

Our Common Futures of Sustainable Work: Concluding Reflections

Kenneth Abrahamsson

«Beyond continued efforts to tackle the health dimension, the EU must prioritise the social dimension of Sustainable Work, notably by implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. We must invest in protecting and creating jobs, and in driving our competitive sustainability by building a fairer, greener and more digital Europe. We must repair the short-term damage from the current crisis, in a way that also invests in our long-term future. To achieve this, the EU must now show clarity of purpose and certainty of direction through its policies. »¹

Promotion of sustainable work: points of departure

This double issue of *European Journal of Workplace Innovation* reflects different journeys and time horizons, with respect to decent and sustainable working conditions and innovative and productive workplaces. The first and the shortest journey, through the scientific and policy-related landscape of the European workplace, is the composition and participating in these two parts by scholars and policy specialists from Sweden and European environments. It started from a somewhat longer journey, when Maria Albin, professor at Karolinska Institute Stockholm, in 2013 took the initiative to create a platform, on Sustainable Work in EU Horizon 2020 financed by support from the Swedish Innovation Agency, Vinnova. Its purpose was to promote Sustainable Work as a core mission in the European framework programme, Horizon 2020, and later Horizon Europe.

One crucial aspect of Sustainable Work is the life course perspective, and job longevity. This mission is also reflected in the composition of contributors including two senior professors still vitally active well past retirement age from Sweden. Professor emeritus and former member of Swedish Parliament, Lennart Levi, born 1930, has a truly eminent scientific career in the field of work environment, health, and stress. He has a genuine global mind, and concern for good and decent work in all countries and continents. Professor Allan Larsson, born in 1938, has had an outstanding career in Sweden and Europe as former Minister of Finance, Director General for DG Employment in the European Commission, and recently adviser to the former EU President Jean-Claude Juncker on the European Pillar of Social Rights.

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0456&from=EN>. Europe's moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation. COM (2020) 456 final. Downloaded 2021-02-09.

The other contributors to this special double issue range in ages from 40 plus to 70 plus, and are both scholars and policy experts in working life science, focussing various aspects of sustainable work, such as work, health, and worker longevity; work, innovation, and technology; digitalisation and jobs; the social dialogue and social partners; green energy and new factories; and job longevity, pensions, and social insurances, in a Nordic perspective. The European perspectives are also well covered by contributions from EU-OSHA, Eurofound and Perosh, the network of European Work Environment Institutes.

From social sustainability to green and sustainable workplaces

Another longer journey and policy formation needs to be mentioned. It first started in 1988 with the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: "Our Common Future" by the World Commission on Environment and Development, a mission given by the General Assembly of the United Nations.²

The concept of Sustainable Development implies limits: not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organisation on environmental resources, and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organisation can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth.

Sustainable Development was also a priority policy for the European Union at the European Councils Gothenburg meeting in 2001, when *A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development* was launched.

The concept of Sustainable Work has over the years encountered difficulties in being included in the broader Sustainable Development family. This lack of family attention is, however, fundamentally solved in the UN Sustainable Development Goals with DG 8 Decent work and economic growth, with the aim of *promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all*. The next challenge is to promote greener and more sustainable jobs.³ Another major challenge in the global policy of Sustainable Development mission is to integrate ecological, economic, and social goals, with the role of decent and sustainable work, productive labour market regimes, and jobs for all. These challenges need to operate at national, regional, and global levels.

As has been presented elsewhere in this double issue of EJWI (Abrahamsson, K., 2021), one of the inspiring minds of the concept and policies of Sustainable Work was Peter Docherty (Docherty et.al., 2009), previously employed at the Swedish National Institute for Working Life.

² UN (1988) Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. Our Common Future., § 3.p. 27.

³ <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-8-decent-work-and-economic-growth.html>.
Downloaded 2021-02-09.

Good working conditions and the regeneration of resources and environmental considerations were part of the concept. Over the years, various approaches to quality of work have been designed in the European policy community and on the research frontiers. Quality of work, decent work, and flexicurity have been signalled in the policy development. The Lisbon Strategy focussed on economic growth, job creation and more and, better jobs, while the Europe 2020 Strategy had the basic goals to stimulate *smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth*. The new strategy also contained convergence policies, macroeconomic stability, and sound public budgets as prerequisites for growth. Future working life strategies cannot only be built on sustainable work. It is now becoming more and more crucial to focus on sustainable employment and forms of job transitions, as well as sustainable welfare.

