

Policies and Practices on Sustainable work.

Working paper.

Summary

A sustainable working life is of great importance for health, economic performance and social sustainability which has been stressed by the Swedish Parliament and social partners. Sweden has a strong history of research on occupational safety and health, work organization, learning and flexibility, labour market qualifications and labour market structure as well as labour rights, all of which are important for sustainable working life. However, crucial knowledge gaps remain, and the interaction with rapid global and societal changes is increasingly important.

This report provides an overview of key policies, practices and knowledge gaps listed by social partners and authorities. Sustainable work is an essential part of a productive and healthy society. The social partners and authorities emphasize e.g. the need for research on transition to and from working life, how to combine creativity and innovation and sustainable working life. The need for better tools to assess working conditions, reinforcement of preventive work in occupational health services, and awareness of the globalization context is also emphasized. The Swedish parliament recently (March 2014) made five announcements to the government of high relevance for working life research.

The Social Partners

Sweden and other Nordic countries have a leading role in supporting innovations and societal changes in industry, the service sector and welfare provision. The Swedish case highlights the dynamic relations between a healthy and innovative workplace and economic development and prosperity. Competitive skills from individual, corporate, to societal level are crucial factors for capacity building. High work performance and the number of active working years are significant factors for economic performance and social sustainability.

An increased public attention in the 1970s on occupational safety and health issues resulted in agreements between the social partners in Sweden on collaboration to improve the working conditions. This included a support for work related research. Initially the focus was on risk factors in the chemical and physical environment, later extended to ergonomics and the psycho-social environment, and to a more proactive approach. Sweden has taken a leading role in research on occupational safety and health, work organization, learning and flexibility, labour market qualifications and labour market structure as well as labour rights.

The policies and financing of working life research have changed over the years. From a change in public research financing 2001 and the closure of the working life institute in 2007, the governmental support for working life research has strongly declined. This concerned the social partners, who in 2007 suggested that work environment research should be a strategic research area in the research bill. In a high level letter to the Minister in charge, the partners offered to ascertain the relevance of the research, secure access to the workplaces for implementation research, and to support

dissemination of the results¹. They emphasized the importance of work environment research for a sustainable working life, including implementation of research to achieve satisfactory work environments with the least possible risks for personal safety and health, and possibilities for personal and professional development. This joint policy has been reconfirmed in later statements.

Below follows a short overview of policies with regard to sustainable work and important knowledge gaps indicated so far in the project from the social partners and relevant authorities. However, this is an ongoing dialogue, with a national meeting planned for the autumn 2014.

Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (Svenskt Näringsliv)

A sustainable working life is seen as closely linked to the concept of sustainable companies and sustainable business by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (Svenskt Näringsliv), e.g. Swedish companies experience a shortage of skilled people. In the competition for the right skills, an attractive work environment is an advantage. This is important not only for the individual workplace, but for whole segments of industry which currently face difficulties.

More knowledge is also needed on how to handle new technologies and new ways of work organization (like LEAN production). Working-life needs to be more sustainable for young workers, and ageing workers. Moreover, organizational change, demands on rapid down-sizing or growth, are not exceptions but a permanent part of business. More knowledge is needed to align this with sustainable work policies, e.g. overcome old attitudes and norms, create possibilities to adjust working hours in different types of industry, and find new careers when this is the best solution.

The increase in mental health problems all over Europe is also viewed as a concern by the confederation.

Swedish engineering companies (Teknikföretagen)

The organization is – together with the metal workers' union – involved in a project to strengthen Swedish competitiveness by combining new work organization (like LEAN) with Swedish norms and conditions, including work environment aspects. Employee well-being and job-satisfaction at safe, sound and stimulating workplaces is a strategic issue for the member companies.

The tradition of a high profile in work environment issues combined with a focus on creativity and innovation in Teknikföretagen is in the core area of the Platform. This has prompted further discussions between the Platform and Teknikföretagen on how to select member companies for further collaboration about identifying important knowledge gaps as well as additional advocacy approaches.

Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL)

The public sector in Sweden is the main supplier of key welfare services to the citizens and by the citizens, and also the main employer for women. The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL) points out that this has so far not been acknowledged in the EU research framework programmes, including Horizon 2020, which usually only considers private business as a key factor for European competitiveness. A well-functioning welfare sector is crucial for social development and

¹ Skrivelse till statsrådet Lars Leijonborg 2007-10-05: "Partsgemensamma synpunkter och förslag avseende arbetsmiljöforskning" för Svenskt näringsliv (Jan-Peter Duker), LO (Ulla Lindqvist) och PTK (Bengt Olsson).

sustainable economic growth of the society. A major challenge is how the public sector shall handle the demographic change –with an increasing demand for services supplied by an ageing workforce.

The public sector is ultimately governed by democratic political decisions. The problems and possibilities with dual demands of the public sector i.e. responsibility for welfare services and being a major employer, have been insufficiently recognized. In a recent policy document, the advantage of an integrated approach to patients' safety and occupational safety was pointed out as an important topic.

Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO)

The Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) argues that "Sweden needs a new, modern and sustainable labour market policy", and emphasizes that sustainable work needs to be put into the broader context of social cohesion and the welfare state. The life-course perspective is highly relevant, with a good start in life, and a good start in working life. Research is needed to understand and improve: transitions from the school to the workplace, employability, transitions from temporary to permanent jobs; organization of Life-long learning for keeping employability, the chance to choose a suitable job, and preserve work ability.

Better tools for risk assessment are warranted, including assessment of the work organization and psychosocial risks. Also, the preventive work of the occupational health services needs to be reinforced.

Women in Sweden are bread-winners for the family, equal to the man. This makes women's work a priority in Sweden and in the Nordic countries. There is an important interaction between sustainable working life and the welfare systems, especially for women, which needs to be further elucidated.

A sustainable working life is paramount for social cohesion, and social trust, which in turn is linked to efficiency and economic growth. Globalization is putting a hard pressure on sustainable working life, including trends towards deregulation. Researchers need to be aware of this context, and take it into account.

The Swedish Confederation for Professional Employees (TCO)

TCO gives priority to sustainability in modern working life. Terms and conditions of employment, and the way that work is organized and adapted to new demands are important areas of research. These demands do not only come from work itself, but also from the employees having quite different expectations from only a few decades ago. These expectations include a work-family balance, but also the possibility to exert influence - both with regard to working hours and job content. Offering the tools for such influence is one of the major challenges of the trade union.

Relevant authorities

Swedish Work Environment Authority (Arbetsmiljöverket)

The Swedish Work Environment Authority emphasizes the need to improve implementation of existing knowledge, translation into practice, and to have a whole society approach. A good contact

with the research society is important for the Authority, but the Authority could also assist with input on key knowledge gaps, and with good net-works.

Major challenges in Europe involve a demographic shift, migration and economic crises. This leads to an increasingly heterogeneous labour market, staffing enterprises, and extensive subcontracting, which may all negatively affect the work environment. A good work environment in Europe can only be ascertained through education and dissemination of knowledge.

The current economic crises makes high unemployment a political priority, and tends to shift the focus away from promotion of long-term productivity through sustainable work. Less regulation, including the occupational safety and health area, is high on the political agenda in many European countries. It is necessary to show the links between a good work environment, and benefits to the individual, the company, and to society. Also, it is important to show how regulatory policies, and enforcement practices, most effectively contribute to a sustainable working life. So far there has been very little research on this.

Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Försäkringskassan)

The interaction between Sustainable work and the welfare systems is a major issue for the Agency, with strong implications for the trust in tomorrow's welfare systems. Thus, this interaction should be considered in a forward looking perspective, including the often complex life situation for vulnerable citizens, and involvement of different sectors in society.

Swedish Parliament

The Swedish Parliament recently (March 2014) made five announcements to the government of importance for the policy of working life research:

- The government should initiate a dialogue with the social partners on zero tolerance for fatal occupational accidents
- The government should increase funding for research, training and inspection in order to reduce deaths from occupational causes
- The government should take initiatives aiming at a reporting with full coverage of all occupational accidents and near accidents, including immigrant and migrant workers
- The government should report back to parliament on actions to reduce mobbing and harassment at the workplace
- The government should initiate a commission to coordinate and strengthen working life research. It is the opinion of parliament that the current research policy does not ensure sufficient research on working life