
Work time reduction as an environmental tool – policy recommendations

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Résumé

Climate change is a reality, and the pace of change does not show any signs of slowing down. Various strategies have been proposed to deal with this. Our research project has focussed on a particular strategy advocated by many ecological economists - work time reduction - drawing insight from a range of approaches, including feminist, Marxist and institutional economics. Work time reduction is a progressive policy, viewed in terms of the household and unpaid work, well-being and the distribution of work (potentially changing what Marxists would describe as absolute surplus-value production). Domestic consumption is a main driver of environmental degradation. Work time reduction allows us to reduce an individual's ecological footprint in a way that maintains, or even increases, their well-being. Previous findings from this research project suggest that many people state they care for the environment, but this environmental concern is most prevalent among those who work the longest hours. This indicates the link between long hours, higher consumption and environmental degradation is not manifest in people's decisions. This inconsistency between people's decision-making regarding work time, and their environmental preferences, suggests that if worktime reduction policies were introduced without considering this relationship the desired outcome is likely to be lost. A deeper analysis of the relationship using primary data on preferences to working hours and attitudes to the environment found that there are both gendered and class differences in pro-environmental behaviour. There is also an inconsistency between people's satisfaction with working hours and leisure time, further reinforcing the intransitivity in preferences. These worries need to inform work time policymaking. Feminist scholars have stressed unpaid care, as well as other housework, are crucial in supporting a fully functioning labour market. Our analysis suggests that income and socially institutionalised values and norms associated with work may act as barriers to work time reduction. The research project further reviewed how HR-policies may be a nexus for managers to reconcile environmental and social sustainability with organisational sustainability. We found that this concept does not seem to be well developed within organisations. Managers want to uphold social and environmental sustainability, but are restricted by expectations on economic goals. This is reflected in how organisations perceive social policies as costly and only endorsed if they do not interfere with business as usual.

Based on the findings in this research project we would recommend regulation and education as appropriate normative responses to the inconsistency between people's decision-making regarding work time and their environmental preferences. There is a further need to target the social pressures around consumption and its associated strong norms. Work fulfils a range of human social needs and can be used as a redistribution tool. There is a need to support managers in dealing with potentially larger teams. As with any societal transformation, a large-scale work time reduction is going to face resistance and initial difficulties.

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However, these struggles have to be weighed against the current climate crisis and downwards spiral in social wellbeing.

Mots-Clés: Work time reduction, environmental sustainability, preferences