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CDE
CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT

CDE POLICY BRIEF

Photo: TJ Blackwell

Free Days for Future?

Mainstream modes of working and consuming in rich countries are eroding our social and ecological foundations. Advocates of a shorter workweek point to a possible *triple dividend* from working less. This policy brief summarizes how reduced working hours could benefit our well-being, economies, and the natural world – and what measures could be taken to help make this vision a reality. Based on evidence and experience from around the world, we recommend a transformation pathway – shifting from Switzerland's current standard workweek to a new, improved worktime status quo that could better meet our and others' needs – and those of the planet.

The research featured here is focused on Switzerland.

When the current health crisis is finally brought under control, there will doubtless be significant pressure from many corners to return to something resembling "business as usual". For countless workers in wealthy countries, that would mean resuming lives characterized by overwork, high stress, many hours spent commuting – and related material overconsumption. But this is not an option we can afford to indulge. Achieving lastingly healthy, happier, more just societies this century demands that we rethink our priorities and redesign our lifestyles and wider systems – not least of all our models of work, pay, and play.

Our creation: the workweek

The 40-plus-hour workweek has been with us for so long that it's easy to forget we invented it – and could just as soon change it. In 1926, following many years of labour activism, Henry Ford first introduced a five-day workweek at his American auto plants. A few years later, Kellogg's cereal company implemented a six-hour workday at their factories.[1] These reforms, reductions at the time,

KEY MESSAGES

- Making our societies greener, happier, and more just will require a variety of strategies. In wealthy, industrialized countries, reducing the time we spend working for income – i.e. the standard workweek – is a highly promising policy alongside other reforms.
- Working less can increase our well-being, reduce stress, and lower burnout risks. Newly gained time can provide greater space for reflection, relationships, and enriching activities – and it can support more environmentally friendly, smaller-footprint lifestyles.
- Shorter workweeks can also support greater gender equality and better distribute gainful employment among workers, thereby reducing the numbers of unemployed.
- How people allocate their paid working time should be as flexible as possible to suit their own requirements. To this end, we need measures that allow everyone to work less if this improves their quality of life.

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Box 1. Study results on working less in Switzerland

With funding from the Mercator Foundation Switzerland, a CDE research team explored the circumstances under which working less can enable a more sustainable lifestyle (Bader, Hanbury, Neubert, Moser 2020). Over a period of 10 months, researchers monitored 800 participants divided into two groups: one group's weekly work hours were reduced, the other group's work hours remained the same. The results of the survey showed that:

- People who reduced their working time exhibited greater well-being in the short run, and lower burnout risk in the longer run.
- Those with longer working hours displayed higher levels of environmentally harmful behaviour, especially more commuting, general car and air travel, and clothing consumption.
- After reducing their working hours, participants displayed higher levels of environmentally conscious behaviour and less commuting. Other high-impact behaviours (housing, general mobility) were more resistant to change.

were largely promoted and welcomed by workers – especially because average salaries and compensation were kept high enough.

Overall, global figures illustrate major reductions in working hours from 1870 to the middle of the last century. In France, for example, annual hours worked per capita fell from 2,945 to 1,848 over this period. Even after World War II – in the so-called golden age of capitalism – standard working hours continued to decrease, albeit less sharply: from 1950 to 1980, average hours worked per employee in the OECD fell by another 18%.[2] Switzerland, for its part, gradually reduced its standard workweek from 50 to 42 hours between 1950 and 1990.[3]

In most countries, however, this gradual march towards greater leisure and a better work–life balance came to a halt towards the end of the 20th century. Since then, a curious combination of economic and cultural developments has seemingly locked in an eight-hour-per-day, five-day-per-week societal norm that poorly suits the needs of many – and, on balance, does not even necessarily benefit our economies.

Progress interrupted

Technological advances and better-skilled workers have not delivered the major leisure dividend predicted for our era by John Maynard Keynes and other 20th-century economists.[4] Keynes expected we would work as little as 15 hours each week by now. Instead, structural biases towards the translation of productivity gains into ever more material output and greater profits – including capital gains (or "economic rents") for the already rich – have prevented reductions in standard working hours for average workers. A recent OECD study across 24 countries shows that real median wage growth effectively *decoupled* from labour productivity growth between 1995 and 2015.[5]

A new feudal system. Prior to 1980, the fruits of productivity gains were relatively evenly distributed across society, with incomes rising and average work hours falling for large swathes of the population. More recently, however, the benefits of productivity gains have been increasingly captured by a fortunate few, while new masses of *precariat* have been forced to endure wage stagnation, longer hours or multiple jobs, more stress, and burnouts.[6] The sense of "needing to run to stand still" among workers is underscored by evidence that labour's share of national income has been steadily declining since the 1990s.[7] Switzerland has not been exempt from these trends of rising inequality and extreme wealth concentration,[8] with recent figures showing that the country's richest 10% hold 75% of the nation's overall wealth.[9]

