A REFLECTION ON THE FUTURE OF WORK AND SOCIETY

María Prieto and Maria Marta Travieso
Members of the Unit of the Future of Work, ILO

Abstract

Work and society, and how these interact, are major components of the discussions around the future of work. As these are dynamic and complex issues, they need to be analysed from multiple perspectives. Which is why a range of experts from different disciplines with the objective of understanding the current analysis, thinking and debates on the issue of work and society were gathered. Discussions steered around how the meaning of work has evolved and how it has impacted on society (and vice versa) in both developing and developed economies. The meeting examined the opportunities to reclaim the centrality of work in the quest for personal and social development. In doing so, the meeting took into consideration different aspects such as: work and material well-being, societal changes, ideology, personal development, dignity and cultural aspects, work-life balance, consumer awareness, stress management, burnout and harassment, among many others.

El trabajo y la sociedad y el modo en que los mismos interactúan son elementos sustanciales de las discusiones relativas al futuro del trabajo. Se trata de cuestiones dinámicas y complejas que necesitan ser analizadas desde distintas perspectivas. Por este motivo, un grupo de expertos en distintas disciplinas se reunieron con el objetivo de comprender el análisis, el razonamiento y los debates sobre la cuestión del trabajo y la sociedad. Las discusiones se focalizaron en el significado del trabajo y su evolución y cómo ello ha impactado en la sociedad (y viceversa) tanto de las economías desarrolladas como en desarrollo. La reunión también tuvo el objetivo de ver de qué modo se podría devolver el protagonismo al trabajo como modo de desarrollo personal. Para ello, la reunión tuvo en cuenta distintos aspectos tales como el bienestar material y laboral, los cambios en la sociedad, la ideología, el desarrollo personal, la dignidad y las cuestiones culturales, el equilibrio entre trabajo y vida personal, el conocimiento del consumidor, la administración del estrés, el "burnout" y el acoso, entre otras cuestiones.

Título: Una reflexión sobre el futuro del trabajo y la sociedad

Sumario

1. Background

This paper is the result of the reflections and exchanges resulting from a workshop[1] organized in the framework of the International Labour Organisation's Future of Work Initiative, with a special focus on "Work and Society". The Workshop was a unique opportunity to reflect upon the issue of work and society from a multi-disciplinary perspectives and gathered a range of experts from different disciplines (including historical, psychological, sociological and educational, amongst others).

2. What is meant by future?

A key dimension in the discussion on the future of work is the time horizon. In other words, how far into the future we are looking: 5 years, until the end of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 100 years, and so on. This fundamentally informs the vision we have of the future and how we best address challenges and opportunities that can arise.

The relationships between the individual, work and society as a whole have changed over time and the pace of this change has accelerated in recent history and continues to do so. It is in the framework of an often-unimaginable speed of change, in an unforeseeable future, that the experts provided their projections for the future. However, an assumption underlying much of these discussions is that the future is not predetermined.

3. In the context of a dystopian world

The differences in economic and social development between and within countries should not be overlooked when reflecting on the future. What is a reality for a country, town or person, might not be an issue for another. Therefore, logically, the drivers of change affect different places and people differently over time. At the same time, we cannot avoid a global approach when addressing the future of work, given the ever-increasing interconnectivity among all (or almost all).

In addition to the often-discussed technological advances, the future of work and the way it relates to society is deeply affected by demographic trends and changes in the way workforces are constituted, organised and regulated. There is a generational and cultural aspect to demographic issues. On the one hand, in some regions, like Africa or India, there is "a demographic dividend" with a growing young population, which could reinvigorate the economy even if the government does not intervene. On the other hand,

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[1] In the International Training Centre of the ILO in Turin, Italy 21 and 22 September.

European countries and other high-income countries, often have ageing, and in many cases, shrinking populations. In addition, although migration has always existed, there seems to be an exponential increase of large scale movements of people. Internal migration from rural to urban areas, particularly in poorer countries, should not be overlooked either. All these factors have a bearing on the supply and demand for labour and services which call for different contextual as well as global and regional solutions. For example, it was highlighted that the above-mentioned demographic shifts may lead to increases in demand for care or health services or for greater investment in education, for both the young and older populations.

