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Sustainable work: A conceptual map for a social-ecological approach

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Abstract. *In this article, we map the concept of "sustainable work" in the international policy and academic literatures. On this basis, we develop a multidimensional framework, arguing that sustainable work needs to integrate ecological and social sustainability, address work beyond paid labour, attend to local and global interdependencies and make its normative foundations explicit. Articulating these sometimes conflicting requirements in a context-sensitive way calls for a (re-)politicization of work. Following a capability-based approach, we argue that the literature on sustainable work should make the case for the democratization of work on multiple levels, to give workers and other stakeholders a voice.*

Keywords: *democracy, decent work, green jobs, local/global interdependencies, paid/unpaid labour, sustainable work, workers' participation.*

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1. Introduction

The transition towards sustainable societies has massive implications for work. The shift towards forms of life that do not overstep "planetary boundaries" (Rockström et al. 2009) will result in the creation of new jobs, while certain traditional jobs will disappear and others will need to change. Work in coal mines will, hopefully, soon belong to the past, while more people will work in maintaining green energy grids. But is that all that "sustainable work" can and should mean? Based on an overview of international policy documents and an analysis of the critical academic literature, this article discusses how sustainability is understood in relation to work, how it challenges the boundaries of work and why defining its concrete features requires a "re-politicization" of work.

On the international policy level, we find the concept of "green jobs", which aims to capture the environmental impact of work – what we refer to as its "biogeophysical" sustainability[1] – but neglects its social dimensions and the concept of "decent work", which in turn focuses on social sustainability (Poschen 2015). While the 2019 ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work[2] refers to the environmental and social dimensions of sustainability (Rombouts and Zekić 2020), the UNDP (2015) explicitly speaks of "sustainable work". This plurality of concepts raises some key questions: Can different dimensions of sustainability – in particular, social and biogeophysical – be integrated and realized simultaneously? And how radical is the change required in order to make work sustainable in such an integrated sense?

We share the position of many scholars who argue that taking the concept of "sustainable work" seriously requires going beyond the notion of "green jobs" (e.g. Bottazzi 2019; Jochum et al. 2020; Hoffmann 2023). To this end, the critical literature across various disciplines suggests several requirements of sustainable work for consideration. In our conceptual mapping, we synthesize and systematize this literature, organizing the different lines of research into an integrated framework.

We begin, in the second section of this article, by discussing the concepts of "green jobs", "decent work" and "sustainable work" in the international policy literature, before reviewing the critiques and alternative approaches that argue for a more thoroughgoing re-conceptualization of work from a sustainability perspective. In the third section, we integrate these voices from different academic fields to develop a multidimensional framework that brings together four requirements for such a re-conceptualization. Sustainable work needs to: (1) integrate ecological and social sustainability; (2) extend the boundaries of work beyond salaried and formal "jobs" to include unpaid and informal forms of work and consider their interrelations; (3) be attentive to local and global interdependencies; and (4) be explicit about the normative foundations of sustainability. This framework leads us to adopt a broad definition of sustainable work, understanding it as any kind of productive or reproductive activity that contributes to fostering and activating the capabilities that are essential in enabling human beings and other living species to flourish in the present and the future.

In the fourth section, we consider the challenges of integrating the four requirements of sustainable work. These need to be fleshed out in a context-sensitive way in order to be practically useful. Moreover, they cannot always be easily combined, leading to potential conflicts and the need to find resolution mechanisms. Because these conflicts need to be made explicit and addressed, sustainable work is not only a conceptual issue, but also a political one (Laruffa 2022). Neglected in the international policy literature, this political aspect has been taken up in the academic literature mainly by ecofeminist and ecomarxist

[1] The term "biogeophysical", which we use throughout this article, brings biodiversity, pollution and climate issues under one umbrella.

[2] ILO, ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, International Labour Conference, 108th Session, 2019.

scholars (e.g. Gorz 2008; Littig 2018; Barca 2020; Cukier 2018; Räthzel, Stevis and Uzzell 2021; Foster 2023).

How to deal with the tensions between the different requirements of sustainable work will ultimately depend on the normative approach to sustainability, which influences the practical dimensions of sustainable work, as well as the methodology used to define them. Among the three main normative approaches identified in the literature – preference-based, needs-based and capability-based – we draw inspiration from the last one. According to the capability approach (Nussbaum and Sen 1993), the tensions and contradictions that arise between the different requirements of sustainable work can only be resolved by giving voice to both those who engage in work and those who are affected by it. Such participatory processes can help define the concept of sustainable work more concretely, identifying its practical features. From an academic perspective, this requires bringing the literature on sustainable work into a dialogue with the literature on the re-politicization of work. Understood in this way, the concept of sustainable work could ultimately point to a thoroughgoing democratization of the economic system, at various levels.