Addicted to growth. Despite this ongoing transfer of wealth from bottom to top, little has changed in mainstream economic policymaking circles: the pursuit of ever-expanding gross domestic product (GDP) still reigns supreme. For decades, the dominant thinking has been that ongoing GDP growth improves the majority of people's well-being and – of decisive importance – sufficiently *offsets harms* related to that growth. This ideology has been especially damaging worldwide in ecological terms: recent data show that global economic growth is exhausting material resources and expelling pollution – including greenhouses gases – far more rapidly than new technologies can compensate for.[10] Yet even at the level of the individual, the link between economic growth and well-being is not straightforward. A study of over 1.7 million people worldwide showed that beyond a certain *income level* – e.g. USD 100,000 yearly household equivalized income in Western Europe – having more money does not make us happier.[11]

Harms of overwork. Similarly, beyond a certain *employment level*, the genuine benefits of work as an activity in itself – like cultivating a sense of efficacy and identity[12] – can be outweighed by stress, lack of time for relationships and other meaningful activities, as well as related morbidities. The total productivity lost in Switzerland due to stress-related illness, such as depressions and burnouts, was CHF 6.5 billion in 2018.[13] And according to research surveys, about 30% of workers in European countries (including Switzerland) wish to work less – not least to reduce their stress levels.[14]

Dogma of wage labour. Paid work is a cornerstone of contemporary market societies and, at the same time, an Achilles heel. In rich countries in particular, we have set up externally supplied consumption-based systems in which paid work – as most people's sole or main source of income – overwhelmingly determines our livelihoods and social security,[15] as well as our social acceptance and fulfilment of other key psychological needs.[16] In this paradigm, our dependence on creation and maintenance of *paying jobs* is routinely used to justify unceasing, environmentally destructive economic growth.

Given these realities, it becomes obvious that we cannot achieve sustainability in rich countries without transforming our relationship with work.

The triple dividend of a shorter workweek

> *"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear"* – Antonio Gramsci

Crises often provide an opportunity to question "common sense" beliefs[17] that are hindering progress – or even making us sick. Long before the pandemic, many forward-thinking observers highlighted the need for systemic changes in the way we produce and consume.[18] Becoming a greener, more just, and happier society will thus require a number of strategies. A shorter workweek is one such strategy, with potentially transformative implications. Research points to a possible *triple dividend* – social, economic, and ecological – from spending less time working to earn income.

Social dividend: working less for a healthier and happier life. From 2015 to 2017, nurses in Göteborg, Sweden, were enlisted to test a 30-hour workweek. The results were largely positive, with nurses logging fewer sick hours and reporting better physical and mental well-being. Similarly, after standard weekly work hours were reduced from 44 to 40 hours in Portugal and from 39 to 35 hours in France between 1996 and 2002, increases in job satisfaction and leisure enjoyment were observed among

beneficiaries.[19] When workers spend their new discretionary time in ways that induce positive emotions and well-being without harming the environment – such as sports, gardening, socializing, and community engagement – overall well-being and health improvements can be especially pronounced following a working time reduction.[20]

Economic dividend: widely shared, stable, green employment. Ever-increasing labour productivity means that fewer people are needed to produce the same amount of output (goods, services) from one year to another. In our current profit- and growth-focused system, this dynamic typically causes job losses unless we expand our overall economies further in order to "take up the slack". However, if we would choose instead to prioritize *resource productivity* (e.g. clean-energy infrastructure) – rather than labour productivity – and strive to expand jobs in human-centred, resource-light sectors (e.g. "care" work, teaching, and the arts), we could share societally beneficial paid work more widely and fairly while reducing standard weekly work hours overall. Notably, this would likely improve *economically beneficial* gender equality, too, as women currently shoulder most of the burdens of unpaid labour (e.g. childcare) and involuntary underemployment.[21]

Ecological dividend: working less to protect the planet. There is a link between *longer working hours and higher incomes*, on the one side, and *larger, more damaging ecological footprints*, on the other – both when comparing countries[22] and when comparing individuals within countries. This is starkly illustrated by the jet-setting superrich, many of whom have ecological footprints hundreds or thousands of times bigger than the average person.[23] Indeed, *individuals who earn less tend to lead more environmentally sustainable lives* – even if they do not consider themselves particularly eco-conscious.[24] They fly less,[25] drive less by car, live in smaller apartments,[26] and consume less in general.[27] And their newly acquired time from working less can be used to transform consumption patterns – for example by repairing items (e.g. cellphones) instead of buying new ones, sharing certain consumer goods (e.g. household tools) instead of possessing them alone, or cooking meals at home instead of eating fast food.[28]