More specifically, it was argued that labour migration may have both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, it results in increasing diversity in society and the workplace, it can meet needs of employers for specific skills or can fill low skilled jobs. On the other hand, it can cause a "race to the bottom" if migrants are willing to work under worse conditions or it can swell the numbers of people working in unacceptable forms of work and/or in the informal economy, for example. Migration can also cause social tensions and rises in populism as well as xenophobia and/or racism. It is the responsibility of governments to integrate this diversity although social partners also have a role to play here. It was also felt that where a person was born would continue to have a huge impact on his or her future.

There are also gender dimensions to this issue; for example, in some countries, women have moved –and are increasingly moving– into paid employment, from unpaid care work. This results in demand for services (care services), which can be met by migrant workers. Questions were also raised on the effects that the digitalisation of work will have (and is already having) on migration, as workers may increasingly be able to get work through platforms (through their mobile phones, computers etc.) from wherever they are situated, and thus they would no longer need to migrate to find work.

4. Three Main Points of Convergence

The rich diversity of the participants to the meeting contributed to the inclusion and examination of a variety of topics and views. While differences of perspectives where many, three main points of convergence were noted in the workshop: (1) that we should all work; (2) that the value of work is evolving and; (3) that new social model(s) with the participation of all should be considered.

4.1.   We should all work

A key question concerning the interactions between work, society and the individual is whether or not we will work in the future and who decides who would work or not. This key question also raised a number of other questions, including that of potential inequalities (or deepening existing ones) and power structures; the latter being of particular importance given the current fragmentation of work (short term contracts, gigs, project-based work etc.) and the imbalance of power between employer and worker. In the short to midterm future (but potentially in the longer term as well) this key question also very much depends on the context and level of development as working can be a necessity, not a choice.

There was a consensus that indeed we should all work as by so doing we contribute to society. There is a fairness or egalitarian argument as to whether we should work (or not) as well as a developmental argument for the individual and society. In addition, even if the work of an individual does not contribute to society, if it develops the individual, then it sustains and advances her/him, thus it has value.

There are also strong cultural and psychological reasons for working, for example contributing to society/the community, personal dignity and self-worth, amongst others. The desire to work is also part of the obligation to work. This raises the important distinction between work as a right and work as a duty. It should be noted however that not any form or structure that creates an obligation to work should be accepted.

There should however be exceptions to the idea that everyone in society should work, the elderly, children, the sick, people caring for others (although this may be considered work, it is often unpaid), students, and those doing training, for example. Even people who want to work sometimes need to dip out of the labour market temporarily for many reasons and they should be able to re-enter the labour market at a later stage.

Although there are many fundamental reasons why people need to work, the problem is increasingly that economies are not generating sufficient jobs. Technological transformations seem likely to exacerbate this. It was also argued that in a world where jobs become scarce, societies should be "sharing" job opportunities with a fair distribution of what are considered as "good" and "bad" jobs. This also raises questions on how it is decided who gets to do which jobs, both paid and unpaid. In this regard, it would also be important to rethink the notion of working time and avoid the common one-size-fits-all approach which provides for a "typical" length of working week (for example 40 hours being considered as full time work).

a. Basic universal income as a possible alternative

The question of a basic universal income as a possible alternative (to work) was discussed. Although this idea could partially address the probable challenge of fewer jobs and less work within societies, it seems unlikely that it will solve all related issues. Moreover, there is an ethical dimension to this: whether it is acceptable for everyone to get a fixed sum of money at regular intervals on an unconditional basis.[2]

The concept of a universal basic income raises profound questions about personal freedoms and choices versus the needs of society. It is clear though, that there is a need to reform and modernise social protection systems depending on the country, to adjust to future challenges in the world of work. The concepts of equality and inclusiveness need to be the basic principles upon which any reforms should be based.

It was highlighted that many of the issues regarding a universal basic income were not necessarily relevant for developing countries where the majority of people need to work to survive –and this is likely to continue in the foreseeable future.

Given the increase of interactivity, global solutions are necessary. Linking this to the idea of a basic income, could result in the management (or governance) of a basic income at a global level which would be given in some countries and not others.