2. "Green jobs", "decent work", "sustainable work": A loose web of international policy concepts

"Green jobs" is the flagship concept in international politics regarding efforts to make work environmentally sustainable. The concept builds on a loose combination of (1) sustainable features that are supposed to contribute to preserving or restoring the quality of the biogeophysical environment and (2) the concept of "decent work" promoted by the ILO (Poschen 2015). In practice, "green jobs" refers to the "greening" of the economy by transforming or restructuring the most polluting and carbon-intensive sectors (agriculture, energy, transport and construction) and by developing jobs in other sectors, such as care work, services or forestry (e.g. UNEP et al. 2008, 295–299). The international policy literature suggests that public investments and tax incentives should support these transformations, with the aim of sustaining full employment and economic growth.

Supported by the Green Jobs Initiative (UNEP et al. 2008) launched by various international organizations – including the United Nations (UN), the International Organisation of Employers (IOE) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) – the concept of "green jobs" has developed into a dominant policy paradigm. The ILO defines it as follows:

> Green jobs are decent jobs that contribute to preserve or restore the environment, be they in traditional sectors such as manufacturing and construction, or in new, emerging green sectors such as renewable energy and energy efficiency. [They] help: improve energy and raw materials efficiency; limit greenhouse gas emissions; minimize waste and pollution; protect and restore ecosystems; support adaptation to the effects of climate change.[3]

According to this definition, green jobs are decent jobs that produce environmentally friendly goods or products or involve eco-friendly processes. However, as well as being vague, the definition also appears to be incoherent. Take, for example, the construction of energy-efficient houses on previously unsealed land: this can contribute to the reduction of energy consumption, but it can also lead to a loss of biodiversity. In other words, green jobs can contribute to the production of environmentally friendly goods or services, all while contributing, through their work processes, to biogeophysical deterioration.

Although the above definition does not elaborate on this, the requirement that green jobs be "decent" involves the social dimensions of sustainability. The concept of "decent work" was developed by the ILO in 1999 to reconcile workers' dignity and protection with rapidly changing capitalist economies. It brings together the four strategic objectives of the

[3] See https://www.ilo.org/resource/article/what-green-job.

ILO: the promotion of rights at work, employment, social protection and social dialogue (ILO 1999).[4]

The ILO (2015, 4–5) makes the coupling of green jobs and decent work a condition for a "just transition", a third key concept used in the international policy grey literature to address sustainability in relation to work. A "just transition" aims to address the economic, social and environmental challenges of sustainable development. Thanks to this link with decent work and just transition, greens jobs are supposed to foster "social inclusion", "social justice" and "poverty eradication", within "environmentally sustainable" and "competitive" economies (ILO 2015, 4). Green jobs are thus seen as a "win-win solution", by aligning economic growth with social and environmental goals through the creation of new jobs (ILO 2015, 10; see also ILO 2019). However, by drawing on an understanding of work as jobs and commodified labour, the ILO makes the solution to the social-ecological crisis hinge on economic efficiency (Bottazzi 2019).

Efficiency in capitalist societies is closely intertwined with a normative approach based on individual preferences. Given that such an approach is partly to blame for the ecological crisis (Holland 2014), it does not seem appropriate for addressing the tensions between social and ecological sustainability. Against this background, the combination of green jobs, decent work and a just transition resembles an idealistic pileup of conflicting requirements rather than an operational framework. In practice, green jobs, decent work and just transitions are mostly addressed separately, in policy as well as in academic research.

While the concept of "green jobs" has enjoyed widespread political success, another notion, that of "sustainable work", has remained in the shadows.[5] It was coined in 2015 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) when the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was incorporating work into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The latter commit to full employment and economic growth (UN 2015, 19–20), but the definition of "sustainable work" goes significantly beyond that of "green jobs" by encompassing unpaid work, global interdependencies and human development.

> Sustainable work is defined as work that promotes human development while reducing or eliminating negative externalities that can be experienced over different geographic and time scales. It is not only critical for sustaining the planet, but also for ensuring work for future generations.
>
> Sustainable work is not just about paid work [...]; it also encompasses the often impactful efforts of caregivers, volunteers, artists, advocates and others, which have positive impacts on human development. Furthermore, sustainable work concentrates on activities that can achieve the dual mutual goal of high sustainability and high human development. (UNDP 2015, 37)

By acknowledging the effects that non-commodified work has on both human development and biogeophysical (un)sustainability, this definition responds to a major criticism levelled at the dominant conception of work by ecofeminist and ecomarxist thinkers (e.g. Barca 2020; Gorz 2008; Littig 2018; Räthzel, Stevis and Uzzell 2021). However, it does not say much about the concrete features of sustainable work, nor does it address the potential for *conflict* between the different goals listed and between the different groups affected by them. As such, it runs the risk of staying strangely apolitical, formulating desirable goals but failing to acknowledge that they may be difficult to reconcile.

