goals.

The term *decent work* undoubtedly reflects the fundamental message anchored in the ILO Philadelphia Declaration (1944) and the Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization (2008): "Labor is not a commodity." As was emphasized, labor is "not an inanimate product, like an apple or a television set, that can be negotiated for the highest profit or the lowest price," and as "a part of everyone's daily life is crucial to a person's dignity, wellbeing and development as a human being" (ILO 2019, p. 13). Accordingly, this means that the protection of human dignity is undeniably the key issue for the ILO's concept of decent work, and constitutes the starting point for care and protection in labor law regulations, including the creation of international labor standards.

The ILO's decent work concept was launched as "productive work for women and men under conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity" (ILO 1999; Rantanen *et al.* 2020, p. 3) to counterweigh negative effects on employment conditions and the recommodification of labor that occurred during globalization and market liberalization (Piasna *et al.* 2020, p. 2). Even though the concept of decent work has evolved from its initial proposal (Liukunnen 2021, pp. 23–27) and many efforts have been directed towards to its conceptualization and measurement (Piasna *et al.* 2020, pp. 6, 7), employment creation and enterprise development, social protection, standards and rights at work, governance and social dialogue still constitute the main basis for archiving these approaches. As the general director of the ILO, Guy Rider, states: "promoting jobs and enterprise, guaranteeing rights at work, extending social protection and promoting social dialogue are the four pillars of the ILO Decent Work Agenda with gender as a cross-cutting theme."

The decent work concept was accompanied by different measuring tools and indicators (Bescond *et al.* 2003; Ghai 2003; Anker *et al.* 2002; ILO 2013b; Piasna *et al.* 2020), including statistical measures (Anker *et al.* 2002), DWCPrs (Rantanen *et al.* 2020) and those pointing out its deficits (Bescond *et al.* 2020, pp. 180–182). Their suitability for future progress raised concerns nearly 20 years ago (Ghai 2003), and they are still significant as they are based on using different methodologies in relation to the complexity of decent work, its conceptualization, and potential policy leverage. Many objections are focused on the creation of an ideal situation based on the decent work concept, including the use of the composite indicator and country-level differences, and are related to the remaining undefined and unmeasurable concept of decent work (Piasna *et al.* 2020, pp. 2–5, 11).

The ILO contributes to achieving the goal of decent work in the globalized economy "by elaborating and promoting international labor standards aimed at making sure that economic growth and development go hand-in-hand with the creation of decent work" (ILO 2019, p. 14). As the concept of decent work is the product of an agenda enshrined in soft law instruments, international labor standards are also part of the binding legal sources that are included in the international legislative process. It is important to note that international labor standards evolve from a growing international concern that some action needs to be taken on a particular issue (ILO 2019, p. 20), and as they are addressed to fostering fundamental human rights (Rombouts and Zekić 2020, pp. 341–348) they play central role in the realization of the goals of Agenda 2030.

International labor standards set out basic principles and rights at work drawn up by conventions and recommendations with binding or non-binding guidelines, based on Codes of practice and ILO Declarations as meaningful but soft law instruments. Among them, eight "fundamental" Conventions that contain fundamental principles and rights at work (Dambrauskienė and Mačernytė-Panomariovienė 2001), which are also covered by the Decent Work Agenda (1998), were identified. They include: freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labor; the effective abolition of child labor; and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation. According to the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization (2008), Member States are also encouraged to ratify another four Conventions from the viewpoint of governance because of their importance for the functioning of the international labor standards system.

This causes reflections on working conditions that respect the dignity of the people who work and contribute to the aim of sustainability. Following the conceptualization of sustainability and definitions related to this term in the frame of employment (Fleuren *et al.* 2020, pp. 3–7), these conditions shall be understood as those "that are not negatively (and preferably positively) affected by that individual's employment over time."

However, it is in vain to look for the legal definitions of these conditions. Important insights into their perception are contained in Article 31 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000), which states that "every worker has the right to working conditions which respect his or her health, safety and dignity." Moreover, every worker has the right to the limitation of maximum working hours, to daily and weekly rest periods and to an annual period of paid leave. The reference point here is analyzed in the literature as aspects of just and favorable working conditions, with a healthy and safe work environment, guaranteed time free of work (Mačernytė-Panomariovienė and Wrocławska 2021), respect for family and private life (Mačernytė-Panomariovienė and Krasauskas 2021), non-discrimination and equal rights policy (Mačernytė-Panomariovienė, Erikson and Wrocławska 2022), just remuneration, and strengthening employability issues and protection against psychological violence at work – or mobbing (Guobaitė-Kirslienė and Blažienė 2021). Consequently, in legal terms working conditions stay in close relation to fundamental human rights that need be provided for all people at work, creating the basis for the decent life of all and referring to the protection of people's dignity during the performance of work.

The notion of core labor standards (fundamental labor rights) as integrating decent work in the core of the system of international labor standards (Liukunnen 2021, p. 27) is worth attention here. Even though there is no space for detailed explanations in this context, it requires highlighting that core labor rights are "essential not only to workers' rights, but to human rights everywhere" (Hiatt and Greenfield 2004, p. 43). As international instruments that define a range of human rights at work and provide a guide to civilized, dignified and sustainable workplaces, and as the most fundamental human rights at work, labor standards create conditions that allow access to other important rights (Howard and Gereluk 2001). As representing minimum standards to achieve the life dignity and self-sufficiency that are inherent in human beings (Hiatt and Greenfield 2004, p. 44), they also mean that workers have a voice and can act to release themselves from exploitation. As Rombouts and Zekić (2020) point out, "the universalistic approach of principle of decent work for all, together with the Decent Work Agenda and the recognition of certain labor rights as fundamental labor

standards, has led to a closer alignment between labor rights and human rights in recent decades" (p. 356).