Tax systems are a key component here as they are a tool for the redistribution of wealth. Further research and analysis is however required on taxation systems and models that can address both the challenges and opportunities in the world of work of the future. International relations between States as well as distributional issues are at the heart of this, redistributing resources from those that have them and finding ways of sharing. But this debate can no longer take place entirely at a national level; these are global phenomena that need global solutions.

b. From manufacturing to services

Analyses of the future of work and society, in particular with regards to the structure of production, are based upon industrial or manufacturing models of production. However, this needs to be adjusted as there has been – and it was argued there will continue to be – a huge growth in employment in the services industry.

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[2] Studies have been carried out in Germany where if everyone got 1,000 Euros/month (equivalent to 31.4% of GDP) this amount would still not be enough in the event of unforeseen additional costs (such as illness, accidents, etc.).

New technological developments and a so-called 24/7 society where people are increasingly demanding services instantaneously, may have consequences such as wealth distribution, working time and health issues. This discussion raised a number of questions: (i) If we assume increased productivity with new technologies, is that distribution of wealth happening? (ii) Can we distribute also in terms of working hours? This needs to be talked about in all countries, within and between countries, and between generations. (iii) Another element which can be observed but which is likely to grow in severity unless tackled is the relation between work and health (particularly mental health) and its impact on societies. Unless adequately addressed, it seems likely that these consequences will aggravate. In addition, there is a tendency to believe that the future holds an eminent decrease in the use of permanent employment contracts which would have an impact on stress levels as short term "project based" tasks and jobs would, it was argued, increase precariousness. Research has shown that the majority of workers working on flexible contracts still seek the security of a permanent contract.

With new technologies, the responsibility of employers has shifted to become the responsibility of society more broadly as well as public institutions. This sharing of responsibility has both risks and benefits. It could mean that workers do not know who their employer is (could be an algorithm!) but it could also result in greater participation from individuals both as workers and citizens.

Another dimension to this issue is the informal economy which is the reality for many but is usually not taken into consideration for the purpose of social protection, freedom of association and collective bargaining.[3]

4.2.   A changing value and definition of work

Many of the issues above are grounded upon understandings, values and meanings given to work, the individual and society. These are often contextual and based on norms within society. It was noted however, that such norms may change over time. Envisaging a society without work will require fundamental changes in societal norms.

Although there are strong cultural and psychological norms pushing us to work (as well as reasons of survival for the majority of humankind), it can be argued that ultimately what human beings need, is to engage in meaningful "life projects". These do not necessarily have to be linked to work (paid or unpaid) as commonly defined. The

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[3] Regulatory approaches are possible and necessary for informal workers. An example was given from Chile where informal work is included in the labour law to ensure workers' rights including trade union representation.

meaning of work is also to a great extent subjective, given that to one person work may be a matter of life and death, whereas to another it may be a lifestyle choice. It was agreed that the definition of work in this context needs to be flexible so that work is not only linked to the workplace. Many believe that working is related only to the workplace, however it should be taken into consideration that care, household work and the like are also work.

How then do we define work? There are arguments for and against having definitions of work or at least having definitions that are more or less narrow. Being too specific (for example only paid work is considered 'real' work) can be detrimental to the world of work and to individuals who don't fit into these narrow definitions. But likewise, having broad definitions can also carry risks as this makes regulating labour markets and developing policies extremely challenging. How work is defined has far reaching repercussions on other social policies and thus on society in general. For example, if work is narrowly defined in terms of waged labour, those people working "outside of the definition" could be excluded from social protection. One fundamental aspect highlighted, was that whenever work creates value (including in the gig economy, task work or platform work for example), it should be considered as work and duly regulated. In terms of the value of work, it is clear that unpaid work is not valued as highly as paid work – even though the intrinsic value of the unpaid work may be high (for example unpaid care work). It is also important to note that value is also, consciously or unconsciously, attributed to individuals based on the job they do.