[4] The ILO defines decent work more precisely as "productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Decent work involves opportunities for work that: is productive and delivers a fair income; provides security in the workplace and social protection for workers and their families; offers prospects for personal development and encourages social integration; gives people the freedom to express their concerns, to organize and to participate in decisions that affect their lives; and guarantees equal opportunities and equal treatment for all" (ILO 2008, vi).

[5] Inconsistent with this use, Eurofound, a tripartite European Union agency, uses the expression "sustainable work" with an exclusively social meaning to refer to ageing workers' health (Eurofound 2021; Vendramin and Parent-Thirion 2019; Volkoff 2019; see similarly Kira, van Eijnatten and Balkin 2010).

3. Four main requirements for re-conceptualizing work

The "green jobs" concept, as part of a broader "green growth" paradigm, has been met by a number of critical voices that underscore its internal contradictions (e.g. Littig 2018; Bottazzi 2019; Hickel and Kallis 2020; Jackson 2021; Gough 2022; Hoffmann 2023), asking whether biogeophysical sustainability can be compatible with a continued commitment to growth (e.g. Bottazzi 2019; Cassiers, Maréchal and Méda 2018; Rosa and Henning 2018; Kreinin and Aigner 2022). These voices are part of a broader wave of research seeking to rethink work in terms of its human *and* ecological features (e.g. Aigner et al. 2016; Barth, Jochum and Littig 2016; Urban 2017; Méda 2018; Barca 2020; Dörre 2021; Räthzel, Stevis and Uzzell 2021; Jochum et al. 2020; Bohnenberger 2022; Gough 2022; Seidl and Zahrnt 2022). In what follows, we build on this rich body of literature, bringing different voices into dialogue with each other and organizing their different lines of research into four requirements for re-conceptualizing work towards sustainability, namely: (1) addressing the social *and* ecological sustainability of work together; (2) extending the understanding of work beyond the confines of paid and formal work, and considering the interrelations between different forms of work; (3) considering their local and global interdependencies; and (4) making explicit the normative foundations of sustainable work. In this section, we review these requirements – which are often treated separately – before arguing for their integration.

3.1. Addressing the social and ecological sustainability of work together

In line with the traditional agenda of labour studies, social sustainability of work focuses on the individual and social dimensions of wage labour. It is concerned with working conditions, workers' health, work–life balance and the expressive dimensions of work, such as autonomy or recognition (for an overwiew, see Vendramin and Parent-Thirion 2019). Accordingly, in this literature "sustainable work" refers to employment that does not harm workers' physical and mental health, while ensuring social stability through employment-related social benefits. In its most positive version, it aims at workers' well-being (Barisi 2011). Ecological or environmental sustainability of work, for its part, is concerned with the biogeophysical consequences of work (for an overwiew, see Hoffmann 2023), framing "sustainable work" as employment that does not harm ecosystems, living species or the planet in general.

Ecological sustainability of work draws attention to the materiality of work and its related environmental consequences. More concretely, it pays attention to the *supply of resources* (which materials and resources are used, where they come from, how they have been produced, etc.), the *processes of production* (how much energy is consumed, which greenhouse gases are emitted, how much waste is produced, etc.) and the *output of work* (its life expectancy, whether it is recyclable, etc.). Despite a growing consensus on the need to integrate those issues into labour and work research, the process is slow (e.g. Hoffmann and Spash 2021; Bohnenberger 2022).

Two arguments underline the importance of addressing the ecological and social sustainability of work together. The first is an argument of political feasibility and societal acceptance. If sustainable work policies are implemented without taking the social dimension into account, they are likely to lead to new inequalities, a lack of legitimacy, resentment or even active resistance. Ensuring that the environmental transition does not exacerbate social inequalities is precisely the objective of "just transition" policies, for example by funding retraining for workers who lose their jobs in so-called "brown" industries and subsidizing the creation of "green jobs". But the question remains whether such measures are sufficient to cope with the multiple and interrelated social aspects of the ecological transition (Stevis and Felli 2015).

The second argument for integrating the ecological and social dimensions of sustainability is one of principle. It holds that the climate catastrophe and other ecological disasters violate basic human rights, such as the rights to life, health or not to be displaced

(Caney 2010). The goals of ecological sustainability include the prevention of such human rights violations and thus align with the goals of socially sustainable work on a principled level. This point has also been made in the "just transition" literature (e.g. Stevis and Felli 2015), which emphasizes the need to find fair and equitable solutions in which the ecological sustainability policies of some groups or countries do not undermine the social sustainability of others. This raises questions about the inequalities that characterize current national and global socio-economic systems, with their power asymmetries between employers and workers, and between rich and poor countries (e.g. Foster 2023; Lessenich 2016).