As the world of work was affected by new transformations over recent decades, important labor instruments contributing to the protection of fundamental rights at work were adopted at the ILO and EU forums. Among them, at the ILO forum the following conventions are worth particular attention: the Violence and Harassment Convention No. 190 (ILO 2019c); the Domestic Workers Convention No. 189 (ILO 2011); and the Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation No. 205 (ILO 2017a). The efforts undertaken at the EU forum are also meaningful, as they resulted in the adoption of: Directive (EU) 2019/1152 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union; and Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and caregivers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU. The European Economic and Social Committee is of the opinion that work will continue to be the main source of income in the digital age, which also poses threats. For example, informal work, and in particular work on digital labor platforms, is often poorly paid and without social guarantees, and no official mechanisms are in place to address unfair treatment (Berg *at al.* 2018). Consequently, on October 28, 2020, a proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on a decent minimum wage in the European Union was presented (EC, 2020), while on 16 September 2021 the European Parliament adopted a resolution on fair working conditions, rights, and social security for workers on digital platforms (2019/2186 (INI)). It is important to note that on December 9, 2021, the European Parliament submitted a proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the improvement of working conditions on digital platforms. The ability of employees to adapt to new tasks is equivalent to the ability to adapt work to individual job requirements with the help of digital technologies. Additional efforts for the improvement of working conditions are visible in the European Parliament resolution of January 21, 2021, with recommendations to the Commission proposing a directive on the right to disconnect which contributes to the protection of health and safety at work.

Notwithstanding the efforts taken, the *expressis verbis* indicated approach to promoting decent work occurs in only a fragmentary scope in the ILO conventions, while both binding labor law sources (ILO conventions and EU directives) lack the reference to sustainability in terms of employment over the life course. The long-term perspective during working lives, with changing employability or the ability to work in extended life circumstances; the life course transitions approach, with a view to critical life-changing events and changing individual health and preferences; and finally the holistic approach, which considers workers' health, personal characteristics (education, skills and interests) and family and social responsibilities (Eurofound 2016a, p. 6) as meaningful routes for the achievement of sustainable development goals, are still omitted. The lack of a longitudinal perspective for the assessment and adequately tailored quality of tools to measure work go in line with the changing capacities of workers, and abilities throughout the life course should be treated as the main shortage for the effectiveness of achieving sustainability aims. Such a state shall be treated as a significant obstruction in the implementation of the holistic and comprehensive approach included in the idea of sustainable development. While soft legal instruments such as ILO Declarations, Resolutions and Guidelines point out aspects of the transformation of the labor

market and recall responses to the new future of work, the international labor standards embodied in conventions as the bases for decent work lack the explicitly mentioned issues of sustainability in the life course approach (sustainable employability (Fleuren 2019), sustainable employment (van Dam *et al.* 2017) or sustainable work (Kira *et al.* 2010)) that focuses, inter alia, on employment and work environment characteristics, working individuals' capacity and ability to work, their constraints, determinants and predictors. Meanwhile, awareness of the above issues is fundamental for the creation of decent working conditions in the human life course.

Consequently, using the life-course approach to fill the existing gap in the creation of quality work and decent conditions for the decent life approach, with strong linkages between fundamental human rights, should become a new paradigm for the realization of the idea of decent work as the new core international labor standard.

Whether the decent work concept needs to be redeveloped via some specific sustainability mechanisms is another question altogether. The transition to more environmentally, economically, socially sustainable and inclusive growth requires deep transformations and profound changes (ILO 2018), raising discussion about possible changes in the meaning of decent work (Rombouts and Zekic 2020, p. 320). Rombouts and Zekić highlight that "decent work should therefore also be a notion that is dynamic and adaptable to changes in society with respect to securing a sustainable future" (p. 356). There are proposals to broaden the concept by including the WHO quality of life concept, which provides an enriched perspective (Budowski, Jany and Schief 2020, p. 7) via a broader approach that puts weight on the decent life as the framework for decent work within the environmental perspective (Liukunnen 2021, pp. 26–27; Rombouts and Zekić 2020, p. 354). The social aspects of employment are also of particular importance (Rombouts and Zekić 2020, p. 356). Among new ideas, making sustainable work "the desirable horizon" underlines a multidimensional approach to quality of work and considers individuals as the whole. In this vein, combining the priorities of sustainable development and decent work (Vendramin and Parent-Thirion 2019, s. 62), searching for a response to challenging contemporary issues through conceptualization via the comprehensive framework of sustainable employability (Fleuren 2019, pp. 48–80), or focusing on sustainable employment characteristics (van Dam *et al.* 2017) are all worth particular attention. All of the above perspectives should be involved in considerations, as they each shape the framework for the improvement of working conditions for individuals and consider their management in different life stages, having a direct effect on the situation of different working cohorts and the well-being of future workers. This leads to a discussion on labor law instruments that shall constitute the framework for exercising the right to decent work as a common right of present and future generations and a meaningful means of contributing to sustainable development.

