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Subject: Sustainable work over the life course
- Council Conclusios

Delegations will find attached the Council Conclusions on the above subject as approved by the EPSCO Council at its meeting held on 6 December 2021.

Council conclusions on sustainable work over the life course**ACKNOWLEDGING that:**

1. The world of work is rapidly changing as a result of technological progress, globalisation, climate change and population ageing. The EU's working-age population has been shrinking for a decade and this trend is expected to continue¹. With the overall population remaining relatively constant, the risk of labour shortages is increasing. To compensate for the shrinking working-age population, it is necessary to bring more people into the labour market and keep them there, offering quality jobs, enabling people to have longer working lives and improving productivity².
2. To constantly improve people's living and working conditions is the essential objective of the European Union³. The European Pillar of Social Rights⁴ (hereinafter: the Pillar) is the compass that guides us in achieving this aim. The European Council's Strategic Agenda identifies the implementation of the Pillar as a priority action for 2019–2024. In the Porto Declaration, EU leaders stated that the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan⁵ provides useful guidance for the implementation of the Pillar and welcomed the three new EU 2030 headline targets on employment, skills and poverty reduction.

¹ See also Green Paper on Ageing. Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations. COM(2021) 50 final

² See also European Commission Report on the Impact of Demographic Change. 2020.

³ Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union, Preamble

⁴ Interinstitutional Proclamation on the European Pillar of Social Rights.
OJ 2017/C 428/09

⁵ Action Plan presented by the Commission on 4 March 2021.

3. The Union and Member States have committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda⁶, including Goal 8, which focuses on sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. As was also recognised in the ILO Centenary Declaration, the changing world of work requires urgent action to seize the opportunities offered and address the challenges posed by shaping a fair, inclusive and secure future of work for all⁷.
4. Parties to the European Social Charter have accepted certain rights and principles as objectives of their policies: all workers should have the right to just conditions of work, the right to safe and healthy working conditions, and the right to bargain collectively, to freely choose their occupation, to fair remuneration sufficient for a decent standard of living for the workers and their families, to freedom of association, to special protection if they are children, young persons or women, and to appropriate facilities for vocational guidance and vocational training. Additionally, all persons with family responsibilities and who are engaged in or wish to engage in employment have a right to do so without being subject to discrimination, and as far as possible without conflict between their employment and family responsibilities⁸. This is particularly relevant for women, who continue to spend more time in unpaid care work than their male counterparts.

⁶ Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A/RES/70/1

⁷ ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work and Council Conclusions on The Future of Work: the European Union promoting the ILO Centenary Declaration. 13436/19

⁸ European Social Charter (revised), which has been ratified by the following EU Member States: AT, BE, BG, CY, EE, FI, FR, DE, EL, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, MT, NL, PT, RO, SK, SI, ES and SE.

5. In its Council conclusions of 2020⁹, on ‘Demographic Challenges – the Way Ahead’ the Council recognised the significant impact of the demographic transition on our economies and social protection systems. The Council called upon Member States to address the challenges posed by the transition while tapping into the opportunities for economic and social development. The Council also acknowledged the mutually reinforcing nature of people’s wellbeing and economic growth in its 2019¹⁰ Council conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing.
6. Recent initiatives by the Commission aim to contribute to improving the quality and sustainability of work. The EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027¹¹ sets out the key priorities and actions the Commission considers necessary for improving workers’ health and safety in the coming years, which will be marked by the green, digital and demographic transitions. The European Skills Agenda¹² intends to deliver on the first principle of the Pillar, on the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning.
7. The term ‘sustainable work over the life course’ used in these Conclusions means living and working conditions that allow people to engage and remain in work throughout an extended working life. This includes the transformation of work to eliminate the factors that discourage or hold workers back from staying in or entering the workforce, while taking individual circumstances into account¹³. Availability for work differs and is likely to change over the life course. The challenge is to match the needs and abilities of the individual with the quality of jobs on offer¹⁴.

⁹ Council conclusions on ‘Demographic Challenges – the Way Ahead’. OJ 2020/C 205/03

¹⁰ Council conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing. OJ 2019/C 400/09

¹¹ EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027. COM(2021)323 final

¹² European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience. COM(2020)274 final

¹³ The characteristics of an individual in relation to work (abilities, needs, health, skills, etc.) and individual circumstances change over the life course and so does one’s availability to work.