One might ask whether "economic sustainability" should also be integrated into a conceptual framework for sustainable work. Economic sustainability is conventionally understood in capitalist economies to describe economic activities that cover their costs and generate profits for investors. As such, it seems to be a prerequisite for the survival of companies that might be willing to develop sustainable work. However, we do not see "economic sustainability" as a first-order normative goal, on a level with ecological and social sustainability, but rather as one of the conditions that foster or prevent the latter. The question then becomes how the rules of the economic game should be changed (e.g. through property rights, taxes, subsidies, environmental regulation or health and safety standards), so that work can be socially and environmentally sustainable, while also covering costs insofar as to make it economically viable. It raises the wider question of whether sustainable work, in the broad understanding we suggest, can be realized in a system driven by a preference-based logic of efficiency at all, or whether it should take place in organizations committed to value creation and financial stability, without aiming at profit creation or growth (e.g. Bottazzi 2019; Cassiers, Maréchal and Méda 2018; Gadrey 2011; Jackson 2021; Méda 2014). Although this question goes beyond the scope of this article, it also points to the need for politicization, for which we argue below. It needs to be discussed honestly, instead of automatically incorporating the requirements of conventional economic sustainability into an understanding of sustainable work, which would make such an understanding inappropriately conservative.

3.2. Moving beyond paid and formal work towards sustainable lives

This second requirement for re-conceptualization has been promoted by ecofeminist and ecomarxist thinkers. Ecofeminist scholars remind us that, beyond paid and formal work, unpaid reproductive work also has an ecological footprint, all while being the essential condition of productive work (e.g. Littig 2018; Barca 2020). Ecomarxist authors denounce a narrow understanding of work as paid labour to the detriment of creative, civic and political activities (e.g. Gorz 2008; Räthzel, Stevis and Uzzell 2021; Fraser 2022).

These arguments call into question the categories we use to think about work (Herzog and Zimmermann 2023). In an anthropological sense, work can refer to an activity, while in an economic sense it can refer to producing economic value and, in a social meaning, to producing identities and social hierarchies (Zimmermann 2015). Yet, capitalist societies have essentially focused on the latter two meanings, reducing work to labour – that is, abstract work, quantifiable and measurable in time and money, and producing labour-based social identities within the legal systems of welfare states ruled by norms of class, nationality and gender. Labour unions, while being an important voice in the fight for ecological sustainability, often remain caught in such traditional conceptions of work, at least in the global North (e.g. Brand and Niedermoser 2016; Galgóczi 2021). Moving our understanding of work beyond paid labour involves addressing class, gender and racial relations of domination that fuel labour and are in turn nurtured by it (e.g. Barca 2020). The "labour as a whole" (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010), "post-work" (Weeks 2011), "mixed work" (Littig 2018), "new work" (Bergmann 2019) and "activity society" (Seidl and Zahrnt 2022) approaches all propose a broader understanding of work as a human activity embedded in nature and in different spheres of human life.

Critics of the current focus on paid work alone have been among those to take an interest in working time reduction, for example through a four-day week (Méda 2018; Autonomy 2023).[6] Related to working time reduction is the question of income, which ties this issue back to the social dimension of sustainability. One proposal that has received a lot of attention, and which is also endorsed by many proponents of sustainability (e.g. Hickel 2020), is that of an unconditional basic income. Whereas its defenders contest the intrinsic anthropological value of work (Frayne 2015; Weeks 2011; Hoffmann and Paulsen 2020; Hoffmann 2023), many of its critics see in the expressive properties of work a constitutive element of human self-realization (e.g. Hassel 2017). However, what is clear is that, by decoupling income from the traditional notion of a "job", an unconditional basic income would open up new configurations in the relation between paid and unpaid work.

It is noteworthy that communities of individuals who try to prefigure a more sustainable lifestyle (e.g. agricultural communities committed to environmental goals) often practise much more integrated forms of production and consumption, and of work and leisure, moving fluidly between activities in the course of their days (e.g. Pruvost 2021). While this is not feasible for all forms of work (e.g. highly specialized tasks such as brain surgery), it challenges the established relation between the market system, on the one hand, and alternative forms of provision on the other. In thinking about how work can be made sustainable, it is essential to take the interrelation between its different forms into account.

3.3. Taking local and global interdependencies seriously

The third requirement for re-conceptualization considers the webs of local, regional, national and global interdependencies in which many forms of work are embedded, and thereby the effects of work not only on workers but also on consumers, residents and the wider society in which it takes place. Many forms of work are part of global markets and supply chain structures and are affected by changes occurring in other parts of the world. Environmental processes themselves are often global – first and foremost climate change (UNDP 2020).