Progress in the improvement of opportunities for decent work requires that efforts be undertaken to provide clear conceptualization (definition), obligations and responsibilities (from societal, organizational and individual levels) for its implementation that are embedded in the framework of a new measurable concept. Indeed, the process of such transformations is not simple to implement but is worth the effort, as changes in the new world of work cannot be stopped and need strong and direct counterbalancing measures that are adequate for contemporary challenges.

The characteristics of sustainable work during the life cycle

The definition of sustainable work according to Eurofound

Eurofound has made a very significant contribution to the concept of sustainable work. Since its launch in 1990, Eurofound's European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) has provided an overview of working conditions in Europe. Eurofound developed a multidimensional model for analyzing the quality of work and employment in 2002 and has since advanced its research on job quality.

Eurofound's definition of *sustainable work over the life course* means that working and living conditions are such that they support people in engaging and remaining in work throughout an extended working life. These conditions enable a fit between work and the characteristics or circumstances of the individual throughout their changing life, and must be developed through policies and practices at work and outside of work. As Eiffe (2021) highlights, Eurofound "takes the perspective of the working individual being in a concrete job situation (job quality, work organization) that interacts with its private life domain. Key features are around job quality, work-life balance, developing skills and employability, having enough earnings etc." (p. 68).

As indicated by Eurofound, it follows that to understand how work is to be sustainable over the life course, two domains need to be addressed:

1) work, specifically the characteristics of the job and the work environment;
2) the individual, specifically their characteristics and circumstances.

The characteristics of the job domain are relevant to workers currently employed, and focus on job quality and working conditions over the life course (such as health and safety, skills development, work organization and working time practices). Many working conditions can have an impact, which we will discuss in more detail below.

Sustainable work is a desirable horizon for Europe, insofar as it is likely to underlie a multidimensional approach to quality of work that will consider working individuals as a whole, with their characteristics, their constraints and their trajectories (Vendramin and Parent-Thirion 2019). As for the second area, factors that influence availability and can prevent an individual from being employed include: care responsibilities; poor health and wellbeing; lack of skills; spells of unemployment and inactivity; and lack of motivation. Availability for work can vary significantly between people and will change for an individual over the life course. Different people have different needs and abilities, which significantly affect their employability and capacity to work, as well as their motivation to work. Jobs and the work environment can be adapted to accommodate specific needs, because the legal regulation also provides for exceptions (positive discrimination) – additional guarantees and rights for persons from socially vulnerable groups. Labor force participation rates, therefore, can be increased by helping people find a job that matches their needs and abilities. In this, three phases are distinguished: education, work and retirement (Eurofound 2003), to which activities related to care might also be added. People change jobs willingly or unwillingly over their life course. Indeed, society has moved away from the "job for life" paradigm. Technological change and globalization have increased the need for companies to adapt and restructure. More flexibility with regard to contracts also leads to more turnover of workers. However, more research is clearly needed to explore

the effectiveness of sustainable work policy mixes. This regards the implementation in various sectors of the labor market (particularly against the backdrop of the growing service sector), posting of workers (Rennuy 2020; Biletta *et al.* 2020), assessments of big industries vs. SMEs and the relevance of the concept for various types of workers such as self-employed, platform workers and many others (Eiffe 2021). Both the characteristics of the job and the circumstances of the individual are influenced by a set of policies, regulations and practices. One of the more recent studies commissioned by Eurofound reached two different conclusions: on the one hand, good progress has been made towards improving job quality overall, demonstrating the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks, joint action by social partners, and workplace policies and practices; on the other hand, important differences remain between different groups of workers. These persisting differences, and the fact that new challenges are developing, signal that the improvement of job quality, in pursuit of increased wellbeing at work, must be inclusive. In other words, it must address the variance between countries, sectors, occupations, employment statuses, worker characteristics and business models. It is paramount that companies and workers together devise a form of work organization that allows for good job quality and working conditions. As Eurofound research has shown, high-involvement work practices are beneficial to all (Biletta *et al.* 2021).

Accordingly, it can be concluded that, considering Eurofound's definition and the two areas it assesses, the answer to whether work is sustainable throughout life is missing an element related to the conditions that would enable people to remain engaged and in work. Work engagement is not just about creating employment (employment as such) opportunity rights, but it should be much broader. Eurofound's study on working conditions needs to consider more working conditions and means for their adaptation to workers at different stages of the life cycle. They also need to assess changes not only in work or employment but also in other areas (for example, business establishment, their limitation, taxes, administrative requirements, social dialog, etc.) that may lead individuals to decide to stay at work and be loyal or to create their own business or workplace (platform), which may also affect the future prospects of individuals and thus the sustainability of work.

The main determinants of sustainable work

According to Eurostat data, persons over 15 years of age are considered to be able-bodied, up to 64 years age. According to Eurofound's concept of sustainable work, in order for these people to remain in work for life, they must not only have good conditions to work and earn, but must also be motivated to stay in work when they start a family, have dependents, or become sick or are elderly. States must therefore take all measures to ensure that workers are cared for at all stages of their life cycle (youth, adulthood and old age; single, married, with children, in mature family without children, or elderly) without discrimination. Sustainable work must accompany all professional (working) life. In turn, a focus on extending the statutory retirement or other labor market-related measures is not enough to make work sustainable over the life course (Eiffe 2021).