Photo: TJ Blackwell

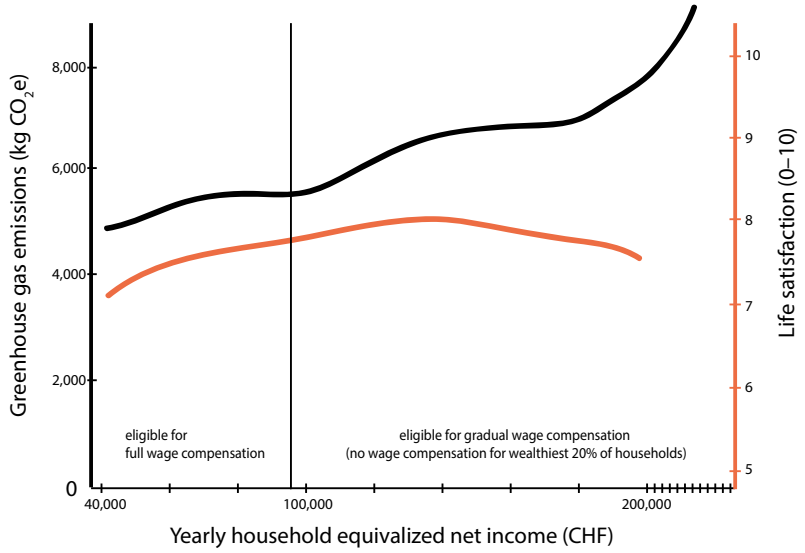

Figure 1. Swiss household data show that higher earners emit more greenhouse gases (black line) – especially the wealthiest – but that, beyond a certain threshold, having more money does not make people significantly happier (orange line). Based on these empirical findings, we recommend introducing a gradual income compensation scheme for reduced working hours, whereby people with earnings below the median wage could work less without suffering a pay cut (i.e. full wage compensation), whereas people with earnings above the median would receive less pay when working fewer hours (Bader, Hanbury, Neubert, Moser 2020).[29] Graph: Christoph Bader

A shorter workweek for Switzerland

We may not yet be ready to fulfil Keynes's vision of a 15-hour workweek, but the time appears ripe for another significant step in that direction. To date, shortened workweeks – e.g. four-day weeks – have been successfully tested in wealthy countries like Sweden, Germany, and New Zealand. Laws have recently been passed in support of reduced working hours in France, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Germany's largest union and Europe's biggest industrial union, IG Metall, negotiated a 28-hour workweek option in 2018. Given these experiences and the evidence that – beyond a certain level – having more money *does not* make us happier but *does* make our lifestyles more environmentally harmful, we recommend eventually shortening Switzerland's standard workweek by up to a day, for example. Importantly, this should be combined with a formula for income compensation (see Figure 1) which ensures all workers a decent, satisfying living despite working less. Stepwise policy measures could help to realize this goal (see "Policy implications", next page).

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Policy implications

Prepare the ground for shorter workweeks
Independent initiatives by pioneering individuals, groups, workers, and employers can demonstrate what is possible and motivate others to test shorter workweeks.[30] Meanwhile, we also need to initiate a wider societal discussion about what we regard – post-pandemic – as "normal" or desirable in terms of hours of paid work versus other essential or life-enriching activities. This should include critical reflection on work-related gender stereotypes. New progressive government measures should create more favourable conditions for working less – especially by eliminating penalties for part-time work (e.g. reduced retirement benefits, lower chances of career advancement). Finally, we need more research on how to encourage and support working time reductions that balance improvements in well-being and environmentally friendly behaviour.

Foster and expand rights that enable people to work less
Shifting to a shorter standard workweek will likely require incremental changes.[31] For this purpose, we have to strengthen and extend related rights or "entitlements":

- *Implement part-time-oriented structures* such as flat hierarchies, rights to work part-time and/or job-share – even in senior positions – and flexible work models in favour of employees. Individual tax rates could also be adjusted to end disincentives for part-time work.[32]
- *Adopt a variable "life-course approach" with individual time rights* that people can use to flexibly adjust their working hours per week and days per year – as well as career breaks and age of retirement – according to life needs and desires.[33] Within this approach, paid parental and care leave should be expanded – for example in line with Sweden's 16-month parental leave act or the Netherlands' policy guaranteeing employees at least 70% of their usual salary when they take breaks to care for sick family members.
- *Introduce an option to choose working less instead of receiving higher pay* such as is now being offered in various industrial sectors in Germany and Austria.[34]
- *Expand possibilities to take periods of time off* for socially and ecologically relevant endeavours, such as in Switzerland, where people under thirty can take a one-week (unpaid) break to engage in youth work.

Set sights on a shorter workweek for all – with job and liveable income guarantees
The public sector could function as an innovator and early adopter of shorter workweeks. A mission-driven, explorative approach could help us identify the conditions (e.g. income level) under which the benefits of working less outweigh possible downsides (e.g. rebound effects). Relevant approaches should be embedded in a framework of *gradual income compensation for reduced working hours*, ensuring a decent, satisfying living for all that also respects environmental limits. Importantly, initial analyses suggest that policies of reduced working hours could ultimately fund themselves based on reduced health and social costs linked to overwork.[35]

Suggested further reading

Bader C, Hanbury H, Neubert S, Moser S. 2020. *Weniger ist mehr: Der dreifache Gewinn einer Reduktion der Erwerbsarbeitszeit* [Less is More: The Triple Dividend of a Working Time Reduction]. CDE Working Paper 6. https://www.cde.unibe.ch/unibe/portal/fak_naturwis/g_dept_kzen/b_cde/content/e65013/e681581/e968300/e968311/e969224/CDE_Working_Paper_6_eng.pdf

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