This global dimension requires research to break out of the box of classical work and labour studies that are still strongly tied to national borders and address economic and ecological supply chains (Lessenich 2016; Jochum et al. 2020). Empirically, this means considering the effects of work on workers along these chains, but also on the local communities and the local environments in which the work is performed (Renouard and Ezvan 2018), thus raising complex questions about ascribability, accountability and responsibility.

These questions touch upon the role of *consumers*: how might they influence the work to produce the goods and services they consume, for instance, through product boycotts of unsustainable work practices? (e.g. Beck 2019). Various initiatives have been taken to provide better information about the ecological and social features of products that consumers buy, for example, by giving "green grades" to products (Bullock 2017). But many such initiatives have remained unsystematic and lack the means to enforce standards (ibid.). This has direct effects on what kind of work, and with which levels of social and ecological sustainability, is available in the countries where the goods are produced.

Taking such interdependencies seriously matters not just for theoretical but also for practical reasons. An example is "carbon leakage", where production (and therefore often also jobs) is shifted to other countries with laxer environmental regulations.[7] This distorts the

[6] This, however, does not mean that the time allocated to "work as a whole" would decrease (Gerold 2022). Reducing working time need not, per se, increase sustainability; much depends on how people would use their additional time resources (e.g. Pullinger 2014).

[7] The European Union therefore grants certain exemptions to companies that might move to other parts of the world because of its CO_2 trading scheme. See https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/eu-emissions-trading-system-eu-ets/free-allocation/carbon-leakage_de#:~:text=Carbon%20leakage%20refers%20to%20the,increase%20in%20their%20total%20emissions.

national accounting of emissions: if carbon-intense production processes take place in one country and the products are then shipped to another country, where they are consumed, this makes the first country's emissions record look worse than that of the second, which ultimately causes the emissions (e.g. Hickel 2020, 109–111). A global approach is needed to address such phenomena and to avoid creating perverse incentives.

3.4. Making the normative foundations of sustainable work explicit

The last requirement for re-conceptualization has been tackled by only a few authors, despite its centrality in the whole conceptual endeavour. In this requirement, the core question is: What are the normative foundations of sustainable work? Of the three main normative approaches found in the literature – preference-based, needs-based and capability-based – we argue for adopting the third one.

The economic models driving capitalist societies are based on a notion of utility in terms of preference-satisfaction; they legitimize the single-minded pursuit of profits, which are taken as a sign of efficiency. However, the fact that the preferences in these models can only materialize in markets if combined with purchasing power creates a blind spot with regard to actual human needs and aspirations, especially in situations of high inequality in which the needs and aspirations of poorer members of society are neglected (Herzog, Sold and Zimmermann 2023). Another important blind spot of such approaches lies in their ignorance of the role of the environment as a precondition for the satisfaction of preferences (Holland 2014), namely by providing the raw materials needed to produce the desired goods. For these reasons, many defenders of sustainable work argue for moving beyond the preference-based approach and the foundation it provides for capitalist institutions.

The two main alternative approaches currently found in the literature are the needs-based approach (Ekins and Max-Neef 1992; Gough 2022), incorporated into the definition of sustainable development by the "Brundtland Report" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), and the capability-based human development approach (Nussbaum and Sen 1993; UNDP 2015). A key proponent of the latter, Amartya Sen, proposes shifting the definition of sustainable development from "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, 43) to development that "prompts the capabilities of present people without compromising capabilities of future generations" (Sen 2013, 11). Rather than opposing the needs-based definition, the capability approach, now partly adopted by the UNDP,[8] refines it in terms of people's freedom and agency to meet their needs (UNDP 2020; Gough 2022).

These approaches have different implications for the understanding of work. According to the needs-based approach, in order to be sustainable, work must "be organised in such a way that it fulfils everyone's individual needs, ensures equity between people, and preserves the Earth's ecosystem", as Aigner et al. (2016, 9) put it, thereby defining work as a "synergic satisfier of needs" (ibid., 12; see also Rauschmayer and Omann 2017). Work is thus understood instrumentally, as a means of satisfying needs.

The capability approach, in contrast, takes into account the intrinsic value of work, making sustainable work the basis of a "good life" rather than a simple means to an end (Urban 2017; Jochum et al. 2020). By emphasizing the imperative of democracy (Sen 2009), it further requires all stakeholders to be involved in deciding what the concrete features of a "good life" should be. It thus *proceduralizes* the concrete definition of sustainable work through political participation, which is itself an important capability (Laruffa 2022).

[8] This is not the place to analyse the UNDP's approach to sustainable development any further, but it is interesting to note that it is based on a syncretism of the preference-, needs- and capability-based approaches, without, however, exploring their respective implications and the conditions for their compatibility in any depth.

