

## Thinking an Economy with Lesser Burdens: An argument for fewer working hours

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### Introduction

To achieve sustainable societies we are likely to have to move beyond growth based economies. There are a number of possible futures, all dependent on how governments and society respond to corona virus and its economic aftermath. Hopefully we will use this crisis to create something more humane.

Corona Virus while been an "environmental problem" is socially driven. Tackling it will become much easier if we reduce non-essential activities. That is because as we reduce human activities, people will mix less likely and this will prevent the spread of infections. This however presents an economic problem, in the form of recession.

In a normal crisis the prescription for solving this is simple- the government spends until people start consuming and working again. In this case, however, normal intervention would not work as to prevent further spread we need people to stop working or work as less as possible. So hereby the famous Keynesian theory written in 'General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money', which helped the world recover from the great depression in the 1930s, would actually fail. The solution is interestingly also provided by the famous John Maynard Keynes himself, in another less famous theory of his, in which he predicted that working hours would fall with newer technological progress.

What was once seen as an essential indicator of economic and social well-being needs to be brought back on the political and industrial agenda. There are strong arguments for this with some economical, some environmental sustainability, others of equity. All aside, the biggest reason is for survival in a post- COVID world.

### Economic Arguments

In 1930 the economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that technological progress and productivity improvements will make an 15- hour work week an economic possibility within the next few decades.

Recently an economic historian by the name of Robert Skidelsky proposed legislating maximum hours of work in most occupations, without any reduction in output and wages, as a way to achieve a more sustainable economy. Supporting this claim the New Economics Foundation had suggested giving 21 hours working week could solve many interlinked problems like overwork, over-consumption, unemployment, high carbon emissions, low well-being and lack of leisure.

Furthermore Belgian historian Rutger Bregman has strong reasons to believe that Keynes' prediction is achievable by 2030.

### Other Arguments

During the second and third wave feminism ideas like women's access to labour market, equal pay for equal work, men doing a greater share of unpaid domestic work and parental leave with flexibility came up. In accordance to these ideas writers like Nichole Marie and Cynthia Negrey argued that quality of life can be increased if working hours is reduced.

Among writers in the environmental circles like Anders Hayden argued in *Sharing the Work, Sparing the Planet* that working less would mean lower resource consumption and thus lower pressure on environment. To sum up the very problem of this growth-based capitalistic model is it threatens our health, relationships, communities and environment by creating an epidemic of overwork with time-famine.

### The Radical Proposal

To begin with one needs to grasp the idea that the amount of hours worked per day and productivity has no positive correlation. On the contrary it has been found that long working hours has lead to a declining rate of labour productivity. Moreover there has been a dominant idea that 'exchanges value' is the same as 'use value'. Basically people will spend money on things that they want or need, and this act of spending money tells us something about how much they value its use.

There are two main problems with this form of thinking. First, it is quite hard to make money on essential societal services. This is in part because of labour productivity growth- doing more with fewer people. As healthcare requires more personal interaction, so its cost is higher leading to less profits created out of it. Less profit in turn means fewer businesses in healthcare sector, which in turn mean poor working opportunities in healthcare.

Secondly, many unnecessary jobs exist only for the sole reason that they make a lot of money. Like consultancy, financial sector and advertising industry.

Therefore in the wake of Covid-19 we are lacking sufficient key workers with many having not so essential jobs. Still people stay in such jobs only because the means of exchange is in the form of a market. To buy better goods and services they need a high-paying job.

It is with this in mind the first proposal is to make waged and unwaged work of equal importance. In the work front the concept of division of productivity between employer and employee needs to be created. Sector-wide trade union coverage needs to be given importance when decision regarding automation is to be made. Furthermore a division of time for a certain work to be done between all types of worker would most importantly lead to less human interaction, thereby reducing the chance for spread of the deadly virus.

### Conclusion

The epidemic has put us in lockdown. While it seems that the 'lock' in our houses is not going to open up soon enough, it is certainly a hope that this epidemic has not 'down' our spirits yet. The greatest advantage this generation has is the ever-growing digital platform. Taking advantage of it the 'work from home' initiative can be carried out effectively. In the coming future, it seems that this initiative can be made more effective for both providing human comfort and also achieve many environmental objectives. For example if the internet can be made more reliable and fast, many of the jobs can be done while at home. This in turn means less travelling. In the likely scenario where the cure for the virus is not found, this means that people can still fulfil their duties and needs, thereby running the economy in a sustainable manner. Also, in the more optimistic scenario whereby the cure is found, this very initiative will prevent further carbon emission. That might be the silver lining in this nightmare. So let there be less work and more work from home, where ever possible, for a greener world.