



Workshop 4

The future of work in the wellbeing economy

3 March 2021 | 10:00 – 12:00 | EESC - Brussels

Organised by:

The European Environmental Bureau (**EEB**), the European Youth Forum (**YFJ**), the EESC Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment Section (**NAT**) and the EESC Sustainable Development Observatory (**SDO**)

The European Environmental Bureau (EEB) and the European Youth Forum (YFJ) co-organized a workshop on what the future of work in a wellbeing economy could look like. The workshop was kicked-off by YFJ board member Monika Skadborg who introduced the organizations and set the scene. This was followed by a presentation of the "[Escaping the growth and jobs treadmill](#)" report by the EEB and YFJ published in November 2020. The report provides a policy blueprint for creating employment in a post-pandemic EU and a vision for revolutionising the future of work, including universal basic incomes, shorter working weeks, job sharing, job guarantees and economic democracy. This was followed by reactions from Peter Schmidt, EESC NAT Section President and the Rapporteur on the Sustainable economy we need, and Prof. Dr. Irmi Seidl who is an Economist at the Écoles polytechniques fédérales (ETH). Participants then went into break-out groups to have a more in depth-discussion on what is needed to implement those solutions. Questions included, what is needed to implement the alternative? What role does the European Green Deal and/or other EU frameworks play? How can technology and digitalisation accelerate the implementation?

Break-out 1: Universal Basic Income & Job guarantee

The first break-out was kicked-off by Signe Jauhiainen who briefly presented the Finnish Basic Income experiment and facilitated by Katy Wiese from the EEB. The Finnish basic income experiment was launched in 2017 and ran for two years. It was the first UBI experiment to be backed by a national government. During that period, more than 2,000 unemployed people aged 25 to 58 were randomly selected and given a monthly stipend of EUR 560 with no obligation to seek a job and no reduction in their stipend if they accepted one. The results show that participants were happier, and exhibited a higher level of mental wellbeing, confidence and life satisfaction. While it was implemented to see if it encourages people to take up low-paid or temporary jobs without losing employment benefits, the

employment effects were rather small and different depending on the social context. For example, employment rates improved for families with children. Participants themselves experienced a greater sense of autonomy and more opportunities to engage in voluntary activities and care. The discussion afterwards focused on the Universal Basic Income.

There are currently different experiments and initiatives going on apart from the Basic Income experiment in Finland which was running from 2017-2018. For example, we heard from a guaranteed minimum income initiative in Italy. There are common difficulties/barriers towards scaling up these initiatives. Firstly, there are issues that connected to funding, such as funding might be available but difficult to access. Secondly, there are certain legislative issues to implement such a scheme such as legislative changes were needed to implement the BI experiment in Finland. Another barrier is that the responsibility for employment and social policies lies mostly with the member states and their governments. For example, there are numerous legal challenges to implement a job guarantee scheme on the EU level. Thirdly, UBI and other alternative policies are also still being considered as something for the left side of the political spectrum (e.g. in Finland there were only two parties supporting it). To conclude, we need to continue debates about these alternatives, depoliticize the issue and start implementing more case studies in different member states to show case that these are feasible solutions that are beneficial for people and planet that can be scaled up.

Break-out 2: Working Time reductions & Democracy at work

The second break-out group was kicked-off by a presentation of the cooperative concept of Mondragon and facilitated by Arnaud Schwartz, president of France Nature Environnement and member of the EESC. The main characteristic of the cooperative is that members are owners and workers, they have the right to vote and be elected – good quality jobs is an opportunity for our society. 10% of the profits go to the society (sports clubs, cultural clubs etc.), 60% to reserves and 30% shared between workers in a special way. The cooperative is part of the group. What Ander presented is the best-known example of successful cooperative, but there are many other cooperatives that are important: energy cooperatives in Germany and Switzerland. Generally, more promotion and communication around cooperatives are needed. There is one example from Belgium from a person who set up a cooperative in Brussels specialising on sustainable transport solutions: some changes have been implemented by the government on transport and mobility but there is still little knowledge about cooperatives, for instance cooperative banks are non-existent. There is a need to set up a landing space and experimentation space for cooperatives. It was also highlighted that there needs to be a cultural shift not only a legal one or political one. Participants also discussed what weights more such as environmental aspects or democracy? In the end, these are decisions to be taken in the cooperative – many aspects must be taken into account: for instance, gender equality, addressing environmental pollution, etc. It was also mentioned that if all companies become cooperatives it will still be a problem of the GDP treadmill although being better socially. For example, in Switzerland: cooperatives are different and are competing with other big chains which makes them lay off people and they feel the pressure of growth. There is a need a mix of companies, cooperative and other forms of enterprise. Although there is agreement that we will need more cooperatives than we have now. Some suggestions for the EU level:

1. a label that indicates if a company/product is a cooperative
2. Create a preference for tenders from cooperatives
3. Increase awareness through media campaigns
4. Have a Just Transition for companies to switch to cooperatives
5. Have guidelines & definitions for cooperatives

Recommendations

- ✓ The Finnish Basic Income is one of many pilot schemes underway, but there are barriers to wider implementation such as access to funding, legal challenges, lack of communication and misperceptions. UBI and job guarantee schemes could help society move towards a wellbeing economy, but further debate is needed on these options. The entire question needs to be depoliticised and more pilot schemes should be launched across the EU in order to demonstrate that these are feasible solutions that are beneficial for people and the planet and can be scaled up.
- ✓ Cooperatives are one way of increasing democracy at work. However, despite a number of very positive and successful examples, this form of enterprise needs to be promoted more energetically, hand in hand with the necessary legal changes and frameworks at EU level. The economy needs a mix of forms of enterprise that are more resilient, support workers, give back to society and have a lower environmental impact.
- ✓ The discussion on reduced working hours needs to address various issues. For instance, how can we make it more financially rewarding for companies to employ more people for fewer hours and what can be done about the correspondingly reduced salaries, especially for jobs which are already at the lower end of the pay scale.