This is a point from which we take inspiration when arguing, below, that the definition of the concrete features of sustainable work needs to be understood in a similar way, by re-politicizing work – that is, by involving workers and other stakeholders in identifying the capabilities that need to be supported in and through work and, on that basis, in identifying the practical features of sustainable work and dealing with the conflicts that are likely to arise between them.

4. Integrating the four requirements for sustainable work: The need for politicization

As the previous sections have shown, the debate about sustainable work has become very broad, ranging from relatively modest proposals to create new jobs within the existing system to calls for a genuine transformation of the economic system (see also Bottazzi 2019). The policy concept with the widest uptake, that of "green jobs", is on the least radical end of the spectrum; the more far-ranging concept of "sustainable work", in contrast, remains vague and does not acknowledge the tensions between different requirements and normative foundations.

Based on our analysis of the literature, we suggest that for work to be sustainable, it is not enough to "green" it by, for example, taking care of the waste and pollution it produces or the energy it consumes. Instead, a deep re-conceptualization is needed to move beyond the current conventional understanding of work as being commodified and regulated within national boundaries. For such a re-conceptualization, the four requirements that we have discussed need to be integrated into a broadened concept of work.

How to combine these requirements into an integrated concept of sustainable work depends on the fourth requirement, namely the need to make explicit the normative approach informing the conceptualization of sustainable work. As discussed above, we consider the capability-based approach, which includes, but goes beyond, meeting basic needs by integrating issues related to people's valuation, voice and agency (Robeyns 2017), to be the most appropriate in this regard. We draw on it in developing a broad understanding of sustainable work as *productive and reproductive activities that foster and activate the capabilities that are essential to the flourishing of human beings and other living species, today and in the future*.

Many approaches in the literature, which are also increasingly used by practitioners, only cover one or the other of the four requirements mentioned in this article. An illustration is the "circular economy" concept and its "cradle-to-grave" or "life-cycle" assessments, in which the impact on the environment is minimized by reusing and recycling material products as much as possible (Boulding 1966). However, an economy could be circular in an ecological sense and yet insufficiently sustainable with regard to social issues, by allowing exploitative work relations in the supply chains of products, for instance. Similarly, an understanding of circularity can be confined to the sphere of the market economy and formal paid work without incorporating the spheres of domestic and informal work, which may also play an important role in recycling. Integrating the social and environmental aspects of sustainability is a complex task. Identifying the general requirements for work to be sustainable, as we have done so far, is a starting point, but it is far from enough. To make these requirements compatible with each other, they need to be developed in more concrete ways.

There are different strategies for doing this, varying according to the actors, methods and normative approaches involved. At one end is a top-down, theory- and expert-driven approach that would translate these requirements into concrete features conceived as metrics for evaluation and decision-making. At the other end is a participatory approach,

in line with the capability approach, in which workers themselves are given the opportunity to contribute to expanding upon our understanding of the requirements for sustainable work and the ways of dealing with tensions between them.

4.1. Challenges of an integrated framework based on metrics

A first possible strategy for fleshing out the concrete features of sustainable work could be the development of an integrated set of metrics to capture what sustainable work amounts to, while at the same time contributing to settling its meaning. Today, only partial sets of indicators exist. For example, the European Commission has proposed indicators for measuring "job quality" (Commission of the European Communities 2001; Green 2021) and the ILO has developed indicators for the measurement of "decent work" (Ghai 2003; Anker et al. 2003; Sehnbruch et al. 2015; Renard and Zimmermann 2025), while Littig and Griessler (2004, 82–6) suggest indicators for measuring the fulfilment of needs, equality of opportunity and social integration, which they argue should be combined with sustainability indicators (ibid., 86). However, such a metrics-driven approach is not without its challenges.

A first challenge is that such an attempt to build an integrated framework would have to bring together empirical and normative evaluations and, as such, it would inevitably include value judgements (Putnam 2002; Douglas 2009; Desrosières 1998). This creates a risk of leaving value judgements implicit, hidden in seemingly technical decisions about the design of metrics (not to speak of the attempts by lobbyists to distort such metrics[9]). Yet in democracies, questions of values need to be discussed explicitly. There is a risk of undermining political legitimacy if a framework is created without discussions about the values underlying decisions.

Moreover, as already mentioned, it is crucial to be sensitive to different contexts and to ask what sustainable work can mean for them. As research in environmental labour studies has made clear, by widening its focus from the global North to the global South (e.g. Räthzel, Stevis and Uzzell 2021), the concrete challenges of sustainability look very different when considering the "environmentalism of the poor" (Martínez Alier 2002; Anguelovski and Martínez Alier 2014) and other environment–labour conflicts in the global South, than when considering the "green" strategies of trade unions in the global North. In certain contexts, subsistence agricultural work and work that attends to the "commons" – spaces that have traditionally been managed collectively – play at least as important a role as formal, salaried work (e.g. Bottazzi and Boillat 2021).