¹⁴ Eurofound, 2015. Sustainable work over the life course: Concept paper.

8. Sustainable work can be achieved by investing in quality jobs and human capital, with a particular focus on fair working conditions, occupational safety and health, up-skilling and re-skilling and work-life balance. Sustainable work is an essential component of the economy of wellbeing¹⁵ and an important driver of increased labour force participation, productivity, economic performance¹⁶ and social inclusion. If work is unsustainable, it affects the health and wellbeing of people in the labour market and their dependants, with consequences that emerge immediately or in the medium to long term¹⁷.
9. In its opinion on sustainable quality work¹⁸, the European Economic and Social Committee
- a) recognises the sustainable quality work as one of the essential components of quality of life and one which must be considered together with the concept of sustainable development;
 - b) considers ensuring sustainable quality work to be the shared responsibility of the Commission, the Member States and European and national social partners; and c) stresses that social dialogue should be strengthened and broadened to cover more strategic topics focused on sustainability.

¹⁵ Council conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing. OJ 2019/C 400/09

¹⁶ OECD, 2018. Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 221 Job Quality, Health and Productivity: An evidence-based framework for analysis.

¹⁷ Eurofound, 2015. Sustainable work over the life course: Concept paper. and Eurofound, 2021. Working conditions and sustainable work: An analysis using the job quality framework.

¹⁸ European Economic and Social Committee, 2021. Key components of sustainable quality work during and after recovery. [Exploratory opinion at the request of the Slovenian Presidency]. SOC/685.

CONSIDERING that:

10. The shrinking working-age population and increasing longevity present challenges for the functioning of the labour market and require a comprehensive approach to adapting social protection systems. Long-term demographic projections for the EU reveal that the population is expected to decline and experience a significant change in its age structure¹⁹. Labour productivity growth is projected to become the sole source of potential output growth in the EU and the total cost of ageing is set to increase in the long term²⁰.
11. Sustainable work is fundamental for enabling individuals to stay healthy and active as they age, for the prolongation of their working lives, for adequate and sustainable social protection systems, and therefore for the functioning of the economy as a whole. While more research on sustainable work is still needed, the available analyses clearly show that investments in fair working conditions, health and safety at work, education and training, and work-life balance pay off by improving people's wellbeing and thus enhancing their productivity and participation in work throughout an extended working life.

¹⁹ The working-age population (20-64 years of age) will decrease by 32.1 million potential workers (18.6 million men, 13.5 million women) by 2070, meaning the EU would then have fewer than two working-age people for every person aged 65 or older, instead of about three working-age people in 2019. In: European Commission, 2021. The 2021 Ageing Report. Economic & Budgetary Projections for the EU Member States (2019-2070). Institutional paper 148.

²⁰ *ibid.*

12. The quality of jobs in the Union has been slowly improving in recent decades²¹. In 2015, 86 % of employees in the EU were satisfied or very satisfied with their working conditions. However, a little less than a quarter considered that their work endangered their health or safety, and a quarter believed that their work mostly had a negative impact on their health, with men more likely to report these negative influences. Adequate skills are an important factor driving work satisfaction and productivity, and some 28 % of employees report having the skills to cope with more demanding duties (men 30 %, women 27 %), whereas 14 %²² report needing further training to cope well with their duties²³. Working hours do not fit very well with family or social commitments outside work for nearly every fifth worker (20 % of men, 16 % of women) and every fifth worker has felt too tired after work to do some necessary household jobs²⁴.

²¹ Eurofound, 2021. Working conditions and sustainable work: An Analysis using the job quality framework.

²² Figures are sex-disaggregated only where available and where there is a tangible difference between men and women (applies to the entire text).

²³ Eurofound, 2021. Working conditions and sustainable work: An Analysis using the job quality framework.

²⁴ Eurofound, 2017. Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview report, figures for EU-28.

13. Occupational health and safety is a prerequisite for work to be sustainable throughout the life course. The accumulation of negative (health) consequences of work during an individual's working life negatively affects the quality of their ageing and can curtail their working life. The green, digital and demographic transitions require us to anticipate and manage change. Awareness of how to systematically adapt occupational health and safety to every workplace in the changing world of work, in addition to a 'prevention through design' approach²⁵ integrated with a worker-centred design approach, can help to mitigate new and emerging occupational safety and health challenges related to digitalisation²⁶, psychosocial and ergonomic risks and an ageing workforce. Moreover, projections show that investing in occupational safety and health pays off: the return is almost two euros for every euro invested²⁷; while work-related injuries and diseases cost society the equivalent of more than 3.3 % of EU GDP²⁸.