Eurofound's concept of job sustainability is primarily concerned with working conditions and the environment, which encourages employees to work and be loyal. On the other hand, it is important to consider whether the employee feels the support and motivation of the state (various

social benefits) and the motivation of the employer (incentives, benefits for decision-makers, training, etc.). Making work sustainable in line with the Eurofound concept depends on how these support systems intervene at different levels: institutional, company, job and individual. This means that when it comes to the sustainability of work throughout life, a broader discourse is required, i.e., not just about the workplace and its environment. This is because not only a specific job with good working conditions can motivate one to work productively for a long time and or stay in the labor market, but much more is required. This includes, for example: the social system in the event of job loss or change of job, illness or maternity; benefits; a flexible pension scheme, and so on.

The most direct and obvious determinants of the sustainability of work are the characteristics of the job. Eurofound's work on job quality identifies the aspects of a job that may have great influence on the sustainability of work (Eurofound 2012). In its model, job quality is defined as a measure of the potential impact of the characteristics of jobs on the wellbeing of workers. The model distinguishes four dimensions of job quality (Eurofound 2015):

1. earnings;
2. prospects (referring to both the stability of employment and opportunities for career progression);
3. intrinsic job quality, which has the strongest direct effect on health and wellbeing and is therefore a key determinant of whether work is sustainable (skills and discretion, social environment, physical environment and work intensity);
4. working time quality, which includes the duration, scheduling and flexibility of working time and having discretion over it, and which has a two-fold effect on the sustainability of work: it is a measure of the time-intensity of the work effort, and therefore has an important direct and cumulative impact on the sustainability of work; it also determines the amount of time available for non-work activities, which makes it the most important dimension for the reconciliation of work and non-working life.

However, one dimension can never perfectly substitute for another, and it is questionable whether certain elements of a job can really be compensated for (Eurofound 2015). For example, earnings probably have the most important indirect effect on the sustainability of work, having a significant impact on the capacity and motivation for work. In addition, not all workers who endure arduous working conditions are compensated by high wages. Pay transparency is therefore as important as ever (Biletta *et al.* 2021). Many are low-paid and may not be able to move to better jobs, with consequences for their health and healthy life years after retirement. They may not be able to continue working until retirement age, which may have an impact on their income and potentially lead to poverty.

The quality of work is also influenced by the actions of the employer or the organization of work and the creation of a working environment for employees. Employment relations, employee participation and the worker's voice at the workplace level are also important factors. The work environment also influences the degree of autonomy and recognition, the potential for learning, fair treatment and the level of direct involvement of workers, all of which has an impact on wellbeing and on employability (Biletta *et al.* 2021). The authors of the study stress that it is important to note, however, that it is not clear which elements of job quality have the strongest impact on sustainability (Eurofound 2015).

Eurofound (Biletta *et al.* 2021; Gerstenberger 2021) outlines the sustainable work framework at the macro level (economic and social context); the meso level (the work context of: (1) quality of work, (2) work-life balance, and (3) quality of life); and the micro level (individual context). All three levels are interrelated, so it is very important not to separate them. Gerstenberger (2021) emphasizes sustainable work throughout her two life levers: job quality and availability for work. The quality of working conditions (quality of work) affects the quality of life: in order to achieve the goal of quality of life, the importance of the quality of working conditions cannot be ignored.

Eurofound (2017) distinguishes seven characteristics that characterize the quality of work: physical environment; work intensity; working time quality; social environment; skills and discretion; prospects; and earnings. We can observe that five out of the seven indicators of the quality of work (work intensity; working time quality; social environment; skills and discretion; prospects) include psychosocial risk factors (Biletta *et al.* 2021; Gerstenberger, 2021). These can be both internal, such as intensive working time, high workload, etc., as well as external, such as assessment, the opportunity to raise qualifications at the employer's expense, the chance to climb the career ladder, the lack of fear of changing jobs, etc. After assessing this, the legal regulation and the practice and politics of its implementation should also change.

Eurofound's research on this topic is not complete. Working conditions and sustainable work form one of the six main activities in Eurofound's work programme for the 2021–2024 period. Accordingly, this research will show which factors have more or less of an impact on lifelong working ability. In their study on working conditions and sustainable employment, as part of the work programme for the 2021–2024 period, Eurofound will take into account the following aspects: work organization and teleworking, working time, work–life balance, equal treatment, workplace health and wellbeing, skills and training, earnings and prospects, job satisfaction, and non-standard forms of employment, particularly self-employment. New elements of the study on working conditions (for example, work-life balance, equal treatment, job satisfaction) describe decent work, which has so far not been evaluated through such elements as work without discrimination, violence and mobbing (bullying, humiliation). These elements are likely to describe the psycho-physical working conditions and environments which are not visible enough and which should be made clear when describing the concept of decent work.

In summary, the quality of work and the working environment are key components in enabling workers to remain in the labor market longer, to work longer in better health (Eiffe 2021), and to feel motivated, contributing to sustainable working life.