At present, the European Union is facing new crises, in addition to ongoing transformations such as demographic change, including ageing and migration, technological disruption, industry 4.0 and new job creation initiatives. Furthermore, new pressures follow from the impact of Brexit on trade and other forms of exchange, and the new political uncertainty created by examples of political populism, nationalism and protectionism in different countries, regions, and continents. The global public health shock, and the various waves of the Covid pandemic, have almost taken the form of virus war, with hidden, dangerously, and unexpected agendas. On top of numerous policies and measures to limit the impact of the pandemic, digitalisation and climate change expand the policy pressure on the formation of Sustainable Work.

There is no doubt that Covid-19 will have a significant and enduring impact on workplace innovation, far beyond what we could have imagined at the end of 2019 and the first weeks of 2020. A diversified flow of job destruction, job retention and job creation has intervened in the European labour market, industrial structure and working conditions for most employees. Within a few months, most projections, and scenarios of the future of work must be rewritten. The ongoing redefinition of standard employment has been speeded up, and new forms of employment and new ways to work are becoming “the new normal” of the European workplace. Rising unemployment, more temporary work and increasing numbers of precarious work conditions will follow.

The two parts of this special issue have not sufficiently covered the new context for the future of work due to the pandemic shock. The adaptation of working life to Covid-19 comprises several policy challenges, and will be major field of future work life research. The new challenges do not only have to consider various forms of remote work (work environment, leadership, social communication, stress, and work-life balance), but also new risk panoramas, for employees in hospitals and health care, elderly care and in service and transport, where the infection risk is high. In the long run, and in a post-pandemic society, climate change and more sustainable forms of production, just transition, work and living conditions, and social services are fundamental challenges, having impacts not only on all sectors of human life, but also on nature and organic life in a broader context.

Covid-19, Green Deal and Digitalisation: towards new policy frontiers

The launching of the consultation of European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017 highlights the importance of future of work and welfare systems in Europe. The challenges of global competition, digitalisation and demographic change demonstrate the need for new research and innovation in sustainable work systems and innovative workplaces. Longer and healthier working lives are a key issue for Europe's future prosperity. The new triple challenges, Covid-19, Green Deal, and digitalisation open the way for new European research programmes.

Sustainable welfare, social protection and good living conditions are crucial supportive mechanisms for sustainable workplaces. Rapid labour market changes following the need to adapt to climate change, lower carbon omissions, electrification, and new forms of employment, call for an increasing focus to job shifts, career development and workplace learning. As shown in the introductory text in the first part by Allan Larsson and Kenneth Abrahamsson, research on institutional models to support job transition is another highly relevant policy field.

New technology, innovation, and skills development⁴

New technology can be perceived as scary, but the alternative can be even more scary. The Swedish trade union IF Metall describes it this way: "We are not afraid of the new technology, but of the old". The effort to protect old jobs and old technology, can in the long run mean a loss of new jobs. The processes of job retention, job destruction and job creation are an ongoing transformation that has been well documented over centuries by economic historians, economists, and sociologists. Studies of influence and control of technology from a human factor point of view is a recurrent challenge. The social dimension must have a prominent place in designing the technology. The design of the interface between man and machine is a delicate task, that requires reflection and consideration, so that we do not create more problems than we solve. Research has an important role to play, when new technology should be evaluated and introduced, but that role is not being pre-given; we must mark our position by highlighting issues that are perceived as important and relevant (Abrahamsson & Johansson, 2021).⁵

Another field is skill development and technology change. There is an urgent need to deal proactively through skill-development, and especially in-work training, to deal with the

⁴ The descriptions of future work challenges are based on contributors of some authors in the double issue of EJWI, which are referred to in the text.

⁵ Abrahamsson, L. & Johansson, J. (2021) Digitalisation and Sustainable Work: Obstacles and Pathways. Human Works Science, Luleå university of technology. This issue EJWI.

inequalities and labour market dislocation that innovation tends to generate. This means targeting innovation support to firms and organisations that seek to boost innovations by experimenting with improving innovation capacity by improving job quality, rather than solely targeting support to specific innovations or areas of application.



Figure 1. Circles of change shaping the context for the social dialogue on sustainable and greener jobs.

