



International  
Labour  
Organization

OH Open Library  
of Humanities

Méda, Dominique. 2025. "Postscript:  
Recognizing Sustainable Work".  
*International Labour Review* 164 (1):  
1–5. [https://doi.org/10.16995/  
ilr.18839](https://doi.org/10.16995/ilr.18839).



International  
Labour Review

## Postscript: Recognizing sustainable work

**Dominique Méda**, Université Paris Dauphine – PSL, [dominique.meda@dauphine.psl.eu](mailto:dominique.meda@dauphine.psl.eu)

Responsibility for opinions expressed in signed articles rests solely with their authors, and publication does not constitute an endorsement by the ILO.

Original title: "Postface : Reconnaître le travail soutenable", *Revue internationale du Travail* 164 (1). Translation by the ILR editorial team. This postscript is also available in Spanish, in *Revista Internacional del Trabajo* 144 (1).

The *International Labour Review/Revue internationale du Travail/Revista Internacional del Trabajo* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Bibliographic references to articles in the *Review* are included in *Labordoc*, the institutional repository of the International Labour Office. Information on the International Labour Organization (ILO), including ILO publications, is available online at [www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org).

OPEN ACCESS

© The author(s) 2025. Journal translation and compilation © International Labour Organization 2025.



As I set out to explain in this postscript, the articles in this Special Feature are of great significance: they constitute a remarkable contribution to our knowledge about work and could be instrumental in improving practices.

Over the past few decades, many countries have witnessed a complete dismantling of employment protections (Méda 2019). These have been challenged in theory: memorably, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has repeatedly called “employment protection legislation” into question, criticizing its rigidity (OECD 2004); but also in practice, through the many reforms to make work more flexible. In addition, these reforms, and especially those in Western countries, have often focused on the issue of working time, its relationship with other social time – such as family or leisure time – or its reduction, as in the case of France.

In various countries – Germany in the 1980s and, later, France – the idea took hold that work is permeated and constrained by instrumental rationality, capitalist logic and technical specialization, which can be avoided by reducing the space occupied by work and freeing people from its constraints. Some authors argued that working conditions had not been given enough space or attention in public debates, overshadowed by unemployment and employment – this was a criticism, aimed specifically at the Left, voiced by Bruno Trentin in *La città del lavoro* (Trentin 1997) – and called for the liberation of work, that is, the improvement of the specific conditions in which work is conducted (Coutrot 2018).

Nevertheless, during this period, studies continued to analyse working conditions, and major surveys – both national surveys and the European Working Conditions Surveys – made it possible to measure their development with some accuracy. In 2019, the ILO was thus able to report on the working conditions of more than a billion people across the world (in Europe, the United States, Turkey, China and Latin America), providing evidence that exposure to physical risk was common (more than half of workers were exposed to repetitive movements), that between a fifth and a third of workers were exposed to high noise levels and that women worked more than men and earned less (ILO and Eurofound 2019). Accordingly, interest in the concept of sustainable work started to grow.

In a note that retraces the genealogy of “sustainable work”, Patricia Vendramin (2016) claims that the concept first appeared in the book *Creating Sustainable Work Systems* (Docherty, Forslin and Shani 2002) and primarily aimed to address the problem of the intensification of work. As Vendramin (2016, 2) explains, for Docherty and his colleagues, a system of sustainable work was a system that was capable of reproducing and developing all the resources and components that it used. In particular, it had to be capable of regenerating and developing the human and social resources that it mobilized.

According to Vendramin (2016), the concept initially took a socio-technical approach, seeking to associate the human, social and ecological factors in human activities. Following its adoption by French ergonomists specializing in ageing, this socio-technical approach was abandoned and the focus shifted to the quality of work. This marked a move away from a “system of sustainable work” to “sustainable work”. Although the ecological dimension had been fairly weak in the early research, it now disappeared altogether – various chapters of *Creating Sustainable Work Systems* do consider the ecological aspect but, in their conclusion, the authors recognize that “[a]lthough the notion of sustainable systems here is borrowed from ecology, the caring and efficient use of natural resources in general is not the topic of this book” (Docherty, Forslin and Shani 2002, 214).