²⁵ The 'prevention through design' approach is a way to prevent and control occupational injuries, illnesses and fatalities early in the planning and design process. See also EU-OSHA, 2018. Foresight on new and emerging occupational safety and health risks associated with digitalisation by 2025.

²⁶ Such as 24/7 digital availability, blurred private-working life boundaries and the use of devices that determine pace of work or monitor workers' performance. See also EU-OSHA, 2019. European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks, ESENER. and Eurofound, 2017. Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview report.

²⁷ European Commission, 2011. Socio-economic costs of accidents at work and work-related ill health. Key messages and case studies.

²⁸ EU-OSHA, 2017. An international comparison of the cost of work-related accidents and illnesses.

14. Providing opportunities for skilling, up-skilling and re-skilling throughout an individual's working life is an important component of sustainable work. It helps adults of all ages prepare for and adapt to changing labour markets, prevents unemployment and helps to ensure that no one is left behind. The vast majority of establishments in the EU provide some form of training (including on-the-job training), but about three out of 10 provide it to less than 20 % of their employees²⁹. Training paid for or provided by employers is more accessible to employees with permanent contracts (44 %) than those with fixed-term contracts (31 %) or those with another type of or no contract (only 22 %)³⁰. In 2016, only 37 % of adults were participating in learning activities each year. For low-qualified adults the rate was only 18 %.³¹
15. Flexibility, security, predictability and equal opportunities for all are important aspects of sustainable work. The share of non-standard forms of work has been increasing in the last decade. More than four out of 10 workers in the EU are not in a standard employment relationship³². Non-standard forms of work can create new job opportunities (in particular due to the enhanced flexibility they can offer), particularly for those further away from the labour market, but can also increase insecurity and uncertainty, which negatively affect people's wellbeing. There is limited comparable data on non-standard forms of work, their significance for labour markets and their impact on social protection systems across the EU. Flexible working arrangements, both in standard and non-standard employment, should facilitate better work-life balance³³. However, further efforts are needed to improve the working conditions and social protection of those in non-standard employment to make work sustainable for everybody.

²⁹ Eurofound and Cedefop, 2020. European Company Survey 2019: Workplace practices unlocking employee potential.

³⁰ Eurofound, 2017. Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview report.

³¹ European Commission, 2021. European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. COM(2021) 102 final

³² European Parliament, 2016. Precarious Employment in Europe. Patterns, Trends and Policy Strategies.

³³ See also Council conclusions on telework. ST 9747/21

16. The gender employment gap is a major unsustainable feature of labour markets. The loss of the educational and work potential of women has a negative effect on the performance and competitive edge of the EU economy. This cost the EU more than EUR 320 billion in 2018, which corresponds to 2.4 % of EU GDP that year³⁴. A crucial explanatory factor for women's lower participation in the labour market is their greater burden of care responsibilities, resulting from an unequal sharing between them and their male counterparts³⁵. The lifetime cost of a woman's exclusion from employment is estimated at between EUR 1.2 million and EUR 2 million depending on her educational level, with the cost generally being estimated as higher for women with higher educational attainment³⁶. Improving the accessibility, affordability and quality of care services³⁷ and promoting equal sharing of care responsibilities between women and men could contribute to closing the gender employment gap.
17. Social dialogue is key to ensuring sustainable work to the benefit of all parties. Social partners play a central role in a changing world of work and are particularly well placed to identify – in the context of specific activities or sectors – the health and safety solutions and conditions that enable sustainable work. Social dialogue is thus also crucial for well-functioning and productive economies and cohesive societies.

³⁴ Eurofound, 2020. Women and labour market equality: Has COVID-19 rolled back recent gains?

³⁵ Eurofound, 2018. Striking a balance: Reconciling work and life in the EU.

³⁶ European Commission, 2017. Impact assessment accompanying the document Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU.

³⁷ Care services include, but are not limited to: childcare, long-term care (services for dependent people because of old age, chronic illness or disability), short-term care services.

