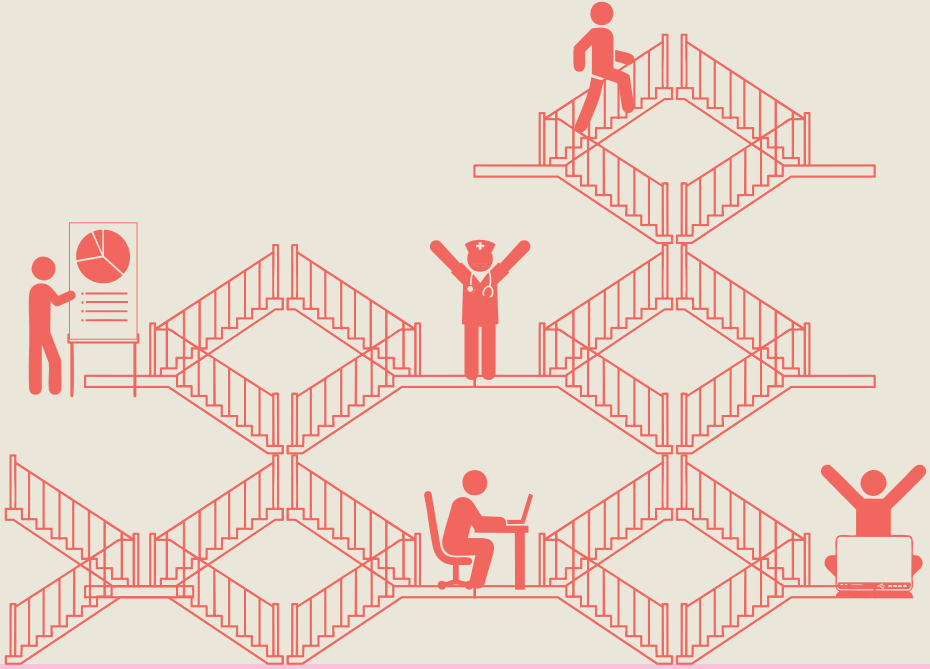


Work



BEYOND GROWTH



Colophon

A publication by Commons Network & Oxfam Novib.
September 2025.

Authors: Agata Gunkova, Diane Golenvaux

Contributors: Sophie Bloemen, Winne van Woerden,
Amita Pitre, Eline Achterberg, Jane Garton

Design: SAZZA

Licence: CC BY 4.0

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

www.commonsnetwork.org

www.oxfamnovib.nl

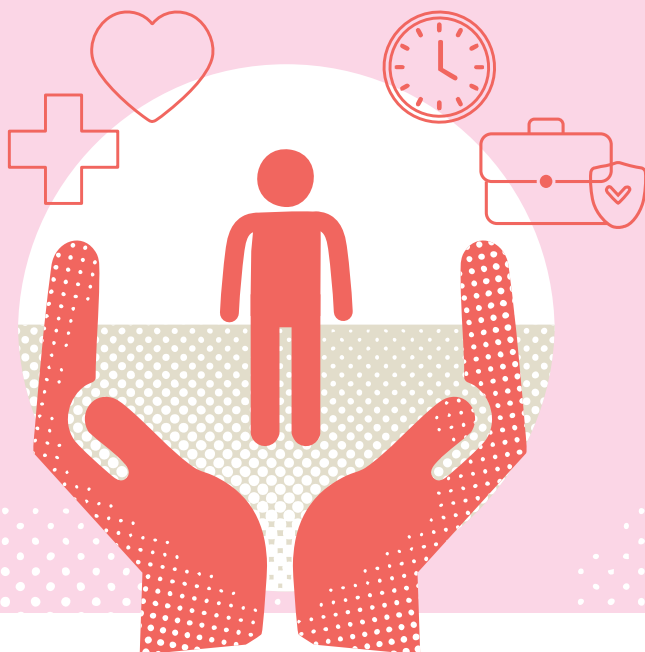
RETHINKING WORK IN A POST-GROWTH ECONOMY

Today, work falls short of creating thriving communities and ecosystems. Instead, it upholds economic activity that exceeds planetary boundaries and directly drives environmental destruction. Essential work is often underpaid and undervalued, and precarious contracts, unhealthy working conditions and ‘bullshit jobs’¹ have destructive impacts on the physical and mental health of workers across Europe.

