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SUSTAINABLE WORK FOR ALL

A SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL AND GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The paper introduces the concept of sustainable work with reference to the current threads of the discourse on sustainable development and labour. In so doing, it stresses the need for gender equity as an indispensable element of a socio-ecological notion of sustainable work. The argumentation is underpinned by findings of sustainability studies, the sociology of work and industrial relations, gender studies and approaches critical to economic growth. Along these lines, sustainable work allows for a self-determined and healthy conduct of everyday life for both men and women¹. It comprises all forms of work that are necessary to sustain a society, i.e. paid, caring, community and self-provisioning work. Sustainable work is accompanied by a secure, fair and sufficient income for everyone. It contributes to the provision/production of ecologically and socially compatible goods and services on a global scale. Central prerequisites for sustainable work for all include a general work-time reduction, the redistribution of all forms of work, and a socio-ecological tax reform.

¹ Conduct of everyday life is a particular sociological concept which can be traced back to Max Weber (Jurczyk et al. 2016).

1. THE STARTING POINT: THE GREEN ECONOMY CANNOT BE THE ONLY ANSWER TO THE MULTIPLE CRISIS

Europe is confronted with a double crisis: socio-economic and ecological. The capitalist economies of many EU Member States have been challenged by low or even stagnating growth rates in recent decades which, in many countries, have led to rising unemployment (Lessenich/Dörre 2014).² The economic crisis in many EU countries is linked to the social crisis, the unjust distribution of wealth and possibilities for social inclusion, which – especially within the EU – is made worse by austerity politics.³ Neoliberal politics have increased social inequality within and between the European countries (Piketty 2014): global poverty is on the rise and wealth is no longer unevenly distributed only in the Global South, but also increasingly in the Global North (Human Development Index 2011: UNDP 2011b). Women (and children) remain particularly affected by poverty (Gender Inequality Index 2011: UNDP 2011a).

The predominant strategic answer to this situation is to enhance growth, preferably sustainable growth, primarily by technical innovation: “Europe 2020” sees itself as a “new strategy for jobs and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” and prioritises the efficient use of resources, the creation of new jobs and the reduction of poverty (European Commission 2010). The European growth strategy refers to the concept of a green economy which has been proclaimed by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008⁴ and reconfirmed recently with the declaration of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015).

Green economy and green jobs have become the new buzz-words in the international sustainable development discourse. This debate is being promoted by important supra- and international political actors (United Nations’ organisations, the OECD, the EU, etc.) which are trying to steer the currently too

heterogeneous and vague notions of what sustainable development could actually mean in a particular direction. Green growth created by intensified investments in eco-efficient technologies and the economisation of eco-system services – in short, the global greening of capitalist economies – are presented as a promising strategy that could lead the way out of the global crisis. Promises of the green economy include the reconciliation of economy and ecology, the creation of new green jobs, and a reduction in social inequalities on a global scale.

Until now, the notion of a green economy must be seen merely as a declaration of intent that largely ignores its own potential consequences and conflicts. Indeed, while it is hard to assess the extent to which the greening of the economy might actually become a reality, a number of critical objections have already been raised.

First, the feasibility of the decoupling strategy must be called into question. In recent years, economic growth has not been decoupled from resource and energy consumption, the dominant use of fossil fuels has accelerated climate change, and technical solutions alone have not been sufficient to eliminate the global ecological crisis (Fischer-Kowalski/Haberl 2007). Then there are the so-called rebound effects, which increase relative savings in absolute terms through greater consumption (Santarius 2014). In times of restrictive fiscal policy, the decoupling strategy’s dependence on state incentives further reduces its chances of being achieved.

All this makes the concept of the green economy sound like an oxymoron, i.e. a contradiction in itself (Brand 2012a, b). As long as economic growth, the quasi holy grail of mainstream economics, remains untouched, the green new deal and the green economy will inevitably become ensnared in the growth dilemma (Altvater 2011).

There is much to support the notion that a green economy does not resolve the social and ecological contradictions of capitalism, but at best makes them workable in a temporary and geographically limited context, as “an exclusive modernisation project restricted to the Global North and the emerging areas of the Global South” (Wissen 2012: 34; translation BL).

The establishment of capitalist growth and profit imperatives, in particular in the Global South and the so-called emerging nations, has been accompanied by a rise in a new consumer middle class (Brand/Wissen 2011). Their consumption of natural resources follows the standards of the Global North, i.e. it is above average and cannot be generalised. It is questionable whether the members of this class will be willing to give up their affluent lifestyle in favour of greener alternatives, especially since their environmentally harmful consumption habits and social practices form part and parcel of their everyday way of life (Jonas/Littig 2015).