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION INVITES

THE MEMBER STATES, taking into account national circumstances, to:

18. STRENGTHEN policies to further improve working conditions for all and to support people through the transitions they face throughout their working lives so that they are able to enter and re-enter the labour market quickly and find a quality job, including through cooperation between the various public services involved.
19. UPDATE, as appropriate, their national legal frameworks and current occupational and health strategies with due consideration for the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027, focusing on its three crosscutting key objectives of anticipating and managing change in the new world of work, improving prevention of workplace accidents and illnesses, and increasing preparedness for any potential health crisis.
20. ENSURE that sufficient resources are available for the functioning, networking and promotion of the EU-OSHA national Focal Points.
21. UPDATE the methods used to forecast skills demand and IMPROVE mechanisms for addressing skills mismatches.
22. Continuously DEVELOP and PROMOTE opportunities for lifelong learning for all to help people to adapt to the changing world of work, also by taking into account the European Skills Agenda, including by encouraging the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and skills.
23. STEP UP EFFORTS to improve working conditions, social protection and access to lifelong learning for those in non-standard employment, so as to make work sustainable for everybody.

24. STRENGTHEN the effectiveness of labour inspections and other enforcement and supervisory mechanisms, as appropriate, so that the applicable legal provisions relevant to sustainable work are observed.
25. FURTHER EXPLORE possibilities for better work-life balance, including by improving the accessibility, affordability and quality of care services, with a view to, inter alia, ensuring equal opportunities for women and men in the labour market.

THE MEMBER STATES AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, in accordance with their respective competences, to:

26. ANALYSE the main obstacles to sustainable work and systematically strive to IDENTIFY solutions that will facilitate it, thus supporting active and healthy ageing, longer working lives, people's wellbeing, labour force participation, social protection systems, productivity and economic performance.
27. SUPPORT research into and development of quality databases on sustainable work, taking into account relevant socio-demographic statistical variables³⁸, to ensure data consistency, comparability and accessibility for evidence-based policymaking.
28. STRENGTHEN mainstreaming of occupational safety and health into relevant policies and measures, especially in the areas of public health (in particular mental health), social care, education and training, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, public procurement and the environment.
29. FURTHER DEVELOP comparable statistical data on non-standard forms of work and ANALYSE their significance for labour market transformations and their impact on social protection systems, taking into account relevant socio-demographic statistical variables.

³⁸ Socio-demographic variables include, for example, age, sex, education, level of ability limitation, household, employment, income, etc.

30. FACILITATE and SUPPORT the exchange of best practices and acquired knowledge on sustainable work and its long-term benefits for the functioning of labour markets and social protection systems, as well as for people's wellbeing, while taking into account the underlying trends accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
31. PROMOTE a culture of prevention in the field of occupational safety and health and a culture of lifelong learning.
32. DESIGN and IMPLEMENT targeted measures to tackle the gender employment gap.
33. SUPPORT social partners in order to enhance their capacity to promote sustainable work.

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION to:

34. ANALYSE the consequences of unsustainable work practices and the benefits of sustainable work for individuals, employers and society as a whole, in close cooperation with the relevant EU agencies and international organisations, such as the OECD and ILO.
35. KEEP the relevant Union acts under review, with a view to improving the contribution of existing measures to sustainable work, and put forward the necessary proposals to ADAPT the existing legal instruments, where relevant, to the demands of the changing world of work, in particular with regard to population ageing.
36. ENSURE the swift and full implementation of those actions within the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027 for which the European Commission is responsible, with a particular focus on the fight against occupational cancer through further advances in setting occupational exposure limits, and INTEGRATE the objectives of the EU Strategic Framework into the relevant existing and upcoming strategic documents.

37. RECOGNISE the importance of sustainable work over the course of people's lives in the upcoming European Care Strategy.

SOCIAL PARTNERS, while respecting their role and autonomy, to:

38. CONTINUE TO ENGAGE in social dialogue at all levels about the changing world of work.

39. PROMOTE awareness raising on the benefits of sustainable work for workers, employers, citizens and society as a whole, and on a culture of occupational safety and health and a culture of lifelong learning.

40. PROMOTE preventive action as the most effective way of ensuring sustainable work, in particular with regard to the impact of population ageing and digitalisation.

41. RAISE AWARENESS of the fact that a higher level of occupational health and safety is beneficial to workers, employers, citizens and society as a whole, and that safe and health-friendly jobs contribute to the sustainability and competitiveness of the Union's economy.

42. FURTHER PROMOTE effective implementation of the existing occupational safety and health rules.