Decent work through the prism of sustainable work over the course of life. A new conceptual framework

Sustainable work as the guiding principle

The definition of *sustainable development* was provided in the Brundtland Commission's Report (1987) as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Embedded in the framework of the Agenda 2030 and aimed

in general at enhancing the quality of human life worldwide, sustainable development constituted a significant background for the analysis of two concepts: sustainable work over the course of life and decent work. Both of these concepts are driven by flagship initiatives to improve working conditions and eradicate inequalities and exclusions, serving as meaningful and positive influences on the quality of work and the quality of people's lives and contributing to social cohesion. This is clearly expressed by the call for increased investment in both decent and sustainable work (Global Commission 2019, pp. 45–48). Decent work cannot be achieved without providing sustainable work (jobs, employment) and without shifting attention towards qualitative instead of quantitative approaches.

The concept of decent work has been well-known for decades and is evidenced worldwide in programs advocating for the protection of fundamental rights at work, becoming an integral part of Agenda 2030 and one of the main development goals to be achieved among the other 16. The international labor standards developed by the ILO are essential components of the international framework for ensuring that the growth of the global economy provides benefits for all (ILO 2019, p. 7), including strong reference to fundamental rights at work and the four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda (1998). As is emphasized, the ILO's decent work concept focuses more on labor law, social protection and social justice issues – themes consistent with the global reach of the ILO's work (Ghai 2003). When the dignity of working people confronts new threats and challenges, the principle of decent work – as based on dignity, equality, a fair income and safe working conditions, and as such placing people at the center of development (ILO 2019) – needs a more proper response in a way that considers challenging contemporary issues and involves acting with adequate mechanisms. Obstacles to such an approach are difficult to overcome without the development of a new reference point for protective instruments that may be identified within the detailed, long-term perspective. These instruments work towards balancing working lives, where the issue of sustainability at work for working individuals (Vendramin *et al.* 2012; Vendramin and Parent-Thirion 2019, Figure 13.1) can be a worthy aim for achieving the sustainable development goals.

According to Eurofound's (2015) definition, *sustainable work over the life course* means working and living conditions that support people to engage and stay in work throughout an extended working life. It is important to note that sustainable work over the life course, as analyzed through the prism of the conceptualization of sustainable development, is referred to as "conditions that enable the individual to meet their needs through work in the present without compromising their ability to meet their needs through work in the future. These conditions enable a fit between work and the characteristics or circumstances of the individual throughout their changing life and must be developed through policies and practices at work and outside of work" (Eurofound 2015, p. 2). The lifelong perspective of organizing work leading to the improvement of the quality of jobs has become the guiding principle of exercising rights at work and shaping the conditions for their performance in line with the aims of decent work. Through the individual prism, these are combined into the goals that the ILO strives to achieve.

Compared to decent work, the concept of sustainable work can be measured in life-long, individual, and more precise terms, even if there are some reservations related to its numerous indicators (Eiffe 2021, p. 69) as they occur when analyzing sustainable employability in relation to the practical level (Fleuren *et al.* 2020, p. 3). Thanks to this, most arguments stay closer to the workplace level.

This constitutes the overwhelming advantage of sustainable work for increasing efficiency. Sustainable work during the life cycle "refocuses on the quality of work, in all its dimensions, and strengthens the notion of individuals' trajectories" (Vendramin and Parent-Thirion 2019, s. 14). As Vendramin and Parent-Thirion (2019) highlight, the approach to sustainable work "involves considering the effects of working conditions – cumulative over time – and their relationship with private life in the long term. It combines framework for analysis of working conditions and the focus on individuals as a whole, with all their characteristics, their trajectories and the constraints that weigh on them" (s. 62). Sustainable work considers different transitions in working life that take place not only between jobs, but also between employment and unemployment, between periods of learning or caring, or when returning to work after a period of illness, enhancing the focus on return-to-work schemes and flexible work arrangements (Eiffe 2021, p. 75). Therefore, together with life-long measurable indicators, sustainable work contributes to achieving quality of work in a better way than the universal concept of decent work. The concept of sustainable work contains a set of variables, parameters and components that bring additional attitudes to measuring the quality of jobs according to its multidimensional approach, with a comprehensive and holistic perspective on working conditions (Vendramin and Parent-Thirion 2019, s. 62). Accordingly, the environmental perspective also seems to be easier to trace.

The concept of sustainable work and its indicators "capture the societal and economic objective of keeping workers longer in the labor market due to population ageing, demographic change and financial constraints (e.g., as regards sustainable pension systems and public finance)" with direct reference to the individual worker. In the context of work, it is particularly important that it "implies simultaneous efforts towards achieving individual, social and economic work; and labor market-related goals that will enable the needs of the present worker to be met without compromising his/her ability of future work" (Eiffe 2021, p. 70). Through the prism of sustainable work, new routes for achieving social cohesion and inclusiveness can be followed and encompassed into the framework of the aims of decent work. Indeed, the lifelong approach as related to working people's expectations, abilities and constraints requires the use of a variety of differentiation methods, reasonable accommodations and adaptations appropriate to the life cycle transitions and changes that typically occur in human life. Measurable working time patterns (Eurofound 2017b, pp. 64–68) and working conditions that are adequate for different ages (Eurofound 2017a) are an important element of the influence of sustainable work on the ability and capacity to work.