2 Germany may be an exception, but comparatively low unemployment rates and the so-called German job miracle are a consequence of the creation of many precarious jobs and jobs in the low-income segment.

3 This can be connected to a crisis of democratic representation: a growing number of people do not feel they are represented by the traditional parties and political elites. This manifests in the rise of right-wing parties and movements in various European countries as well as in leftist movements like Podemos in Spain. In addition, there are more and more totally apolitical people who have either resigned from any political activity or no longer vote. Studies show that political representatives are mainly recruited from and voted in by the middle- and upper classes. Often, the poorer classes do not vote at all. Consequently, current democratic representation and the shaping of a political will exclude not only minority groups but a growing number of (poor) people, too.

4 <http://web.unep.org/greeneconomy/> (accessed 30.07.2016)

However, it is not only in the consumption of natural resources that social inequality will continue to rise. The production of regenerative energy – as propagated by the green economy – is often accompanied by forced evictions and the expropriation of land, thus also exacerbating social injustice as a whole (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2012). There are many examples of such practices, e.g. the construction of dams for hydroelectric energy production in Brazil and China, or the cultivation of palm-oil plantations in Indonesia to produce biofuel. The construction of such mega-dams and the monoculture of renewable raw materials are also highly problematic from an ecological perspective.

Finally, and as a further consequence of the gender-specific distribution of labour, it can be assumed that (above all poorer, rural) women in the Global South will be affected to a particularly large extent by the arrival of agribusiness and the destruction of peasant farming structures – either because they are responsible for collecting water or firewood and farming the land or because they have to generate an income from trading their agricultural produce (cf. Appel 2010). To sum up: the socio-economic crisis of capitalism is directly linked to the ecological crisis, or more precisely the crisis of societal relationships with nature (Barth/Jochum/Littig 2016). In the end, this means that the traditional equation of ‘economic growth means labour means wealth’ will no longer work, partly due to inner-economic reasons (secular stagnation) and partly to ecological limits (Jackson 2009). Green growth as a global model will not solve this problem. However, (green) growth might be necessary to a certain extent for the world’s poorer countries to enhance well-being and foster sustainable and equitable development. Of course, a greener economy is required on a global scale, with green production and green products. But this greening of the economy must be part of a fundamental socio-ecological transformation (WBGU 2011; Jonas 2016). The sustainability-oriented reorganisation of modern working societies is at the heart of this transformation.

2. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER POLITICS ARE INSEPERABLE

There are plenty of specific references to gender aspects cited in the international documents on sustainable development and the green economy mentioned above. Recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015) have called once again for gender equity and the empowerment of women and girls. However, the actual wording used simply repeats the well-known general gender mainstreaming objectives (e.g. an increase in the number of women in decision-making bodies and positions, equal access to education, healthcare,

equal pay, etc.) without specifying concrete measures.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the green economy bears significant potential to create decent green employment (ILO 2015). For decades, gender equality has been an explicit ILO goal. Hence, it constitutes the issue of progress reports for green jobs and is recommended for observation particularly in the Global South. While official gender-specific data for assessing green jobs is scarce, progress towards including women in the green labour market is stated aligned to individual initiatives, often financed through microcredits, e.g. in the tourism or energy production sectors. This can lead to empowerment, especially of women, but it can also result in high levels of debt and the complete pauperisation of families (Littig 2016).

A systematic inquiry into the gender-specific effects of the ‘Green Jobs Initiative’ is, as of today, also pending in the Global North. From a gender perspective it must be pointed out that decent green jobs, based mainly on technical or scientific education, are not only fewer in number but are also predominantly taken by men (Leitner et al. 2012). Women are primarily employed in the alleged green sectors with low qualifications and poor working conditions. To make green jobs attractive for highly qualified women, a series of accompanying measures is needed: from measures to increase the number of girls and women studying technical and science subjects and entering such professions to gender mainstreaming in this segment of the labour market (for details see Kuhl 2012).