It is also important to encourage firms to undertake “innovation impact assessments” to analyse the impacts that larger innovations are expected to have (prospective) and have resulted in (retrospective) to improve firms’ abilities to increase the beneficial and minimise the detrimental effects of innovations. We should promote the use of qualitative case-study research to understand the complexity of and mechanisms behind the interaction of innovation and job quality across industries, especially in the services, is also important (Mathieu & Boethius, 2021).⁶

Social dialogue and social partners need to be driving forces for green transition. Early co-operation between a new firm and trade unions has the potential to proactively address prerequisites for sustainable work in design phases of new factories, but also to strengthen attention to other dimensions of social sustainability that are vital for start-ups. Building a stakeholder chain, inspired by the Nordic model, emphasises the dimensions of social sustainability needed in work processes in the early development phases, which is also beneficial from a society perspective. However, a systematic approach with anchoring

⁶ Mathieu, C. & Boethius, S. (2021) The generative relationship between job quality, innovation and employment. Sociology department, Lund University. This issue EJWI.

activities, both within and between the stakeholders at different levels, is needed. These findings are reflected upon in the case study carried out in early phases of a major greenfield project aiming at establishing a new industrial domain in a Nordic context (Harlin et.al. 2021).⁷

Equality, sustainable work, and economic growth

The opposite to sustainable work is the lack of good job qualities, such as an unhealthy work environment, lack of influence and co-determination, low work dignity and job enjoyment, and weak employment relations or none. Inequalities, gender gaps and discrimination of migrants are other signs of the bad side of the coin. To combat inequalities in working life is not just an issue of social justice and respect. Equality is a goal that also has a productive mission, and is beneficial for economic development and growth. In this context, it is worrying that inequalities of income, social standard and living conditions are increasing in many countries; Sweden is not an exception (OECD 2015).⁸

Sustainable work over the life-course and job longevity are not goals in themselves, but missions for good living and working conditions. In Sweden and other countries, the number of post retirement age or senior workers is increasing, and is more noticeable for white-collar workers than blue-collar workers. However, job-longevity and postponed retirement could also create new gaps, between employees not being able or healthy enough to work until retirement, and those who continue into their seventies. At the end of the day, Sustainable Work also interacts with institutions supporting sustainable welfare, security, and wellness for all citizens, and not only those who have a strong employment position or contract.

The pandemic has brought a renaissance for occupational health and safety measures, i.e., protective masks being the most visible sign. The interface between occupational health and public health has never been so significant, relevant, and crucial as in the pandemic period. The breadth and depth of the changes that are already affecting the world of work demand a response from the OSH community. Policy makers need to ensure that the regulatory framework is fit for purpose, and that tools and resources are in place to ensure adequate protection is afforded to all workers, while not stifling innovation, or acting as a brake on business.

Whether it is climate change, globalisation or digitalisation, there is no holding back the impact of the megatrends described. As a society, we must adapt while preserving the values and standards we hold dear. Technological advances, such as the use of artificial intelligence in human resource tools, or in 'intelligent cobots', are not necessarily a threat to OSH. However, it is essential that the design, implementation and roll-out of new technology follows established principles, such as worker participation, or 'prevention through design' and

7 Harlin, U., Skagert, K., Elg, M. & Berglund, M. (2021) Stakeholder collaboration inspired by the Nordic model – Towards sustainable work and competitiveness during an industrial start-up. RISE& Helix, Linköping University. This issue EJWI.

8 OECD (2015), In It Together: Why Less Inequality Benefits All, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264235120-en>. Downloaded 2021-02-09.

others yet to be consolidated, such as an ethical framework for digitalisation, codes of conduct and proper governance. Digitalisation will bring challenges, but also opportunities.

Automation allows the design of better jobs; data analytics can improve risk assessment, and access to data can help inspection and enforcement. Fortunately, these challenges and opportunities are not country specific and there is much to be gained from sharing knowledge and experience of different approaches. EU-OSHA is a networking organisation that aims to act as a catalyst and facilitator for exchange among the EU 27 member states, and initiatives such as the ILO led Global Coalition are essential to exchange knowledge and experience at a global level.⁹

The Swedish Working Life Research Journey in Retrospect

The ongoing transformation of the Swedish labour market and working life can be seen as a journey over centuries, while the modern development goes back half a century, comprising new institutions, new labour laws and a renewal of working life research. The early focus on jobs at risk and occupational health and safety has over the years been broadened to studies of work organisation, employment relations and the functions and structure of the labour market. It is a misunderstanding that Swedish research on working life has mainly been performed at the National Institute of Work Environment and the Work Life Centre which merged into the National Institute of Working life, NIWL, abolished in 2007. The main part of the research is taking place at various research departments, centres of excellence and some institutes. The closing down of NIWL, however, had an enduring impact on the international dialogue between Swedish scholars and the European research community.