As Lisa Herzog and Bénédicte Zimmermann observe in their contribution to this Special Feature (“Sustainable work: A conceptual map for a social-ecological approach”), work and ecology have been classed into different fields and disciplines, with proposals that only link them through truncated notions and slogans that do not view the exhaustion of human and natural resources as one and the same. The articles selected for this Special Feature help build a solid concept of sustainable work, without trying to skirt around the inevitable difficulties that could hinder this endeavour.

In their article, Herzog and Zimmerman propose a conceptual shift: they go beyond the limited objectives of “green jobs” and “decent work” to present a revision of the concept of work that is in line with the new definition adopted by the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians:

Work comprises any activity performed by persons of any sex and age to produce goods or to provide services for use by others or for own use. [...] Work excludes activities that do not involve producing goods or services (e.g. begging and stealing), self-care (e.g. personal grooming and hygiene) and activities that cannot be performed by another person on one's own behalf (e.g. sleeping, learning and activities for own recreation). (ILO 2013, 48)

According to Herzog and Zimmermann, sustainable work must integrate ecological and social sustainability, address work beyond paid work, attend to local and global interdependencies and make its normative foundations explicit. They conceive sustainable work as comprising productive and reproductive activities that promote and prompt capacities that are essential in enabling humans and other living species to thrive, both in the present and in the future. This is a towering ambition. Achieving it, according to the authors, is dependent on the adoption of the capabilities approach and a re-politization of work.

The other articles in the Special Feature offer confirmation of the ways in which this definition of sustainable work can satisfy the expectations that are currently placed on work, as well as specific indications on how to achieve this. They all agree on the following:

- The organization of work and the way in which workers are treated is indeed essential but the *nature* of what is produced by the activity of work is also important. Work that contributes to destroying the conditions of life on Earth is harmful to the health and well-being of individuals.
- Giving workers a say not only on their work, but more generally on how they work and on the nature of the goods and services they produce, through collective deliberation, is essential in making work socially and ecologically sustainable.
- Such deliberation is complex, difficult and unwieldy to organize. Rather than seeking to avoid conflict and disagreement, it should allow their expression, and it should be integrated into the legislation governing labour “rights”.
- Legislation governing labour “rights” should not be limited to the national sphere but should seek to prevent situations in which the conditions of work in certain countries improve to the detriment of those in others. It should legislate for international value chains in their entirety.
- Lastly, trade unions must play a key role in bringing about this revolution, and the proposals to democratize work put forward by Ferreras, Battilana and Méda (2020) – endorsed by the European Trade Union Confederation, the former European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights and the Spanish Minister of Labour, among others – must be put into practice.

The authors are therefore calling for a real revolution, both conceptual and practical. This Special Feature thus opens up a vast undertaking in both academic research and practice.

Considering, first, who would be equal to this undertaking, the Special Feature highlights the responsibility of the ILO (who else could develop such regulation and monitor its enforcement?) and the importance of coordination among relevant international institutions: the ILO, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and perhaps a future international organization on the environment. Research must continue to examine the regulation of value chains and the universal adoption of the European Union's (EU) Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, alongside other instruments such as the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive<sup>1</sup> and discussions on the new responsibilities attributed to enterprises.

---

<sup>1</sup> Directive (EU) 2022/2464 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 amending Regulation (EU) No 537/2014, Directive 2004/109/EC, Directive 2006/43/EC and Directive 2013/34/EU, as regards corporate sustainability reporting.