Nevertheless, social equity, gender equality and environmental justice must be at the heart of sustainable development, having been demanded from the very beginning of the debate on sustainable development in Rio 1992 (Agenda 21, Chapter 24, UN 1992). Recent feminist declarations have advocated the use of the term ‘sustainable and equitable economy’ rather than ‘green economy’ to tie in directly with and strengthen the decisions made in Rio 1992 (Women’s Major Group 2011).⁵ A discussion paper published by a network of different German women’s organisations has presented an extended definition of the green economy concept:

“Our understanding of a green economy means prioritising a socially and environmentally just society and a corresponding economic system that will facilitate a ,good life for all’. [...] Thus, it is essential to acknowledge the multifaceted and productive care work that is overwhelmingly performed by women, as well as the productivity of the natural environment, as the basis of any economic activity.” (genanet 2011: 1) This definition refers to the long-standing feminist critique of the narrow concept of paid work which has become pre-

⁵ https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/3467SD2015%20Position%20Paper_Womens%20MG_v1_March%202014.pdf (accessed 30.07.2016).

dominant with the development of modern working societies and which, until now, ignores female (re-)productive work in the private sector. Feminist demands for an extended notion of work are also discussed in recent contributions to the sustainability discourse, which are sceptical about green growth. What unifies them is the assumption that work is more than gainful employment.

3. EXTENDED CONCEPTS OF WORK, REEVALUATION OF WORK: WORK IN PROGRESS

Over the last 15 years, a discussion line can be observed within the discourse on sustainable development, which deals with the consequences and preconditions of a sustainable reorientation of the current working society. The arguments are promoted primarily by academic actors without remaining purely academic: they find resonance in the international socio-ecological civic movement. Different approaches within this debate share the vision of a socio-ecological active society with a focus on more than just gainful employment. However, their respective reasoning and elaborations differ widely. Below, three central approaches will be introduced, following an historical line.

a) Extended concepts of work: the German research project 'Work and Ecology' as a point of reference

A systematic analysis of the redefinition of work in the context of sustainable development was first undertaken by the project 'Arbeit und Ökologie' (work and ecology), conducted on behalf of the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung (HBS 2000). In this context, the concept of *Mischarbeit* (mixed work) was developed and can by now be regarded as a reference for the spelling out of an alternative, sustainable conception of work. *Mischarbeit* refers to the combination and interaction of different activities and thereby extends the conception of work beyond the notion of gainful employment. Consequently, it also comprises private care work, own work ('*Eigenarbeit*') and community-related work and thus meets a long-standing demand from feminist women and gender studies: to recognise informal care work, performed mainly by women, as work necessary to society.⁶ *Mischarbeit* combines industrial and work sociological findings of (post-)Fordist developments (subjectivation, delimitation of work, the erosion of the male breadwinner model) with normative principles of sustainability, and argues on two pillars for a work-political paradigm change. Thus, the concept serves to analyse current trends in societal working conditions. Based on this

evaluation of the situation and with reference to the sustainability paradigm of a multidimensional distributional justice, normative guidelines of social sustainability were developed in the context of the project. The implementation of social sustainability and *Mischarbeit* as its guiding principles demands specific political measures such as a socio-ecological tax reform and a general reduction in working hours to attain a redistribution of work. The project results have become a central reference point within the debate on sustainable development and work (Brandl 2016). Meanwhile, this discourse is being enriched by arguments which question the sustainability of capitalist economic growth.

b) Approaches critical to growth

Several acknowledged researchers of sustainability put the prevalent orientation towards a society based on full-time work and constant economic growth up for discussion (Jackson 2009; Lessenich/Dörre 2014; Papst Franziskus 2015). This is mainly justified by the lack of a successful decoupling of economic growth and resources as well as energy consumption, the fact that the prevailing use of fossil energy sources is accelerating climate change, and that technical solutions to the removal of ecological crisis phenomena alone are insufficient in a global perspective. As a consequence, substantially lower economic growth, the general reduction of time spent in gainful employment, an extension of the concept of work, and the orientation of consumption towards sufficiency are required (Bodyn 2016).

Gender-policy considerations are not self-evident in these approaches. However, many of the demands raised take into account long-standing insights into women and gender studies (such as an extended notion of work). Involvement with ecological and social questions concerning the capitalist growth paradigm also motivates a variety of social movements and civil society initiatives to seek alternative ways of living and working as a possible solution to socio-economic problems (Petridis et al. 2015). These include different types of cooperative economic activity and alternative forms of cohabitation, (solidarity economy, transition town movement, eco villages, etc.). In particular in the context of transition studies, great importance is ascribed to such social experiments.

From a gender perspective, how far such projects contribute to gender equality must be discussed. Here, a key question is how far traditional gender roles and the gendered division of labour are altered or reproduced in alternative initiatives or alternative living projects. Empirical evidence remains scarce. However, exemplary findings on urban cohabitation projects show that reciprocal support for reproduction labour mainly take place between the women in cohabitant parties rather than the male partners (Littig 2016).