A transition towards a post-growth economy is fundamentally tied to the rethinking of work – its purpose, how it is organized and governed, how it is valued, and who benefits from it. A shift is urgently needed towards workplace democratization, backed by public policies to ensure that paid work meets certain social and ecological standards while allowing people to organize their

livelihoods more freely and take part in meaningful unpaid work as well. **Post-growth policies are about channelling our productive capacities, including the labour force, into forms of production that are necessary for human wellbeing and the environmental transition, while paving ways out of exploitative work relations.** Jobs should serve social and environmental wellbeing, instead of capital accumulation and unbridled economic growth.

These demands are not based on wishful thinking. Successful examples of alternative practices and policies already exist, including worker cooperatives, public job guarantee programmes and Spain’s working time reduction policy. These can be built upon to create dignified jobs for all in democratic post-growth economies. This primer will provide an overview of possible routes for post-growth work.



Roundtable

Roundtable on post-growth approaches to work

This primer is part of a 'Beyond Growth' series published by Commons Network and Oxfam Novib. It follows from a roundtable co-hosted by the Postgrowth Pan-European Network in the Spanish Congress in November 2024. This event brought together Members of Parliament from Spain, France, Croatia, Slovenia and

Belgium, as well as experts on post-growth, for a discussion on post-growth approaches to work. We discussed the Spanish policy of reducing working time and other policies such as the public job guarantee, as well as the research of UN Special Rapporteur Olivier De Schutter on work, poverty and post-growth. Furthermore, we reflected on how to build progressive political narratives about work that resonate with Europeans at a time when a conservative backlash is sweeping across the continent.

WHY GROWTH ISN'T WORKING

A growth-centred economy requires the continuous expansion of capitalist markets and capital accumulation. Research has shown that economic growth cannot be decoupled from material and energy use fast enough to avert the climate crisis.² **The economy cannot grow infinitely on a finite planet.** Furthermore, growth does not necessarily result in greater wellbeing for all. Neither high- nor low-income countries have succeeded in decreasing inequality, providing everyone with access to basic goods and services, and creating opportunities for fair employment. Instead, we see a sharp increase in billionaire wealth while poverty persists,³ escalation of the climate crisis, and perpetuation of resource and

labour exploitation, especially in Global South countries.⁴

We need an economy that ensures that work provides people with living wages and access to essential goods and services, but also free time for leisure and to engage equitably in non-waged community and care work. **Our economic system does not appropriately value essential jobs and care work.** Work is geared towards creating profits for shareholders and investors rather than prosperity for those who perform it. Our productive capacities are mobilized by profit, and this determines which goods and services are produced – regardless of pressing social and environmental needs.

UN(DER)PAID BUT ESSENTIAL WORK

In the EU, statistics show that over 8% of workers are at risk of poverty.⁵ Together with the neoliberalization of the job market through 'flexible' working arrangements, precarious employment and the weakening of labour union power, waged work currently does not guarantee a decent life where basic needs are satisfied. At the same time, jobs which are essential to human health and wellbeing, such as those in healthcare, education, sanitation, agriculture, transportation and care, continue to be underpaid and largely performed in

precarious conditions by marginalized groups, such as non-unionized migrant workers.⁶ Worldwide, essential workers' wages are 26% lower than those of other employees, while one in three key workers is considered low-paid.⁷ Women are disproportionately represented in most of these essential and low-paid sectors, suffering from unequal wage distribution. Women also perform the great majority of unpaid care work, which is not recognized as work despite being fundamental to the economy and the wellbeing of society.

WORK IN DEMOCRATIC POST- GROWTH ECONOMIES

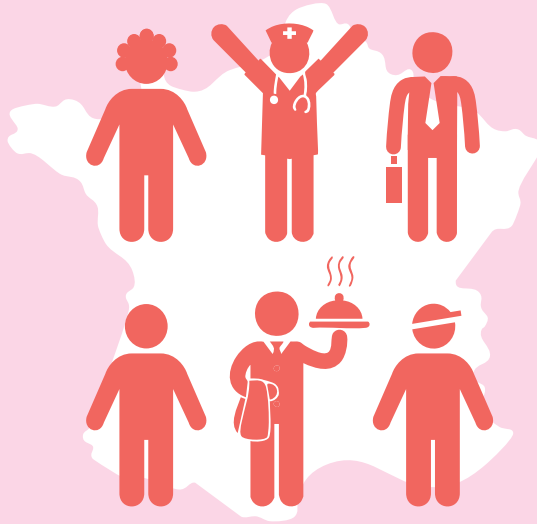
Work is therefore an important aspect of the social and environmental crises we are facing in the neoliberal capitalist economy. Growth is often justified on the basis that it is necessary for employment creation, in an economy where technology development and productivity increases are continuous.⁸ This pits workers against the green transition, as the downscaling of ecologically harmful sectors would lead to unemployment. However, a new economy that de-centres growth and prioritizes environmental and social justice would ensure dignified and meaningful jobs for all, greater agency and enhanced wellbeing for workers, and the fair social and economic organization of care.⁹

Instead of assuming that every sector of our economy needs to grow and create jobs, regardless of whether they contribute to human wellbeing and thriving ecosystems, we need to have a democratic discussion about what we want our economy to deliver – and what kind of jobs and work are needed to get there. Many sectors, such as fossil fuels, advertisement, fast fashion, speculative banking, luxury industries and mass tourism, mobilize massive amounts of energy, material and labour while fuelling overconsumption and waste, and creating social and environmental injustices which disproportionately impact communities

in the Global South.¹⁰ We must prioritize work with high social and environmental utility, rather than work that leads to meaningless accumulation and planetary degradation. Public policy can help to create the new jobs which are needed for the transition. These include jobs in renewable energy, agroecology, sustainable construction and environmental protection, and in building greater public infrastructure for universal basic services.¹¹ There is plenty of work to be done in these sectors, but they need to offer fair wages and better working conditions.¹²

Work could also be democratically organized so that workers have greater agency and power within their workplace. This leads to an increased sense of ownership and job satisfaction, and better social and environmental outcomes. In democratic workplaces, workers can prioritize long-term prosperity, social wellbeing, care work and environmental protection, rather than short-term profits for shareholders.¹³

Lastly, care must be recognized as fundamental labour which enables society to function, and resources and time must be allocated to ensure that everyone can engage in it equitably. This can be pursued by enabling the fair social and economic organization of care whereby family, community and state provisioning combine to provide most of the continuum of care. Through the ‘5 Rs’ – Recognizing, Reducing and Redistributing unpaid care, and Rewarding and Representing paid care workers – both unpaid and paid care work can be valued and organized in a fair and equitable way.¹⁴ State provisioning of care, fair compensation and decent work conditions for care workers, alongside support for community provisioning and care ‘commoning’,¹⁵ put care and reciprocity within local communities at the core of our society.



Territoire Zéro Chômeur

Public job guarantee programme – Territoire Zéro Chômeur in France

In France the ‘Territoire Zéro Chômeur de Longue Durée’ (Zero Long-Term Unemployment Territory), which started in 2016, is an example of a successful public job guarantee programme. It focuses on eliminating long-term unemployment by creating jobs in sectors that meet local needs, while considering

people’s skills, through ‘employment-oriented enterprises’. The programme is founded on the beliefs that no one is unemployable, there is enough work to be done, and that funds to establish employment programmes are not lacking, as the costs of involuntary unemployment are far greater.¹⁶ It is financed through public funds that would otherwise be used for unemployment benefits. Participation is on a voluntary basis, and the programme works with local communities to identify potential interest. Since its launch, it has expanded from 10 to 60 pilot areas and created thousands of employment positions.

POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO BUILD ON

Public job guarantee

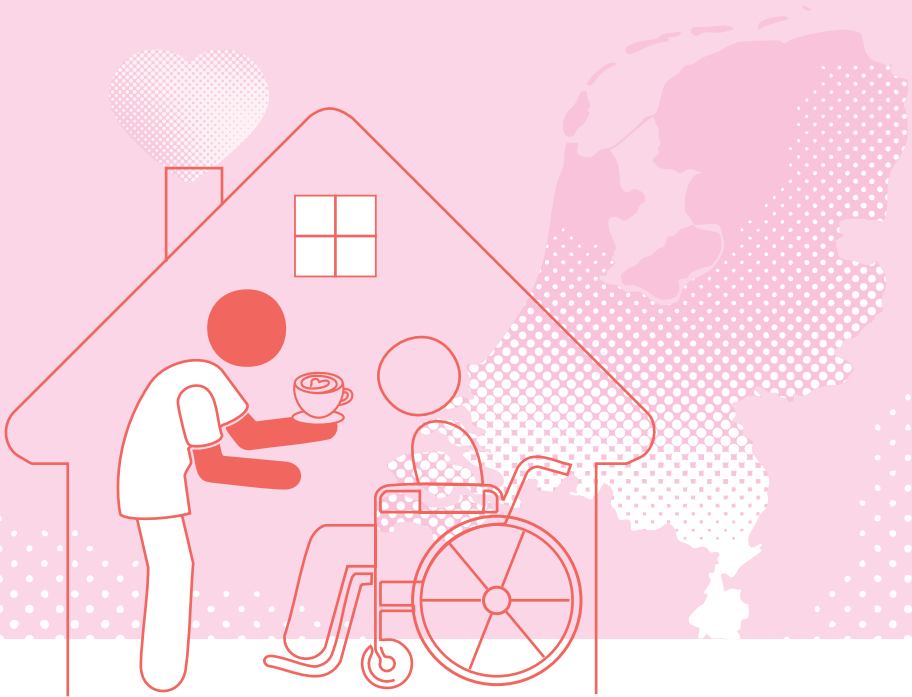
A public job guarantee (PJG) is a public employment programme that ensures workers' rights to access meaningful, living-wage work¹⁷ by creating new jobs that address social needs. These include jobs in essential sectors, but also in sectors of environmental transition such as energy, transportation and agriculture.¹⁸ PJG can be implemented at national, regional or local levels, with models varying in scope and scale. Participation in a PJG is voluntary, with no penalties for non-participation, so that the programme does not replace social protection. Unlike the neoliberal 'workfare' policy which reduces social benefits, PJG pursues a fair work and unconditional welfare approach. It is designed to empower workers through training, education and support services that improve their long-term employment prospects.¹⁹ The programme focuses on care and other essential sectors, where workers are scarce due to low wages and precarious conditions. By providing fair wages and stable working conditions, the PJG strengthens labour standards while creating new jobs in locally useful and environmental sectors.

Workplace democracy and worker cooperatives

Through **workplace democracy**, workers gain greater control in their workplaces and participate in its decision-making processes. This decentralization of power can shift company goals away from maximizing profits towards ensuring workers' wellbeing, the fair organization of care, and environmental sustainability.²⁰ Workplace democracy leads

to more meaningful and fulfilling work, as well as more caring workplaces. Importantly, workplaces should provide flexible working arrangements which make space for unpaid care work, for example through better parental leave policies. Mechanisms can range from employee input into their direct workflows to their full control over company management, including worker shareholding, representation on boards, voting on management, participation in workplace councils or full worker ownership.

Worker cooperatives are enterprises that are owned and democratically managed by their workers, comprising an estimated 8.73% of the world's employed population.²¹ Their structure prevents exploitation and encourages collective responsibility, equity and autonomy, contributing to a more democratic economy. Workers' sense of ownership often strengthens their sense of responsibility, purpose and meaning through work. As a result, workers often prefer to stay within a cooperative even when they are offered a higher wage elsewhere.²² Though embedded in the capitalist system, the model offers a form of resistance by promoting alternative, non-hierarchical work relations that foster local ownership and community wealth building. Worker cooperatives have proven resilient in the face of financial crises, providing steady employment and even creating new jobs.²³ Cooperatives lead to the democratization of work as well as having positive social impacts for the communities around them.