Over the years, there have been various patterns of international exchange for working life development and working life research in Sweden. During the 1980s and 1990s the Swedish Work Environment Fund supported various forms of international exchange. One significant initiative from the Swedish National Institute of Working Life, was to launch a programme of more than 60 international workshops under the heading of Work Life 2000: Quality in Work programme, preparing for the Work Life 2000 Conference in Malmö, January 2001, as part of the Swedish Presidency of the European Union.¹⁰ A majority of the workshops were hosted by the Swedish Trade Unions Office in Brussels, and others were hosted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in Dublin, and to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work in Bilbao. Taken together, the workshops and the final EU conference were a peak performance event for the international exchange between Sweden and other European countries on work life research and development. It is interesting to note that one of the workshops focussed on Sustainable Work.

⁹ Cockburn, W. (2021) OSH in the future – where next? EU OSHA, European Agency for Safety&Health at Work. EJWI.

¹⁰ These workshops have been documented in three volumes, rich in content, by Richard Ennals (1999,2000 and 2001).

Another initiative organised by the National Institute for Working Life was the SALTSA-programme. SALTSA stands for the joint programme for working life research in Europe. SALTSA was a joint undertaking by the three Swedish confederations of employees (trade unions): LO, TCO, SACO, and the National Institute for Working Life, which was based in Stockholm. The purpose of the programme was to facilitate problem-oriented research collaboration on working life related issues in Europe. The SALTSA approach aimed to initiate Europe-wide collaborative research projects by mobilising relevant researchers. The SALTSA programme was subdivided into three branches: Work Environment & Health, Labour Market, and Work Organisation. Due to the closure of the NIWL, the SALTSA-programme was ended

Sweden also joined two ERA-Nets, which were a collaborative exchange between research funders in Europe within the EU framework programme of research. The Consortium OSH-ERA included 12 leading public agencies, ministries and research organisations funding or managing OSH research in close collaboration with stakeholders from science, economics, and civil society and was in operation between 2006 and 2010. The Work-in-Net consortium consisted of senior programme managers of 12 leading public funding agencies and ministries from 7 countries. The objective of Work-in-Net was to create an internal research market on work-oriented innovations, by a systematic exchange and stepwise integration of research objectives, development programmes and workplace innovations, placing the focus on human resource management for improving the quality of working life, innovative human potential, and labour productivity.

Swedish scholars have also participated in the EUWIN network initiated and co-ordinated by Steven Dhondt, Frank Pot and Peter Totterdill and associates. More generally, however, there has been a shortage of wider platforms for international exchange driven by Swedish institutions and funders. One exception, however, is the Vinnova-supported platform for sustainable work in EU Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe, which is described in this special double issue (Lagerlöf & Albin, 2021) and aims to strengthen the capacity of Swedish scholars to participate in the European research programmes more actively. SWOSH targets researchers in the broad area of Sustainable Work, including occupational health, work organisation, employment conditions, digitalisation and new forms of work, green jobs etc. Looking back, international collaboration by Swedish working life research has had its ups and downs. Parallel to making Swedish working life research more visible in a European context, there are several discipline-oriented networks, conferences and associations built on academic subjects such as sociology, economics, labour law, business administration, psychology, pedagogy, political science, technology, and occupational medicine etc. In addition, there are hidden curricula and agendas of international journals for scientific exchange in respective fields.¹¹

¹¹ The Swedish Forum for Working life Research – FALF - started for more than ten years ago and organises annual conferences, publishing and networks for junior and senior scholars in the field. A new network on practice-oriented studies on sustainable work brings together researchers from several universities in Sweden.

Finally, one should mention recurrent Nordic conferences and platforms in the field of working life research. One current, policy relevant and scientifically significant endeavour is the project “The Future of Work: Opportunities and Challenges for the Nordic Models” 2017–2020, funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers, and organised by the Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, in Oslo. This project was inspired by the Global Future of Work project organised by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in the context of its 100th Anniversary in 2019.

This research programme consists of seven pillars, covering various aspects of Nordic working life, labour market transformation and quality of work (Dølvik & Røed Steen, 2018, p. 13).¹²

«Whereas Nordic working lives have been privileged by their strong and adaptive institutions, they are now apparently entering a phase where their ability to master the emerging challenges increasingly will depend on the actors' capacity to foster institutional innovation. Be it in the areas of life-long learning, protection for new categories of workers, inclusion of groups with poor or no formal schooling, or prevention of rising inequality, and ensuring that all economic actors contribute to the common good, the preparations needed to become fit for the future of work will entail engagement in imaginative renewal and reconstruction of the institutions that we once inherited from the pioneers of the Nordic model. »

The seven pillars or thematic approaches are: 1) The main drivers of change demographic change: ageing and migration, climate change, and economic and political changes associated with globalisation, European integration, and rising income gaps. 2) The digitalisation of work, new technology, robotics automatisation, industrialisation 4.0, and new platforms. 3) The self-employed, independent, and atypical work and non-standard work, marginal part-time, temporary agency work, fixed-term contracts and self-employed without employees. 4) The new labour market agents as various platforms. 5) The occupational health-consequences and challenges, and new and unforeseen work environment challenges. 6) The labour law and regulations, 7) The core of the Nordic model of labour market governance.