6 Frigga Haug's model of a „four in one perspective“ follows a similar idea, but without a strong reference to ecological issues (Haug 2008). Also, Bodyn 2016.

c) Care as a normative guideline of economic activity

Indeed, within the critical growth discourse, feminist positions are represented. The need for a wider conception of work, the re-evaluation of care work, a reduction in working hours and a redistribution of work are views generally shared by feminist scholars (Biesecker et al. 2000). However, from an eco-feminist perspective, this constitutes simply a first step towards a gender-equal socio-ecological transformation. Overcoming the externalisation of the costs and preconditions of capitalist economic activity at the expense of nature and women is in need of a fundamental reorientation of economic activity, namely an orientation towards the principles of care (Tronto 2013).

In the context of sustainable development, care refers to current as well as future generations and demands a reorientation of the market-led money economy away from abstract value creation towards an economic and work objective that enables the realisation of life purposes and puts the focus on societal cooperation and concern for the entire work and activities that are necessary to sustain a society whole (societally necessary) work. From a feminist perspective, the socio-ecological transformation towards a sustainable working society must not be gender-blind but must understand the current gendered division of labour as patriarchal power relations between men and women (Biesecker et al. 2012).

4. SUSTAINABLE WORK FOR ALL – TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETAL NATURE RELATIONSHIPS

The latest Human Development Report (UNDP 2015) focuses on 'Work for Human Development', and presents an enlarged and revised understanding of work:

"From a human development perspective, the notion of work is broader and deeper than that of jobs or employment alone. Jobs provide income and support human dignity, participation and economic security. But the jobs framework fails to capture many kinds of work that have important human development implications – as with care work, voluntary work and such creative work as writing or painting" (UNDP 2015: 3).

This definition brings to mind the capability approach (Sen 1979) which is based on a humanistic understanding of human development. According to this approach, human well-being is not just determined by economic means but also includes education, life expectancy and social equality. Work not only provides the economic basis for human develop-

ment and strengthens social cohesion but is also a prerequisite for human development itself:

"Ultimately, work unleashes human potential, human creativity and the human spirit" (ibid: 1).

However, the (ecological) unsustainability of current ways of life and work threatens to undermine the future potential of human development, since it endangers the possibility of working at all (ibid. 155). Thus, sustainable work has to reconcile environmental and development issues: it needs to foster the potential of human development while, at the same time, minimising the ecologically harmful side effects of work, to ensure future work. The centre of this argument concerns safeguarding the sustainability of work itself.⁷

HDR 2015 focuses on the human development potential of work from the perspective of the individual. However, this perspective has to be extended to the societal level. Rahel Jaeggi (2014) argues that (individual) work contributes to the production of general societal wealth while, at the same time, work means participation with general societal wealth ("Teilnahme am allgemeinen Vermögen", nach Hegel). Participation not only refers to economic participation (through income) but also participation in societal knowledge and capabilities and symbolic structures of recognition (Jaeggi 2015: 525). Participation with "general wealth" is characterised by cooperation (to ensure the satisfaction of societal and individual needs) and reciprocity, i.e. the right to receive a share. Starting from this social-philosophical understanding of work, it becomes obvious that the current state of work is pathological – i.e. dysfunctional: with regard to its destructive consequences for the natural environment, it undermines the potential for creating societal wealth⁸; with regard to society, it increases social inequality; and with regard to the individual, his/her physical and mental illnesses (Voss/Weiss 2013). Thus, a reorganisation of work and the working society towards sustainability is needed.

Resuming the approaches and considerations presented so far, the concept of 'sustainable work for all' has to: a) include all societally necessary forms of work; and b) has to be led by the normative principles of sustainable development:

a) Inclusion of all forms of societal work necessary to sustain a society

On a societal level, sustainable work takes into account all types of work that are necessary to sustain a society. This

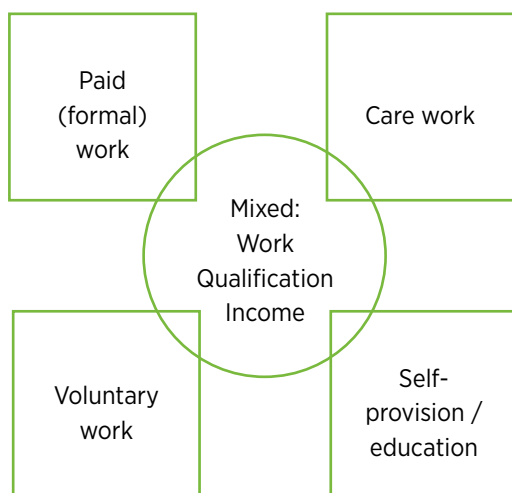
7 The strength of the Human Development Report is the enhanced understanding of work and the recognition of different forms of work, also in a North-South perspective. However, in the end the report is bound to the green growth strategy which recommends the Northern development model as a global model (Barth/Jochum/Littig 2016).