Lastly, the different requirements of sustainable work can stand in tension with each other, requiring careful negotiations and fair compromises – a reality that an integrated system of metrics might hide rather than clarify. While the "environment vs jobs" framing (Räthzel and Uzzell 2011), which applied mostly to sectors such as mining, is increasingly challenged, genuine conflicts can arise, also between different groups of workers; for example, between factory workers and fishers over the presence of a polluting worksite near a coastline (e.g. Rajan 2021). More generally speaking, the benefits and burdens of an ecological transition are distributed unevenly between individuals and groups with different social backgrounds and levels of income, tending to reproduce and strengthen existing inequalities (Chancel 2022). While the most affluent groups of people are the biggest contributors to biogeophysical degradation through their consumption patterns, it is the less affluent whose quality of life is most threatened by that degradation.

These gains and losses need to be acknowledged, fairly negotiated and solutions need to be found which, at a minimum, do not reinforce existing social injustices. However, given that in many countries inequalities along various dimensions are at a level that can hardly be

[9] An interesting case study is the recent discussion in the European Union about the taxonomy of green investments, which led to the controversial decision to include nuclear energy and fossil gas (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EU_taxonomy_for_sustainable_activities).

described as socially sustainable, these solutions should, ideally, contribute to outcomes that are *more* just. This means that before any indicators are defined, the question of the values that should guide public policies in making work socially and environmentally sustainable needs to be addressed.

4.2. Addressing tensions and conflicts through re-politicization

To address these questions, it is necessary to recognize that the characterization of work as "sustainable" is irrevocably political in nature. This becomes clear if one considers real-life struggles around sustainable work, many of which currently take place in the global South – for example, in Amazonia, where an extractive form of capitalism exploits both the environment and human labour (e.g. Barca and Milanez 2021). Surveying the literature about such conflicts reveals that the call for sustainable work is highly political. In richer countries, the conflicts may be less fierce, not least because it is easier to pay "losers" compensation, by providing financial support for regions that phase out coal mining, for instance. But here, just as much as in other world regions, the political character of calls for "sustainable work" needs to be acknowledged. In reaction to it, and in line with the capability approach, we suggest that a thoroughgoing democratization of decision-making processes relating to work is the most promising way forward. This point has also been acknowledged by the critical literature on a "just transition". As Stevis and Felli (2015, 38) write: "a just transition requires the democratization of social and economic relations in order to subordinate production to human (and planetary) needs rather than to profit: market forces should not be the ones to decide *what* ought be produced, and *how*" (original emphasis). They argue that this requires not only deliberation, but also "more confrontational" measures by unions and other groups (ibid., 38–39).

Giving workers a voice is a key element of such an approach (Cukier 2018). This ensures that two key issues can become a matter of democratic deliberation: (1) the concrete form that the four aforementioned requirements of sustainable work take in different social and political contexts, and (2) what compromises between these different requirements of sustainability are necessary and can be justified. The concept of "decent work" also recognizes this point: its definition by the ILO indicates that it "gives people the freedom to express their concerns, to organize and to participate in decisions that affect their lives" (ILO 2008, vi). Eurofound's job quality framework similarly includes the dimensions of "decision latitude" and "organisational participation" (Eurofound 2021, 4) and emphasizes the role of "strong social dialogue structures" (ibid., 67).

However, given the expanded definition of work that we have adopted, traditional forms of social dialogue, with their focus on wage labour, are not up to the task of integrating the voices of all the workers; nor do they include other stakeholders, such as consumers or local communities, whose voices also need to be heard. And for the sake of ecological sustainability, the interests of non-human animals and ecosystems also need to be represented, for example by admitting NGOs as stakeholders (e.g. Dobson 1996; Setälä 2022).

For these reasons, the transformation towards sustainable work can be an opportunity to re-politicize and democratize work (e.g. Urban 2017; Jochum et al. 2020, 229–230; Barth, Jochum and Littig 2016; Uzzell 2021; White 2021; Laruffa 2022). But this also raises the question of the channels and forms of such a politicization. To explore this question further, the literature on sustainable work needs to be brought into dialogue with the literature on the (re-)politicization of work.[10]

[10] The political nature of work is currently also being debated in the "anti-work" movement (e.g. Weeks 2011), in discussions about a reduction of working time (Méda 2018; Reuter 2022; Autonomy 2023) and in relation to renewed interest in alternative models of provisioning, such as "contributive" models (Bottazzi 2019, 10–11). To integrate the different requirements for sustainable work, however, we consider democratization to be the most promising *procedural* way forward because it opens up the decision-making processes about work. The implementation of other proposals, such as working time reduction, can be the *outcome* of such democratic processes.

The democratization of work can take place at various levels. At the workplace level, it can involve giving voice to workers – as described in Bonnemain (2025 – this Special Issue) – but also involving other stakeholders, such as consumers, in the governance of workplaces – as discussed by Gonzalez (2025 – also this Special Issue). In debates about workplace democracy (see Frega, Herzog and Neuhäuser (2019) for an overview), many authors make an explicit connection to the decarbonization of work (e.g. Ferreras, Battilana and Méda 2022). A key argument for connecting these topics is that democratic companies are better able to initiate learning processes, to allow for what Docherty, Kira and Shani (2009, 10–11) describe as "learning for sustainability". Participatory processes can tap into workers' and stakeholders' implicit and explicit knowledge about how their work could be made more sustainable, and take their values and interests into consideration (Herzog 2018, Chapter 6).[11]

However, workplace democracy can only partially re-politicize work and implement sustainable work. Internally democratic firms, such as cooperatives, might still create unsustainable effects on outsiders, such as workers in their supply chains or local communities. Here, approaches that involve unions – as discussed by Crawford and Whyte (2025 – this Special Issue) – or local communities, including indigenous ones – as discussed by Zbyszewska and Maximo (2025 – also this Special Issue) – have the potential to include the voices and interests of broader groups of individuals, including many who do unpaid work. But such approaches might still not go far enough. For one thing, it is unclear whether democratic firms, and/or firms that take the voices of stakeholders into account, can survive in markets dominated by firms oriented single-mindedly towards efficiency (e.g. Vrousalis 2019). Government regulation on the latter would probably be required to allow the former to survive and flourish (Méda 2018; Buch-Hansen and Nesterova 2023). Moreover, democratic workplaces, the unionization of specific industries, or local stakeholder initiatives would not, per se, answer the question of how to deal with unpaid and informal work and the global interconnections between different forms of work. Therefore, these firms need to be embedded in broader attempts to democratize the economy in order to bring it in line with the different requirements of sustainability (see also Johanisova and Wolf 2012; Dörre 2021; Foster 2023).

The debate about *political* democracy and sustainability (e.g. Holland 2014; Bornemann, Knappe and Nanz 2022; Heidenreich 2023) has given rise to various proposals for making current political systems more democratic and for empowering them to better deal with the sustainability challenge. They combine representative and participatory mechanisms of democracy (e.g. "lottocracy" – a system of governance by decision-makers selected at random from a broadly inclusive pool of eligible citizens), but also the integration of different forms of knowledge among experts and citizens (e.g. Herzog 2023). However, the democratization of the *economic* system and of *work* are currently only side-issues in these debates, even though the same challenges arise there as well. Bridging these two strands of the debate – about democracy and sustainability, and about democracy and the economic system – is of crucial importance if sustainable work is to be achieved.

A core challenge for democracy in better responding to demands of sustainability is that it must take place at multiple levels, from local to global, and these levels need to be meaningfully integrated in the decision-making processes. The greatest challenge, in this context, lies at the global level; this holds for general questions about sustainability just as much as for the realization of sustainable work. Could international organizations be "democratized", above and beyond the negotiations between governments, some (but not all) of which are democratically elected? How could the historical domination of international organizations by Western countries be overcome? Could alternative forms of democratic accountability be established at a global level (e.g. Global Assembly

[11] Empirical research shows that co-determined firms in fact do better on certain social and environmental indicators (Scholz and Vitols 2019).

2022)? Although we cannot answer these questions here, they are some of the most important research and political questions ultimately raised by the call to make work sustainable.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed and mapped out how sustainability is addressed in relation to work in the international policy and academic literature. Based on this mapping, we have argued for a re-conceptualization of work towards sustainability in terms of four requirements, integrated into a single framework. We have further argued that the key to making these requirements more concrete is establishing the normative approach for dealing with the tensions between them, thereby making the definition of sustainable work a political issue. Whereas the preference-based approach that drives capitalist societies has proven to be inappropriate for dealing with ecological sustainability (Holland 2014), and the needs-based approach sees work only in an instrumental way, we have argued for the potential of the capability approach. It makes the concrete features of sustainable work dependent on the identification of the capabilities to be promoted in and through work, by means of democratic public reasoning involving all stakeholders. Only then will the more concrete features of sustainable work be derived.

In terms of the next steps for a research agenda on sustainable work, our article calls for a more in-depth analysis of the implications of the capability approach for addressing both work and sustainability. It also points to action research that involves all concerned individuals and groups, starting with workers. Taking sustainable work seriously in all its requirements thus leads to reconsidering the relations between democracy and work, between democracy and the economy and, ultimately, between democracy and research practices.

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