It is important to underline that while this programme was launched before the pandemic, the final report, to be published during spring 2021, will also focus on the Covid-19 shock to the Nordic labour market and workplace. The triple challenge of Covid-19, digitalisation, and the Green Deal, will comprise fundamental challenges to working life and sustainable work in Sweden, the Nordic countries, Europa at large and all continents, they will also challenge and place pressure on the Nordic labour market model in the choice between basic income and the collective bargaining model. These challenges are also reflected in Horizon Europe, the new period of the European Social Fund and national and EU policies. The policies, practices and research on sustainable work need to gain stronger political attention. One positive

¹² <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1265618/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

example from Sweden, is that the Government recently launched a new work environment strategy highlighting the purpose and missions of sustainable work, summarised in these four points.¹³

- A sustainable working life: everyone should be able, strong, and willing to work a whole working life.
- A healthy working life: working life must contribute to development and well-being.
- A safe working life: no one should risk life or health because of worked.
- A labour market without crime and cheating: a deficient work environment must never be a means of competition.

Sustainable Work is today a policy and mission shared by the Swedish government, the social partners, and the research funders, and is also reflected in the research community. The next challenge is to transform and implement these policies into good, healthy, innovative and productive ways of organising work for the future.

Never before, there has been such a significant need to integrate policy solutions and active measures on national and European levels. The current pandemic illuminates the crossroads between labour market and work life policies, welfare policies and health policies. It is too early to anticipate the visions of a post pandemic life in Europe and other continents. New lifestyles, new ways of work and new forms of social protection as well as new forms of inequalities might appear when this global trauma is over. The pandemic has created a renaissance of the need for workers protection and healthy and safe work environments, and in our words, more sustainable and healthy workplaces and new workplace innovations.

«We cannot wait for the end of the pandemic to repair and prepare for the future. We will build the foundations of a stronger European Health Union in which 27 countries work together to detect, prepare and respond collectively. »

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, speaking at the World Health Summit (25 October 2020).

References:

- Abrahamsson, K. (2017) Reflections on working life research in Sweden. Institutional transformation, current policies, and new networks. *EUWIN Bulletin 2/2017*.
- Abrahamsson, K. (2021) Sustainable work in transition. Policies, practices, and research. *European Journal of Workplace Innovations*. Vol 6, Issue 1-2.
- Docherty, P., Kira, M. & Rami Shani (2009) *Creating Sustainable Work Systems. Developing Social Sustainability*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

¹³ <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/skrivelse/2021/02/skr.-20202192/>

- Dølvik, J.E. and Røed Steen, J. (2018) The Nordic future of work Drivers, institutions, and politics. *Tema Nord* 2018:555
- Ennals, R.(ed.) (1999) *Work Life 2000 yearbook 1: 1999*. London: Springer-Verlag
- Ennals, R.(ed.) (2000) *Work Life 2000 yearbook 2: 2000*. London: Springer-Verlag
- Ennals, R. (ed.) (2001a) *Work Life 2000 yearbook 3: 2001*. London: Springer-Verlag
- Ennals, R. (ed.) (2001b) *Work Life 2000 Supplementary Volume*. Centre for Working Life Research Kingston University
- EU (2011) *A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development*. EU Commission's proposal to the Gothenburg European Council.
- EU (2017) *European Pillar of Social Rights*. EU Publication Office.
- EU (2019) *Europe's moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation*. COM (2020) 456 final. Downloaded 2021-02-09.
- Håkansta, C. (2014) *Swedish Working Life Research. Formation and conceptual development of a research field in transition*. Dissertation. Luleå University of Technology.
- Lagerlöf, E. & Albin, M. (2021) *The Swedish platform for sustainable work in Horizon 2020 - in retrospect*. This issue EJWI.
- OECD (2015), *In It Together: Why Less Inequality Benefits All*, OECD Publishing, Paris
- UN (1988) *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. Our Common Future*.

About the author

Kenneth Abrahamsson is a Swedish policy analyst and researcher in the field of work, education and learning. He is presently adjunct professor in human work science, Luleå university of technology and associate professor (docent), Department of Education, University of Stockholm. He has substantial experience as research administrator at various governmental agencies and research funders. He is now a senior consultant and is a member of the Swedish platform for sustainable work in Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe.