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UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI
MODENA E REGGIO EMILIA

CALL FOR PAPERS AND PANELS

WORK BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: TOWARDS A HUMAN-CENTERED RECOVERY

CONFERENCE IN COMMEMORATION OF PROF MARCO BIAGI

Modena (Italy), 17-19 March 2022

Marco Biagi Foundation of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

Introduction

More than one year after the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is possible to draw up an analysis on the extensive impact that it has produced on the economic and social dimension, and, at the same time, to envisage a horizon of recovery, in the light of the solutions and the instruments identified by the various countries of the world to tackle the crisis.

In addition to emphasizing critical issues and accelerating dynamics that were already widespread in the society, in the economy and in the labour market, the pandemic is providing an opportunity to relaunch a critical analysis on the future of work. The massive investment plans released in several regional and national jurisdictions to promote the recovery and mitigate the social effects of the post-pandemic restructuring, in fact, will have a crucial influence on the processes of transformation under way in employment relations and in the labour market, thus calling for a better understanding and an in-depth critical analysis of its implementation.

Recovery plans are part of national and international policies promoted to guide the transformation of employment relations, favoring a horizontal approach that pursues the economic, social and environmental sustainability of work. Accordingly, they interact with the global strategies that had been launched prior to the pandemic outburst (e.g., the Agenda 2030 of the UN and the “Just Transitions” policy advocated by the European Commission). Such approaches rely on technological progress as a driving force to increase productivity and reduce unemployment and claim to fight inequalities, promote the quality of employment and the acquisition of new skills also by supporting social dialogue and collective bargaining. This is all in the context of the digital transition that has already prompted many



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European countries to implement innovative modernization and research programs that pay particular attention to social, economic and ecological sustainability.

It is not by chance that at European level, in addition to the regulation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems, some of the post-pandemic recovery plans envisaged a Digital Society aimed to modernize businesses and Public Administration by means of the implementation of digital technologies.

In order to move the discussion forward, to encourage the exchange of views, and to promote an interdisciplinary debate on the key issues related to the impact of the post-pandemic recovery strategies on the world of work, the conference invites contributions from the international scholarly community on one or more of the following main topics/tracks:

- **Track 1 “Labour Law and Social Policies: responses to the crisis”** will collect contributions related to the management of the emergency, during the pandemic;
- **Track 2 “How to tackle new inequalities?”** will deal with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the labour market, as well as with recovery strategies enacted to tackle increasing inequalities;
- **Track 3 “Work-related challenges and sustainable development in the post pandemic scenario”** will cover topics related to changes within the labour market and in the employment relationship, as well as in the production processes;
- **Track 4 “European economy in the post pandemic: a real restart?”** will focus on strategies and policies pursued at the European level.

Track 1: Labour and social security: responses to the crisis

Labour markets have been most severely affected by the effects of global pandemic. In face of the unprecedented difficulties caused by the virus propagation, national governments have provided different responses and adopted different approaches to defend and relaunch the national labour markets. Accordingly, a number of extraordinary and temporary measures of organizational, economic and legal nature were introduced. They encouraged, on the one hand, the use of flexible instruments like remote working; on the other hand, Governments launched exceptional income and revenue support measures for workers and companies. In addition, to avoid putting millions of jobs at risk, some countries resorted to a temporary freezing of layoffs.

The implementation of recovery plans entailed in some cases a collective effort that led to the conclusion of social pacts, which in turn encouraged Tripartite Social Dialogue. The latter has played a pivotal role to guide strategic initiatives in response of social issues triggered by the pandemic in the context of global processes like the digital and the environmental transitions.

One of the most significant changes concerns digital transition in the workplace, affecting workers’ needs and protection in terms of health and safety (i.e. increase of work-related stress levels and the need to disconnect, as well as issues related to safety at work, the adoption of protective and preventive measures and the hypothetical compulsory vaccination), privacy (i.e. transparency of information collection and

usage) and supervision (i.e. more accentuated and pervasive control, not always fully perceived by workers).

Just transition for all towards a climate-neutral economy that leaves no one behind is promoted by the greening of economies, which also presents opportunities to achieve social objectives.

In this vein, green jobs may contribute to decent work and social inclusion, creating at the same time an environmentally sustainable economy.

In a perspective of sustainable recovery, to promote the improvement of labour policies most of the EU countries decided to allocate a significant share of recovery funds to digital transformation of Public Administrations, by integrating three elements: human capital, technology and organization.

These elements feed into the ongoing global reflection on the need to foster the current digital transition process and to reform active policies by leveraging the pillar of training, aimed at both the employed and the unemployed, to increase youth employment and strengthen skills and protections in line with technical and institutional changes as well as to make a quick fix for risks related to job insecurity and income discontinuity.