Nurse-led 'Buurtzorg'

Nurse-led organization - Buurtzorg in the Netherlands

Buurtzorg is a nurse-led model of care provision in the Netherlands. It is centred on non-hierarchical, self-management

of staff and interdisciplinary, locally embedded care. By giving nurses autonomy and ownership over their working time and trusting in their expertise, Buurtzorg serves as a successful example of workplace democracy, which has led to more comprehensive care for patients but also better working conditions for nurses.²⁴



Transition

Worker-led transition – the GKN factory occupation in Italy

The GKN factory in Florence has been occupied since July 2021, after the British investment firm Melrose Industries decided to abruptly close the luxury vehicles manufacturing site and dismiss the 422 employees. The former GKN workers initiated a struggle that has become the longest factory occupation in Italian history, under an assembly called the ‘Collettivo di Fabbrica’. They

have been fighting to reclaim control of their workplace and to transition towards worker-led and environmentally sustainable production of cargo bikes. Alongside ongoing legal battles for compensation from their former employer and to gain ownership of the factory, the workers have formed a mass solidarity movement and international alliances. Collettivo di Fabbrica members propose an alternative plan of ‘re-industrialization from below’ and a convergence of labour and environmental movements to fight the negative impacts of globalization, financial speculation and the prioritization of profit over people.²⁵

Working time reduction

This transformative policy aims to shorten the standard working time, either on a daily, weekly or yearly basis. Working time reduction (WTR) challenges the preconception that longer hours lead to greater value, instead focusing on human wellbeing, equality and environmental sustainability.²⁶ From a post-growth perspective, there are two justifications for WTR. It could be a way to transition to a post-growth economy, as reduced working time can result in a shift in the composition of households' consumption and have a scale effect on production, reducing overall material and energy use. It can also be a consequence of a post-growth transition, which would lead to less work and require the redistribution of employment and working time.²⁷ WTR is also supported by research showing that working longer hours does not lead to greater productivity, but is instead responsible for increased health risks such as chronic fatigue, reduced job motivation and higher chance of work accidents.²⁸ By reducing the time people are required to spend in paid employment, the policy also creates space for care, rest, education and community activities. Furthermore, reducing the full-time norm might allow more women to take up employment and more men to take up care work, thus promoting gender equality. To fulfil its potential, WTR must be implemented across all sectors and complemented by other supporting measures. These include universal public services which fulfil basic needs, such as healthcare, child and elder care, and education, but also fair wages for all and social security, so that low-income earners are not further disadvantaged and forced to take on multiple jobs.

Steward ownership:

Putting purpose before profit

Steward ownership offers an alternative to

the dominant shareholder ownership model by restricting company control to individuals who are directly involved in the organization. It ensures that value created is reinvested into the company, but also into a pre-established broader vision. This allows the company to support social and environmental causes, but also to prioritize its long-term purpose over short-term gain, ensuring profits are not extracted by external shareholders. Examples include the outdoor company Patagonia, tech companies such as Signal, Ecosia and Mozilla, and the cooperative supermarket Odin. Various steward ownership structures exist, such as the double foundation model, employee ownership trusts and perpetual purpose trusts.³¹ These are all designed to protect the company's mission so it can focus on its long-term vision rather than returns for investors; such models might serve as examples of good practice in the shift towards more purpose-oriented businesses.

Fighting violations of workers' rights and environmental injustice in global supply chains

Multinational companies are not only responsible for labour exploitation and environmental destruction in their own workplaces but also further down their global supply chains. In Europe, national and supranational institutions are responsible for making sure that markets, consumption patterns and corporate behaviour are not violating rights elsewhere. As part of that, companies should be held accountable for their purchasing practices; this includes paying a fair price that allows workers down the chain to earn a living wage, redistributing value and power in the chain, and taking collective responsibility for exploitation.³² Unfair Trading Practices, Human Rights and Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence are examples of EU policies which aim to address rights violations, including workers' rights and environmental rights.