4.3.   New social model(s) with the participation of all

When looking to the future it is important to avoid linear views of development and progress. The fact that our world is extreme in dystopias, and that there is a risk that this aggravates over time, should also not be overlooked. It was argued that if we persist on the current model, in which markets and economic growth are the primary concerns, we would continue to exacerbate existing problems, particularly as the current development path is inherently regressive. The current model is arguably in crisis and market forces are not equipped to solve this. Although legislation can help to find solutions to these issues, there are moral or ethical considerations which need cultural or normative changes if they are to be truly addressed. It was argued that new models need to be found that will address these underlying issues. Given the increasing frequency and depth of political, economic and social crises globally –perhaps even new forms of "ethical codes" are needed to tackle these multidimensional issues from a different perspective**.**

With the advent of new technologies, there is increasing diversity both in the world of work (for workers and employers) and in the modes of consumption and production. At the same time, it is possible that new technologies concentrate the benefits of work in the hands of fewer people. From an economic perspective, this may not necessarily seem problematic but there is an ethics element here and therefore new solutions need to be based on a human centred approach. This creates new challenges for regulating the world of work. This diversity can be beneficial (new flexible ways of working and combining family and professional responsibilities for example) but needs to be managed effectively in order to avoid an increase in precarious low quality or dangerous jobs as well as increased inequalities. Further research is also needed to determine how organisations - particularly enterprises - can tackle discrimination and facilitate integration. National laws as well as international labour standards have a role to play here as do the social partners.

It is important that researchers and policy makers look to the future without overlooking the actual transformation process. It is crucial to plan and prepare for this transformation as much as possible as this would structure the future of work and society. The objective is to move away from a dystopian world characterized by highly productive societies/sectors with highly skilled and highly paid workers coinciding with societies (but also sectors) where low income and inequalities prevail.

There was a strong feeling expressed particularly by participants from the south (notably ex colonialized countries) that there needs to be a redistribution of wealth that could also include benefits from technological changes. In other words, this is a time for "paying back centuries of inequality".

a. The quest for an increased participation

The idea that we are passive bystanders in the face of technological changes that affect the world of work was rejected. Future societies are likely to be increasingly interconnected and there is a need for engaged citizens participating in civic life to help develop more sustainable, equitable and inclusive policies as well as their implementation strategy.

New technologies might be an opportunity to change governance systems and structures to allow individuals to represent themselves for a more direct form of democracy. Underlying issues like inequality and exclusion in the world of work, now and in the future, could be addressed (or at least partially addressed) by a greater voice from workers and individuals. At the same time, in many countries, political parties are struggling to engage citizens who seem to be increasingly disillusioned.

It was discussed that social dialogue could also be revisited to make it more inclusive, for example by including academia, but also people in general. This also raises issues for ILO constituents as their traditional roles (of workers' and employers' organizations in particular) are being transformed.

Education systems are also key for increasing citizen participation in discussions (and, ultimately, actions) to create more inclusive and equal societies. It was argued in this regard, that current education systems focused on producing workers not citizens. Education systems could contribute to the facilitation of new entrants to the labour market so that skills and knowledge meet emerging demands from employers, especially for young people, given the high rates of youth unemployment, particularly in developed countries, as well as the high level of young working poor, particularly in developing countries. It could also help to integrate migrants into societies, provide lifelong learning for people of all ages and help in retraining workers during any transitions in labour markets due to disruptive technologies.

Ultimately, it is important to ensure that the society of the future continues to be human-centred and that the world of work contributes to that. Participatory approaches are crucial to achieve this. There are many cultural and normative/value laden issues running through these debates which argue for contextual solutions. However, there are current global trends that require some kind of global framework, including international norms and standards, particularly in an ever more technological world where national borders are easily circumvented.

5. Conclusions

The workshop concluded that work will continue to be an important element in our lives although its nature is changing. And in so doing, it is changing some essential features of the way we live. These changes are creating new paradigms that require ethical evaluations in order to ensure a human centred society that aim to achieve social justice for all. With this objective, new business models need to align to a new social contract that ensures universal solidarity and provide a constructive path for workers, wider forms of participation as well as environmental sustainability.

A new social contract should thus help us to foster inclusiveness, not only encourage individual success but also foster solidarities that enable societies to prosper.