It is particularly noteworthy that sustainable work equalizes job opportunities in various life cycles, underpinning the need to focus on workers of all age groups due to the different features of employed persons (Eiffe 2021, p. 79) and considering extended working lives and the abilities of states to finance social protection systems (Eurofound 2015). The multidimensional approach to quality of work presented in the sustainable work concept that considers working individuals as a whole is an appropriate response to contemporary challenges in the world of work, and has real potential to combine the priorities of sustainable development and decent work (Vendramin and Parent-Thirion 2019, s. 62). In return, it provides a solution to the question of how to keep people in the labor market in older age.

Sustainable work should become the new approach for the realization of the goal of providing decent work for all in the life cycle perspective that does not interfere with the wellbeing and pros-

perity of future generations. In such a way, it will contribute to the framework of the new Universal Labor Guarantee that embeds fundamental core workers' rights, for which the ILO advocated in its anniversary document – the Work for a brighter future (2019d, pp. 38–39). The search for sustainability during the life course as a desirable paradigm for the prosperity and wellbeing of all members of society requires the consideration of social, economic and environmental aspects. Previous explorations related to the conceptualization of sustainable employability also cannot be omitted (Fleuren 2019; Fleuren *et al.* 2020). Consequently, the definition of sustainable work cannot abstain from previous scientific achievements related to sustainable work, sustainable employment or sustainable employability, which are treated as a comprehensive framework for the analysis of workers' functioning at work and in the labor market throughout their working lives (Fleuren *et al.* 2020). It must also consider the pillars of the framework of the decent work principle and requires that economic and environmental terms be considered, as jobs have to be productive in a competitive market and use environmentally sustainable resources that are safe and plentiful enough for present and future members of society. The latter principle relates to the creation of conditions for sustainable workplaces and working environments, underlining sustainability in organizations and the role of CSR in its creation.

In the authors' opinion, only when work is sustainable for individuals it is possible to achieve the main approach as indicated in the Sustainable Development Strategy and its goals, including decent work as one of its priorities. The concept of sustainable work may complement the existing gap in the concept of decent work and fill its shortcomings related to threats to the new world of work by providing new quality in the redefinition of working conditions and quality of work according to the long-term perspective, all of which is encompassed in the sustainable development concept. The perspective of the human life cycle approach, embedded in the framework of the sustainable work concept, should become the new paradigm for the realization of fundamental rights at work in new working circumstances. Quality of work requires new measurement tools and mechanisms formed by raising awareness and taking responsibility, taking into account the previous discourse around the measurement of the jobs quality (Piasna *et al.* 2020, pp. 8–9; Piasna *et al.* 2019). This does not mean withdrawal from the concept of decent work, but the application of a holistic and comprehensive approach for its enforcement. This perspective also means the need to equip people at work with the right to protect themselves from increased exploitation towards an inclusive and sustainable future.

A definite response to new challenges

This topic embraces a number of important issues related to the normative framework of labor law (Zekic 2019), the regulatory model of labor law, and the scope of application of fundamental labor law standards. This includes: shifting the perspective from a labor rights-based framework towards a standard-based one (Liukunnen 2020, pp. 18, 25–26, 44); the role and methodology of labor law, including proposals for future constitutions of labor relations (Knegt 2017); interdependencies between trade and labor (business and human rights); and the role of values, principles, and rights in the development and enforcement of labor law regulations (Alston 2004), to name

but a few. The authors focus attention towards the issue of the role of labor law in shaping the legal framework of concepts and terms, and advocate for necessary improvements in labor law regulations that are made on the basis of broadening the effectiveness of concepts in fostering the role of fundamental labor rights and widening core international labor standards. As these findings indicate, "stimulating employees through a supportive, rewarding, developmental and challenging work environment might be an effective strategy to retain employees in the workforce such that they are capable and motivated" (van Dam *et al.* 2017, p. 2466).

According to Eurofound's definition, *sustainable work* means achieving living and working conditions that support people in engaging and remaining in work throughout an extended working life. While following the conceptualization of sustainable development, sustainable work in the life cycle means the "conditions that enable the individual to meet their needs through work in the present without compromising their ability to meet their needs through work in the future." The two domains that need to be taken into consideration – job quality and individual characteristics – mean that making work sustainable requires a match between job quality and availability for work (Eurofound 2015, p. 11). It is difficult to disagree with the notion that availability for work not only differs between people, but is also not characterized by constancy and changes over the life course. Therefore, work must be monitored and transformed accordingly in order to mitigate the factors that discourage or hinder workers from staying in or entering the workforce (Eurofound 2021, p. 42). This cannot be achieved without assurances for individuals' just and fair working conditions, and a healthy and safe working environment that is embedded in the framework of a universal decent work principle, with the strong appraisement of factors related to social and environmental frameworks.

It is difficult to disagree with Rombouts and Zekić (2020) that "traditionally, labor law has not been concerned with the question whether work performed by workers is sustainable socially, environmentally, or even economically" (p. 322). Domestic labor law represents a narrowed approach that is focused mainly on the economic dimensions of work, remaining quite ambivalent to the role that work plays in the social and environmental framework (p. 357). The arguments raised by Piasna *et al.* (2020) in relation to the absence of an appropriate indicator for decent work and the failure to conceptualize and measure decent work are noteworthy, as also the observation highlighted by Ward (2004) regarding the success in this regard of only simple and internationally comparable decent work indicators. Consequently, decent work "remained an undefined and unmeasurable concept with little applicability in policy making process" (p. 11). New, unstoppable challenges that threaten human dignity in the world of work require strong and cumulative efforts to turn principles and values into reality to ingrate with global approaches. The role of legal concepts and terms for fostering the achievement of goals cannot be underestimated. The annual EU Sustainable Growth Strategy (2021) states that Member States should adopt measures to ensure fair and just working conditions (EC 2020) that motivate workers to stay longer at work, and is accompanied by the European Semester. This strongly correlates with the fundamental rights of working people proclaimed in the European Pillar of Social Rights (2017), in particular with its 10th principle (according to it, workers have the right to a high level of protection of their health and safety at work. Workers have the right to a working environment adapted to their professional needs and which enables them to prolong their participation in the labor market.), as well as with its implementation action

