

Working less, achieving more!

A 21-hour working week for the 21 century

The eight-hour day and the five-day week of paid work, with its longer paid holidays, sick leave, and maternity leave, remains firmly at the centre of people's lives, providing access to benefits and pensions as well as wages and salaries, and shaping how we use the rest of our time.

The 'working week' usually refers to the time spent in paid labour, but not to all the other work we do that isn't paid. We plan our own lives and our children's lives around what paid employment demands from us and what we hope or assume it will deliver for us. Our daily lives, our ideas about who we are, how we are valued, what we value, our intimate relationships, what we need and what we do are shaped and textured by paid employment. Other work, though even more essential for human survival and well-being, is rarely treated with the same importance. People are encouraged to move from non paid work into paid employment.

At present 21 hours is very close to the average time that men and women of working age actually spend in paid employment each week. This is just a few minutes more than the average time per week they spend in unpaid work at home. So we are suggesting a change to what is regarded as the 'norm' for paid employment, effected through a closer match between these averages. Of course, such averages mask the way paid and unpaid hours of work are unevenly distributed, especially between women and men but also between rich and poor. Our proposal seeks to address these inequalities by redistributing working hours. Simply changing expectations about how we use time will not, on its own, achieve greater equality, but in our view it can make an important contribution. In addition, less time spent earning leaves more time to do all the other things we need to do to safeguard the environment and to sustain well-being for ourselves and those around us.

The British Time Use Surveys offer a detailed portrait of how people in Britain allocate their time over the 24 hours in a day, averaged out over a seven-day week. They include men and women of 'working age', which means 16–64 for males and 16–59 for females. The survey covers everyone within the 'working age' band – employed, unemployed and those described as 'economically inactive', which means they are not employed or looking for a job. On average, they spend 19.6 hours a week in paid work – 24.5 hours for men and 15.4 hours for women.

Officially, full-time workers are those who put in no less than 35 hours a week, with a maximum, under the EU Working Time Directive, of 48 hours. Part-timers are defined as anyone working fewer than 35 hours a week. According to the Time Use Survey, 'full-timers' work an average of 37.2 hours a week and 'part-timers' 19.1 hours. These averages do not reveal how some are severely overworked, often because they can't earn enough unless they put in very long hours, and others are chronically under-employed often because they have no opportunity.

A shorter working week would help distribute paid work more evenly across the population. A major reduction in working hours across the board would open up opportunities for changing the way people control their lives. A much shorter working week could help distribute unpaid work more evenly between women and men. Spending much less time in paid work could, of course, leave parents with much more time to spend with their children. In particular, it could help fathers to be more engaged with their children, which would benefit children and mothers as well as the fathers themselves. However, the effect of a significant shift of time-use towards family settings would not simply create more time for 'parenting' – the troubled craft that is subject to so much political soul-searching – it could also change the way we all think about the worlds of adults and children, and relationships between them, says the new economics foundation (NEF) report '21 hours- Why a shorter working week can help us all to flourish in the 21st century'.

If everyone spent fewer hours in paid employment, the transition in later years from 'work' to 'retirement' would be very different. People could go on earning for much longer, if they were only required to work for the equivalent of 21 hours a week. Gradually reducing hours from that base would be easier, too, because an even shorter working week would still be close to the norm, with everyone's time more evenly balanced between paid work and other activities.

Successful examples of such schemes have already been demonstrated. In Utah, USA a four-day week was introduced in 2008/2009 period. This four-day week helped reduce petrol consumption by 744,000 gallons, carbon emissions by 4,546 metric tons and other greenhouse gas emissions by 8,000 tons. Miles travelled in state-owned vehicles dropped by 3 million, saving Utah \$1.4 million over the first year. Eighty-two per cent of employees said they wanted the four-day week to continue when the year was up.

The absence of paid employment – unemployment – is currently regarded as a plague to society as a whole and a shame on those who succumb to it. Yet, in terms of the transition we must make for a sustainable future, these interpretations do not make a lot of sense.

When it comes to unpaid work – housework and caring for children and/or adults – women and men spend, on average 20.4 hours a week. If we add time spent on neighbourhood-based activities (volunteering, spending time with friends and families, and attending meetings) this goes up to 30.9 hours a week. These are all essential functions that underpin our well-being, without which human society could not function. Women spend more time doing unpaid work than men do, whether or not they are in full-time employment.

The amount of primary energy needed to produce each unit of the world's economic output has fallen more or less continuously over most of the last half-century. This sounds promising, but it is counteracted by population growth and economic growth, so overall energy consumption continues to grow. To stabilise climate change, using relatively optimistic assumptions, will require a global reduction of some 5 per cent every year from now until 2050. By 2050 the average carbon content of economic output would need to be less than 40 kg per thousand dollars, a twenty-fold improvement on the current global average.

To achieve social justice globally alongside continuing growth in high-income countries, with the entire population enjoying an income comparable with European Union citizens today, the world economy would need to grow six times between now and 2050, implying a technical shift of still higher orders of magnitude to avoid climatic disaster. There is thus 'no credible, socially-just, ecologically-sustainable scenario of continually growing incomes for a world of nine billion people'.

Moving towards much shorter hours of paid work offers a new route out of the multiple crises we face today. Many of us are consuming well beyond our economic means and well beyond the limits of the natural environment, yet in ways that fail to improve our well-being – and meanwhile many others suffer poverty and hunger. Continuing economic growth on one hand will make it impossible to achieve urgent carbon reduction targets. Widening inequalities, a failing global economy, critically depleted natural resources, and accelerating climate change pose grave threats to the future of human civilisation.

This is a battle between the two slogans 'Work less – live more' and 'Work more to earn more'. A 'normal' working week of 21 hours could help to address a range of urgent, interlinked problems: overwork, unemployment, over-consumption, high carbon emissions, low well-being, entrenched inequalities, and the lack of time to live sustainably, to care for each other, and simply to enjoy life.

Table: Time spent on main activities with rates of participation by gender, 2005

Main activity	Male		Female		All	
	Hours/Day	%	Hours/Day	%	Hours/Day	%
Doing housework (cooking, washing, shopping etc.)	1.70	7%	3.00	13%	2.30	10%
Providing care (child, adult)	0.43	2%	0.77	3%	0.61	3%
Neighbour-based activities (friends, religious)	1.40	6%	1.60	7%	1.50	6%
Paid work (work and travel)	5.00	21%	3.60	15%	4.30	18%
Study	0.24	1%	0.24	1%	0.24	1%
Personal needs (sleep, rest, eating, drinking)	10.90	45%	11.20	47%	11.10	46%
Leisure time (TV, reading, sport, hobbies)	4.33	18%	3.59	15%	3.95	16%
Total Day	24.00	100%	24.00	100%	24.00	100%

Source: British Time Use Surveys - how people in Britain allocate their time over the 24 hours in a day averaged out over a seven-day week. 16–64 for males and 16–59 for females