Alongside this vast undertaking, key and specific questions regarding the means of democratizing enterprises need to be explored in greater depth. What is the relationship between trade union representation and direct employee participation? What is the proper forum for the regulation of the right to deliberate on work and what shape should such regulation take? Should the mission of enterprises be reconsidered and to what extent? As many authors have suggested, should enterprises' accounting systems be revised in order to guide their choices and, if so, what are the most appropriate alternative systems? And beyond that, does the national system of accounting – as an overarching mechanism – need to be revised in order to include unpaid care activities (Folbre 2006; Heggeness 2023), thereby giving due recognition to their essential role?

Lastly, what is the best way of giving paid and unpaid care activities this recognition and renewed visibility? There are various options. One is to adopt a comprehensive definition of work, covering almost all human activities, including domestic and family activities. If this is not done carefully, though, it could lead to confusion and create certain risks. For example, it could create the requirement that such activities be remunerated, thereby reinforcing rather than minimizing the gendered specialization of roles (Jany-Catrice and Méda 2011). Another risk is that all human activities could be considered to qualify as “production”, and non-productive activities subjected to the same rationalization as paid work. Aristotle said that “life is action not production”. Accordingly, my own early research (Méda 1995) distinguished activities by purpose, seeking to guarantee the access of men and women to the whole range of human activities – including productive, family, political and free personal development activities – based on a restricted definition of work, considered by some to be too restrictive. In order to avoid the limitations of both of these approaches, a wider conception of work – as proposed in this Special Feature – can be adopted while guarding against the risks that I have presented above. This is the approach taken, for example, by the ILO report *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, which argues for the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care tasks within households and between households and the State (ILO 2018). This proposal gives the notion of care a central role, reassesses the purpose of human action and substitutes a paradigm of exploitation with one of respect, love and care, as advocated by the sociologist Aldo Leopold (1949).

## References

- Coutrot, Thomas. 2018. *Libérer le travail: pourquoi la gauche s'en moque et pourquoi ça doit changer*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Docherty, Peter, Jan Forslin, and A.B. (Rami) Shani, eds. 2002. *Creating Sustainable Work Systems: Emerging Perspectives and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Ferreras, Isabelle, Julie Battilana, and Dominique Méda, eds. 2020. *Le Manifeste Travail: Démocratiser. Démarchandiser. Dépolluer*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil. [Published in English as: 2022. *Democratize Work: The Case for Reorganizing the Economy*. Translated by Miranda Richmond Mouillot. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.]
- Folbre, Nancy. 2006. “Measuring Care: Gender, Empowerment, and the Care Economy”. *Journal of Human Development* 7 (2): 183–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649880600768512>.
- Heggeness, Misty L. 2023. “The Girly Economics of Care Work: Implications for Economic Statistics”. *AEA Papers and Proceedings* 113 (May): 632–636. <https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20231108>.
- ILO. 2013. *Report of the Conference*. 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, 2–11 October 2013. Geneva.
- . 2018. *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*. Geneva.
- ILO and Eurofound. 2019. *Working Conditions in a Global Perspective*. Geneva and Luxembourg: ILO and Publications Office of the European Union.

- Jany-Catrice, Florence, and Dominique Méda. 2011. "Femmes et richesse: au-delà du PIB". *Travail, genre et sociétés* 26 (2): 147–171. [English translation available: "Women and Wealth: Beyond GDP"]. <https://doi.org/10.3917/tgs.026.0147>.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Méda, Dominique. 1995. *Le travail: une valeur en voie de disparition?* Paris: Flammarion.
- . 2019. "Three Scenarios for the Future of Work". *International Labour Review* 158 (4): 627–652. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ilr.12157>.
- OECD. 2004. *OECD Employment Outlook 2004*. Paris.
- Trentin, Bruno. 1997. *La città del lavoro : Sinistra e crisi del fordismo*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Vendramin, Patricia. 2016. "Travail soutenable, faisable, durable: de quoi parle-t-on? Origine et évolution d'un concept", Note d'éducation permanente de l'ASBL Fondation Travail-Université (FTU) No. 2016, 9 June. Brussels: FTU.