plan (EC 2021). Efforts undertaken to turn the 20 key principles and rights of the European Pillar of Social Rights into concrete actions (EC 2021) can also be observed. Even though there is no explicit reference to decent work, these regulations related to fair working conditions overlap with decent work (Piasna *et al.* 2020, p. 9). Indeed, they should be treated as essential for well-functioning labor markets and social protection systems, and have a strong influence on the achievement of Agenda 2030 aims. As Piasna *et al.* highlight, the "Pillar was accompanied by a set of indicators, intended as a key tool for monitoring convergence towards better working and living conditions upon closer examination, many of the indicators in fact replicated the focus on job quantity and structural features of the labor market while failing to include job quality features."

It should be noted that when talking about the right to decent work, which is strongly correlated with the quality of work (jobs and employment), we are not dealing with a right that is secured by legal sanctions and that may be claimed before the courts. Instead, this is a fundamental idea, concept and framework, and the main emphasis is placed on the ways of implementation and protection through policies, law, programs and reforms that focus on social protection and social justice issues consistent with the global reach of the ILO (Ghai 2003). The same is true of the sustainable work concept. This state may change as the axis between quality of work and measurement tools developed through the concept of sustainable work over the life course becomes essential in redefining working conditions in line with sustainable development approaches, in which decent work is treated as one of main priorities. In the concept of sustainable work over the course of life we can perceive a new normative basis for strengthening fundamental rights at work; hence, convincing arguments appear in favor of the precise distinction of the right to sustainable work of every human through the components of decent work at every stage of life. Claims for this right shall be made through well-known means that have been acknowledged for decades: justified differentiation; reasonable accommodations; anti-discriminatory, safe and healthy work mechanisms; freedom from forced and compulsory work; and the aggregation of the votes of employees in the collective representation of their interests and rights. These are fundamental means for the protection of dignity at work and constitute a well-grounded basis for the enforcement of the sustainable work concept.

As the awareness of rights at work plays a crucial role, a legal regulatory framework is required for its effectiveness. Indeed, good practice for the creation of corporate social responsibility with Codes of Conduct is also helpful, even though their weaknesses are based on their voluntary approach to labor rights and the scarcity of their references to core labor standards (Liukunnen 2021, p. 38). However, they now need to receive adequate attention at the level of labor law, as they remain in the orbit of so-called soft impact. Today's narrative, "where individuals do not determine their own path but are trapped in adverse conditions" (p. 20) needs be stopped and broken. For this aim, the strengthening of the role of workers' representatives that provide a voice at work for individuals is of primary need.

According to Rombouts and Zekić (2020), "codetermination, collective bargaining and freedom of association rights," for instance, could be further operationalized to devise, institutionalize, and implement policies that advance the Agenda 2030 (p. 357).

In searching for a definite response to contemporary challenges, we need a regulatory labor law framework that is accompanied by labor law instruments (such as ILO conventions and EU direc-

tives). This should directly refer to the concept of sustainable work based on the fundamental pillars of decent work. This is the way to strengthen the protection of fundamental workers' rights and to react to the challenges of the new and future world of work. The starting points here are recent global initiatives that have introduced "a more ambitious vision of paid work and have the potential to broaden the traditional meaning of decent work" by paying special attention to social and environmental issues (Rombouts and Zekić 2020, pp. 354, 357–358).

Decent work means opportunities for everyone to secure work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development, and social integration. However, the idea of the perspective of sustainable work within the life course – as Vendramin and Parent-Thirion (2019) highlight – puts the focus on working individuals as a whole, with their characteristics, constraints and trajectories, and provides new quality for the creation of quality employment and quality jobs. Moreover, as it is based on the quality of work and the quality of the work-life balance (Eurofound 2018, pp. 59–61), sustainable work also considers the social and economic contexts (Eiffe 2021, p. 69). This concept does not abstain from the diversity or vulnerability of labor forces, and as such moves closer to achieving protection for the dignity of all groups of working individuals. The demands for making work sustainable during the life course are obvious, and are aimed at extending opportunities for the creation of decent working conditions for more people throughout their working lives. Consequently, this will bring closer the realization of full and productive employment from which all of society will benefit. These are conditions for inclusive, sustained and sustainable economic development. The main challenge here is not only the definition or conceptualization of the constructive elements of sustainable work, but, as highlighted, also involves matching the needs and abilities of individuals with the quality of jobs on offer (Eurofound 2017b), as the desirable aim is easier to achieve on theoretical grounds than to provide in a practical sense (Fleuren *et al.* 2020, p. 4). The secondary challenge is related to fundamental attitudes, as sustainable work needs to be treated as a measurable concept with different determinants. The question then is how to agree on appropriate measurement indicators and instruments of their enforcement at the workplace level.