CONCLUSION

A different approach to work is possible and feasible. While billionaire wealth is multiplying, essential workers and carers are still being underpaid. Our economies continue to be organized around unbridled economic growth, despite it being incompatible with climate justice. This growth-centred logic is inherent in the current organization of work and the way we think about income security.

A post-growth approach to work allows us to step out of a growthist logic in designing the future of work, and pursue policy changes that can genuinely usher in a just transition towards an economy that prioritizes social wellbeing and environmental justice. In Europe, public job guarantee programmes, the democratization of work and reduction of working hours could contribute to transforming workers' livelihoods and repurposing paid work for social and environmental wellbeing, while allowing more time to be spent on unpaid care work. For a post-growth transition in the Global North to be just, it must also end labour exploitation and resource appropriation in Global South countries. These policies can serve as inspiration and, when initiated together with other eco-social policies, be the catalyst of a transformation to a new economy that moves beyond growth.

REFERENCES

- 1 D. Graeber. (2018). *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. Penguin UK.
- 2 H. Haberl et al. (2020). A systematic review of the evidence on decoupling of GDP, resource use and GHG emissions, part II: synthesizing the insights. *Environ. Res. Lett.* 15. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab842a>; G. Kallis et al. (2018). *Research On Degrowth. Annual Review of Environment and Resources*. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102017-025941>
- 3 Oxfam. (20 Jan 2025). Billionaire Wealth surges three times faster in 2024. <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/media/press-releases/billionaire-wealth-surges-three-times-faster-in-2024-world-now-on-track-for-at-least-five-trillionaires-within-a-decade/>; World Bank. (15 October 2024). *Ending Poverty for Half the World Could Take More Than a Century*. [https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/10/15/ending-poverty-for-half-the-world-could-take-more-than-a-century#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20Oct;Oxfam. \(20 January 2025\). Billionaire wealth in the EU surges by nearly €400 million per day in 2024, with a new billionaire nearly every week. https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/billionaire-wealth-eu-surges-nearly-eu400-million-day-2024-new-billionaire-nearly](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/10/15/ending-poverty-for-half-the-world-could-take-more-than-a-century#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20Oct;Oxfam. (20 January 2025). Billionaire wealth in the EU surges by nearly €400 million per day in 2024, with a new billionaire nearly every week. https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/billionaire-wealth-eu-surges-nearly-eu400-million-day-2024-new-billionaire-nearly)
- 4 Oxfam. (2025). *Takers not Makers: The unjust poverty and unearned wealth of colonialism*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/takers-not-makers-621668/>
- 5 Eurostat. (Updated 24 July 2025). *In-work at-risk-of-poverty rate*. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_iw01__custom_70535/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=3970](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_iw01__custom_70535/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=3970db81-3b05-4390-bbe7-2e0968b08737)
- 6 International Labour Organization. (2023). *The Value of Essential Work*. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms_871017.pdf
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 *Green European Journal*. (1 June 2018). *Work in a world without growth*. <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/work-in-a-world-without-growth/>
- 9 United Nations General Assembly. (1 May 2024). *Eradicating poverty beyond growth: Report of the UNSR on extreme poverty and human rights*, Olivier De Schutter. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/61>
- 10 J. Hickel. (2021). *Less is more*. Windmill Books.
- 11 *Global Climate Jobs*. (n.d.). *What are Climate Jobs?* <https://www.globalclimatejobs.org/global-climate-jobs/>
- 12 UN OHCHR. (30 June 2023). *“Job guarantee” could address biggest employment challenges of our time: UN expert*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/06/job-guarantee-could-address-biggest-employment-challenges-our-time-un-expert>
- 13 J. Battilana, J. Yen, I. Ferreras and L. Ramarajan. (2022). *Democratizing Work: Redistributing power in organizations for a democratic and sustainable future*. *Organization Theory*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/26317877221084714>
- 14 UN Women. (2022). *A Toolkit on paid and unpaid care work: From 3Rs to 5Rs*. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/A-toolkit-on-paid-and-unpaid-care-work-en.pdf>
- 15 Commons Network. (2022). *Manifesto for a Caring*

