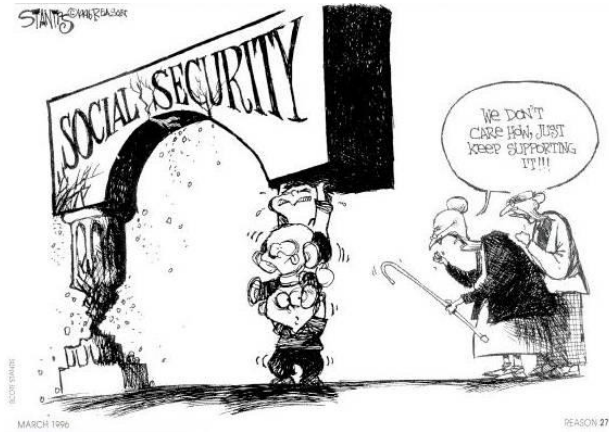


Panel 6 Social services and social benefits

Partner institution: The National Scientific Research Institute for Labour and Social Protection (INCSMPS) <http://www.incsmps.ro/>

Chair: to be confirmed



The ability to live, work and study anywhere in the Union is the EU's right most cherished by Europeans. The main motivation for EU citizens to make use of free movement is work-related, followed by family reasons. Therefore, it is important to note that the way social security is organised greatly varies within Europe, and that every EU country designs its social security system independently. Additionally, EU law provides safeguards in terms of the access to social assistance for economically inactive mobile EU citizens, to protect the hosting Member States from unreasonable financial burdens.

Recent studies¹ have revealed how well-being in Europe has changed over the last years, where differences exist among the Member States and which factors contribute to a higher level of welfare. Similarly, the population ageing is likely to threaten the ability of states to finance the welfare states and the social protection systems in the future. A viable solution is to increase employment rates and to lengthen the working life. To achieve this dual goal it requires devising new solutions for working conditions and career paths that help workers maintain their physical and mental health, motivation and productivity over an extended working life. In other words, work must be made sustainable over the life course.

The term 'sustainability' in relation to work was used by Scandinavian researchers in the book ,Creating sustainable work systems – Emerging perspectives and practices' (Docherty et al, 2009). The authors argue that intensive work systems will, in the long run, have damaging effects on both individuals and the quality of products and services. They propose an alternative approach based on the idea that work systems, the way work is organised, should be aiming at 'regenerating human and social resources.

The current economic and financial conditions are still affected by the biggest crisis and "...it requires rethinking new solutions for working conditions and career paths that help workers to retain their physical and mental health – as well as motivation and productivity – throughout an extended working life. Given the pressures of demographic change, a work environment needs to be created that satisfies the needs of different groups of workers – not only older workers but also those with care responsibilities, for example, or people with physical disabilities or mental health problems – to allow for the participation of the largest possible numbers in the labour force"².

¹ Eurofound – European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS)

² Eurofound,(2012b), pp. 6–7

Identifying and analysing the factors and actions underpinning sustainable work throughout working life is a research priority for Eurofound (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions) in the 2013–2016 programming period.³

The increased life expectancy and low fertility rates are rapidly transforming Europe's age structure in ways that may compromise the sustainability of the welfare states and the social protection systems. Without a significant surge in immigration or other implausible rapid demographic transformations, the working age population will shrink significantly while the post-retirement age population will expand. With the current employment levels, the result will be a rapidly increasing dependency ratio and a need to either reduce social spending or expand taxation significantly so as to finance pensions and healthcare.

A more attractive alternative may be to expand employment rates by a combination of 1) raising the effective retirement age; 2) increasing the proportion of the working age population that is employed. This is the approach taken in the European Union's Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Increasing the duration of the working life is a policy focus in many countries and it has triggered changes in the social protection systems. Access to early retirement has been made more difficult by either abolishing it altogether or by making conditions more restrictive, including making it less attractive from a financial perspective. Secondly, the age when people can retire with a full pension has been pushed out, either through increasing the statutory retirement age or the required number of years of contributions to the pension system. Furthermore, the occupational segregation, differences in work trajectories and the unevenly distributed double burden of combining work and care responsibilities lead to differences in lengths and types of careers. According to Eurostat data, women's working careers are on average eight years shorter than those of men. Inflexible rules on mandatory retirement and access to pensions can also deter those workers who wish to continue working beyond pensionable age, at least part time, from staying longer in employment. These issues of social justice need to be borne in mind when examining the factors underpinning the sustainable work over the life course.

We welcome papers aiming to debate these interesting topics. Studies based on comparative analysis, social security policies review and other exploratory research papers are accepted.

³ Eurofound (2015), *Sustainable work over the life course: Concept paper*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.