It will not be easy to agree on a definition of sustainable work and its measurable components, but these efforts are worth undertaking as they may contribute to raising awareness of rights and the development of real effective mechanisms for their protection and enforcement. This is especially relevant in a reality where the re-commodification of human work and threats to the dignity of working people are as serious as ever. Reservations related to the creation of a utopian or ineffective system of legal protection – with a view towards the current state of protection of rights at work through anti-discriminatory and safety at work mechanisms, including recently made progress – seem unjustified.

Conclusions

The truth is that as new threats are endangering working cohorts in the modern world, we can observe a growing number of deficits with regard to decent work. To address them, four strategic objectives – the pillars of the Decent Work Agenda (1998) – accompanied by international labor

standards, fundamental principles and rights at work are meaningful foundations for decent work, but still seem insufficient. For the improvement of their practical importance and implementation, the developed and slightly evolved concept of decent work needs to be readapted to the new realities of the changing world of work. People need be capable of performing work throughout their extended working lives, and there is strong demand for workforces that are sustainably employable throughout the courses of their lives. The worrying fact is that, though they have improved over recent decades, mechanisms for the protection of fundamental rights at work, as the basic structural elements of decent work, seem to abstain from the long-term perspective that looks beyond the occurrence of specific situations and changes in the human life cycle. Consequently, decent work is not integrated into the global approach to work sustainability during the life course that is embedded in the framework of sustainable development goals.

Voices pointing out the weaknesses of the concept of decent work, its political context and its fairly narrow definition – and the absence of clear responsibilities and liabilities to implement decent work (Budowski *et al.*, p. 3) – might also be shared. Critics become significant as new challenges constitute serious new obstacles for the promotion and realization of the decent work concept, including: changes in subordination at work; the occurrence of new forms of contemporary "slavery," with a growing number of people working informally and without social protection; the lack of balance between free time and working activity; and disregard for the right to be disconnected with the employer, to name but a few. These factors are compounded by increased isolation at work, the diminished role of workers' representatives, and the crisis of collective bargaining and workplace democracy. At present, the search for decent work for all requires a more concrete response and new measures that may offset these imbalances in the labor market and during working lives. To counteract them, a multidimensional approach addressed to the protection of working people and the creation of fair and decent working environments must be applied. In other words, it is necessary to provide sustainability during working lives for all who are employed. This also means providing protection notwithstanding employment status, in particular by making all working people formally protected.

The idea of sustainable work during the life course contributes to the improvement of quality of life in the globalized, digitalized world of work, with demographic and pandemic threats being accompanied by individualization and isolation trends that seriously endanger human dignity. To provide decent work opportunities for all in the new world of work, sustainable work needs to become a principle that is widely accepted, legally grounded, protected, and enforced through public policies, labor legislation and good practice at the company level. Does this mean that sustainable work has to become the new desirable core standard at work and an international labor standard, included in binding international legal regulations? In the authors' opinion, sustainable work needs to be seen as the normative basis for the promotion, protection and enforcement of decent work and decent working conditions. Although it represents an individual perspective on the life cycle, together with decent work and its fundamental components, sustainable work constitutes an inseparable and conditional part of sustainable social development, social cohesion and justice that are immanent parts of the broader sustainable development idea. As a result of the interaction between these two concepts, we come to the concept of sustainable decent work. Sustainable decent work shall constitute the proper and desired response to the required framework for sustained and in-

clusive economic development, quality of work consistent with regulatory investment regimes and economic considerations, and may contribute to the balancing of the required and inevitable flexibility with the effective, measurable protection of workers' rights. At the level of national legislation, it should allow sustainability courses aimed at removing imbalances between economy and society to be followed adequately in their own context and in a manner consistent with general standards.

The framework for sustainable work over the course of life must go beyond the usage of *ad hoc* soft measures, such as codes of conduct that are practically meaningful only for select socially responsible entities. The enforcement of the sustainable work concept has to encompass a set of economic, social and legal measures, with labor law instruments designed: to plan a person's career for employment; to create working and living conditions throughout their career, considering the diversity that occurs at certain stages of a human's life cycle; and to help them to remain in employment adjusted to their psychophysical and health capabilities. Strengthening the role of workers' workplace representatives in the reconstruction of a new quality of work that corresponds to the sustainable development goals should be seen as the basis for the social and solidary economy (SSE) for which the ILO calls in its Centenary Declaration (ILO, 2019a) and in other recently adopted flagship initiatives (ILO, 2022b). This cannot be provided without the improvement of employees' participation in workplace management. Therefore, it should be highlighted that "well-functioning social dialogue is a key component for the successful design and implementation of reforms needed to increase the competitiveness of Europe's economies and create more jobs. It balances workers' and employers' interests and contributes to both economic competitiveness and social cohesion" (Eurofound 2016b, p. 1). For this aim, without strengthening freedom of association and its consistent parts – such as collective bargaining and social dialogue – the picture of labor law will remain incomplete (Liukunnen 2021, p. 22). All labor market actors need to act and work together in striving for the achievement of sustainability goals in order to cope with diversity in national labor law systems and the different scopes of application of labor standards. It is difficult to disagree with the ILO's statement that "sustainable development is only possible with the active engagement of the world of work" (ILO 2013a). Without making the voices of workers audible and noticeable, the realization of decent work will remain ineffective.

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