8 With reference to Marx, the societal relationships with nature can be described as societal metabolism mediated through work (for details, see Barth/Jochum/Littig 2016).

SUSTAINABLE WORK FOR ALL

comprises at least four dimensions: paid work, care work in private households, voluntary work at the community, and work as a self-provider/self-educator. Participating in all dimensions of work means mixed income, mixed qualification and mixed challenges (Table 1) (HBS 2000).

Table 1: Extended notion of work



The concept of mixed work is simultaneously both analytical and normative. Analytically it refers to findings of the sociology of labour, which have shown that the male standard model of lifelong full-time work is being eroded due to the increase of precarious work, limited working contracts, and the discontinuity of career paths through phases of unemployment (Pongratz/Voss 2003). Mixed work was experienced by many women in the early industrialised countries of the Global North: the 'ideal' female working career and life course after World War II was characterised by phases of formally paid work interrupted by phases of unemployment due to care obligations within private households. The new type of working careers evolving in the 'internship generation' is being characterised more and more by discontinuity and changes in different forms of work for men and women, demanding different qualifications and generating different types of income. Thus, mixed work has already become a reality, albeit in a precarious, unsustainable way.

From a normative perspective, mixed work can become a new societal model of sustainable work if it is combined with the normative principles of sustainable development.

b) Referring to the normative principles of sustainable development

Sustainable work must refer to the normative principles of sustainable development. These are, above all, the right to live a life in dignity and inter-, intra- and international distributive and procedural justice. The latter refers to democratic decision-making processes.

From a feminist perspective, the normative principles of care – caring for oneself, for others, for nature (Klinger 2014) – have to be considered explicitly within the concept of sustainable work. Care includes dealing carefully with the (physical and mental) capability to work. Thus, the predominant unsustainability of the current working society does not only affect the societal metabolism, with nature being mediated by labour, but also impacts the (re-production of the (individual) labour force. Instead, sustainable work refers to both the object and subject of work. It takes care of both the (re-)productivity of nature as the external nature (object of work) and human nature, i.e. health, capabilities, etc. (subject of work) (Barth/Jochum/Littig 2016).

Following these normative principles, and based on findings from gender-studies, the sociology of work and industrial relations and sustainability studies, the main characteristics of sustainable work are as follows:

- Sustainable work facilitates mixed work options for men and women (paid work, community work, caring and family work, self-providing/self-educating work);
- Sustainable work allows for a self-determined sustainable way of life for men and women;
- Sustainable work guarantees long-term (physical and mental health and enables a healthy lifestyle;
- Sustainable work demonstrates a secure, sufficient and fair remuneration structure for men and women (income and transfers);
- Sustainable work strives for the ecologically and socially compatible production and supply of goods and services.

The central prerequisites of sustainable work as a new leitmotif for the socio-ecological transformation of current working societies following the guidelines of sustainable development are working-time policies aimed at the reduction and flexibility of working hours and a socio-ecological tax reform to enhance socio-ecological production, products and services.

Thus:

- Sustainable work for all means shorter working hours (reduced full-time, 20-30h) and work flexibility combined with the reorganisation of the social security system;
- Sustainable work requires the reorganisation of cost relations between the different production factors (socio-ecological tax reform).

5. SUSTAINABLE WORK – A RISING STAR

The academic and public debate about a socio-ecological transformation is gaining ground and with it the issue of sustainable work – or more generally: the reorganisation

of societal relationships with nature (Barth/Jochum/Littig 2016). The debate also includes new voices in the field, such as Pope Francis (Papst Franciscus 2015), and the recent Human Development Report (UNDP 2015). Despite the fact that gender equity is an indispensable element of sustainable development, gender issues are not addressed, as a matter of course, when it comes to sustainable work (Littig 2016, Littig 2017). Therefore, this paper stresses the interconnectedness of sustainable development, work and gender. The extended notion of work presented herein, linked to the socio-ecologi-

cal re-evaluation of all forms of work and the redistribution of work between men and women and framed within the normative principles of sustainable development, comprise the centre of a new societal leitmotif of sustainable work. This can be promoted as a mosaic alliance of progressive actors coming from political parties and political organisations, trade unions, NGOs and entrepreneurs. However, in the end sustainable work is part of a much broader narrative: a good life for all – which leaves space and time for idleness, too.

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