- Economy. <https://www.commonsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Commons-Network-Manifesto-for-a-Caring-Economy-2022.pdf>
- 16 Territoire Zéro Chômeur. (n.d.). Beliefs and fundamentals. <https://www.tzcd.fr/decouvrir-le-projet/les-convictions-et-fondamentaux/>
- 17 UN OHCHR. (30 June 2023). “Job guarantee” could address biggest employment challenges of our time: UN expert. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/06/job-guarantee-could-address-biggest-employment-challenges-our-time-un-expert>
- 18 Global Climate Jobs. (n.d.). What are Climate Jobs? <https://www.globalclimatejobs.org/global-climate-jobs/>
- 19 The Job Guarantee. (n.d.). Core principles. <https://www.jobguarantee.org/what/>
- 20 R. Frega, L. Herzog and C. Neuhausser. (2019). Workplace democracy – The recent debate. *Philosophy Compass*. 14:e12574. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12574>; O. Vincent and A. Brandellero. (2023). Transforming work: A critical literature review on degrowth, post-growth, postcapitalism and craft labor. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol 430. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.139640>; J. Battilana, J. Yen, I. Ferreras and L. Ramarajan. (2022). Democratizing Work: Redistributing power in organizations for a democratic and sustainable future. *Organization Theory*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/26317877221084714>
- 21 CICOPA. (2014). Cooperatives and Employment: A Global Report. https://www.cicopa.coop/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/cooperatives_and_employment_a_global_report_en_web_21-10_1pag.pdf
- 22 O. Vincent and A. Brandellero. (2023). Transforming work: A critical literature review on degrowth, post-growth, postcapitalism and craft labor. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol 430. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.139640>
- 23 Eurofound. (2019). Cooperatives and social enterprises: Work and employment in selected countries, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/system/files/2019-06/ef18043en.pdf>
- 24 Buurtzorg. (n.d.) The Buurtzorg Model; S. Sheldon. (2017). Buurtzorg: the district nurses who want to be superfluous. *BMJ* 2017; 358. <https://www.bmj.com/content/358/bmj.j3140>
- 25 Insoorgioma. (n.d.). Dossier GKN. <https://insorgiamo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Dossier-Gkn-al-21-marzo-1.pdf>; Jacobin. (4 April 2023). Italy’s Longest-Ever Factory Occupation Shows How Workers Can Transform Production. <https://jacobin.com/2023/04/italy-gkn-factory-occupation-transform-production-workers-jobs-climate-change>; TUC UK. (n.d.). GKN workers in Florence fight to take over ownership of their factory and win a worker-led transition. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace-guidance/case-studies/gkn-workers-florence-fight-take-over-ownership-their-factory-and>
- 26 European Trade Union Institute. (2017). The why and how of working time reduction. <https://www.etui.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/The%20why%20and%20how%20of%20working%20time%20reduction-2017-WEB-2.pdf>
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 International Labour Organization. (7 November 2018). Working time and the future of work. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/working-time-and-future-work>
- 29 Official website of the president of the Government of Spain and the Council of Ministers. (2 April 2025). The Government of Spain presents the reduction of ordinary working hours to 37.5 a week. *La Moncloa*. 04/02/2025. The Government of Spain presents the reduction of ordinary working hours to 37.5 a week [Activity of the Council of Ministers]
- 30 Euronews. (7 May 2025). Spain moves forward with a proposed law to shorten the working week to 37.5 hours. <https://www.euronews.com/next/2025/05/07/spain-moves-forward-with-a-proposed-law-to-shorten-the-working-work-to-375-hours>
- 31 Purpose Economy. (n.d.). What is Steward Ownership? <https://purpose-economy.org/en/whats-steward-ownership/>
- 32 Oxfam. (December 2019). Human rights in EU supply chains. <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2019-12/Thematic%20briefing%20-%20MHRDD.pdf>

This booklet does not necessarily reflect Oxfam policy positions. The views and recommendations expressed are those of the author and not always those of Oxfam.

This publication is made possible with the support of Fair for All

FAIR for ALL is a Power of Voices partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a consortium with SOMO (The Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations), Third World Network-Africa (TWNAfrica), the Huairou Commission, and Oxfam Novib.