Against such background, papers under this track may address the following (but not exhaustive) questions and issues:

- How the pandemic and the emergency measures adopted by Governments affected fundamental labour rights (privacy, health and safety, strike, etc.)?
- What has been the role and the effectiveness of social partners facing the immediate challenges of the pandemic?
- Has the pandemic influenced the established industrial relations patterns and practices, with regard to the relationship between government and social partners, the systemic role of social dialogue, the strategies and contents of collective bargaining and Labour Law provisions in general?
- Employment and income-protection schemes during and after the pandemic;
- What are the regulatory measures adopted to ensure workers health and safety in the face of new environmental risks? (e.g., personal protective equipment; professional instruments introduced in course of the pandemic; organizational arrangements);
- The evolution of the Covid vaccination: from protection tool to obligation? What consequences may it imply for those who refuse to vaccinate (does it constitute a legitimate reason for dismissal or temporary suspension at work?);
- The non-standard forms of work in the pandemic context and beyond: what are the main trends, opportunities, challenges and risks?
- Remote work as an emergency measure of public health: effects on stress and well-being;
- How have the instruments aimed to address work–life balance in digital and flexible working arrangements reacted to the pandemic stress-test?

- The role of Public Administration in the war on the pandemic: Is there a problem of efficiency?
- Regulatory aspects of digital and ecological transition with specific reference to the world of work;
- Impact of the ecological transition on training, placement and workplace safety;
- Disability and Covid-19: integration policies during and after the pandemic;
- Permanent effects of extraordinary temporary measures adopted in the field of employment relationships.

Track 2: How to tackle new inequalities?

The Covid-19 emergency can be considered an epochal crisis. According to the World Bank, during 2020, the total number of people living in poverty has increased by 200 millions and the world is experiencing the worst global recession since World War II. In many countries, the crisis has hit a labour market already characterized by strong inequalities, stressing the differences among social groups.

Oxfam has underlined that the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on women, since they are employed mainly in professional sectors particularly affected by the emergency, thus, leading to or increasing gender segregation. Indeed, almost everywhere women have suffered a high rate of job loss, compared to men, and there has been a decline in women's participation into the labour market.

Furthermore, the number of inactive workers has increased, even among young adults; hence, the number of NEETs has increased, too.

Governments and international institutions have struggled to address discrimination issues adopting a sectoral and categorical approach, which has led to fragmented and differentiated measures in terms of amounts, timing and access conditions, overloading the employment support system.

Moreover, a switch from social safety nets to active labour market policies is considered to be necessary in order to tackle the increasing risk of job losses. Active labour market policies, indeed, are a crucial factor for the recovery of employment and for the overall effectiveness of the policies undertaken. Also, a broader access to PES is critical to maintain the employability and job-readiness of groups experiencing greater vulnerability and job instability (ILO, 2020). At the European level, the European Social Fund (ESF+) will play a role in this scenario, since it can be considered the cornerstone of EU socio-economic recovery from the pandemic related to labour participation issues, challenged educational systems and increased inequalities. Nevertheless, as ILO (2020) suggests, active labour market support is likely to be more effective when delivered as an integrated package.

Inequalities have also increased all around the world, due to the difficulties of some countries and territories to secure enough supply of vaccine doses, which has created a gap that could extend the crisis.

Against such background, this track invites contributions dealing with the increasing and exacerbated inequalities created by the pandemic in the global economy and within the labour market, as well as with strategies to tackle them. Papers may address in particular questions and issues such as (but not limited to):

- The limits of the “means testing” for the provision of support measures during lockdowns;
- Absolute or relative poverty: the fall in income of the low-skilled workers;
- Regional and geographical differences in the pandemic’s impact on the labour market;
- The informal market and the need to extend social security for workers in the informal economy;
- What is the impact of the pandemic on employment and wages? The problem of minimum wages in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Discrimination and inequalities caused by the switch to remote working;
- Discouraged workers: the crisis in human capital formation;
- Comparison of support measures in the government reaction to increasing inequalities;
- Gini index and the increase of inequalities among social groups;
- Strategies to foster gender diversity in the workplace;
- Strategies to encourage NEETs;
- The impact of the pandemic on caregivers and invisible health care workers;
- Technology and remote teaching: inequalities in the 5g era;
- What could be the areas of new vulnerability and discrimination in labour relations?
- Active employment policies for the job placement of young and vulnerable people in the post-pandemic period;
- Working conditions, algorithms and pay aspects of platform work;
- Can online platform work be a means of breaking down barriers to entering the labour market for vulnerable groups, women and young people?
- Socio-economic costs of digital technologies;
- Role of social partners and civil society in the recovery process. Contribution to policy making as well as direct rulemaking through industrial relations practices;
- Public employment services and active labour market policies;
- New policies to reduce social and economic discrimination and gender segregation.

Track 3: Work-related challenges and sustainable development in the post pandemic scenario

Over the years sustainability challenges and sustainable development have gained traction in institutional meetings and public opinion, affecting political agendas, policies, and corporate actions.

The 2005 World Summit devised sustainable development as a multi-dimensional idea based on the interconnection of three pillars - economic development, social development and environmental

protection (United Nations, 2005). Sustainability can be therefore considered the long-term goal that the three dimensions can achieve through their balance.

Even though sustainability efforts implemented so far have mainly focused on the environment, work-related challenges in a post-pandemic scenario require initiatives that simultaneously address the three dimensions of sustainability.

A roadmap with specific targets to be achieved is represented by the United Nations “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, which include 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure future prosperity and the protection of our planet. Amongst the others, in a labour law perspective it is of particular relevance SDG n. 8, which seeks to promote a sustainable economic growth, with full employment and *decent work* for all. The goal includes also different targets addressing major challenges related to work, such as equal pay, full inclusion for people with disabilities, gender or age discrimination, youth employment, child labour, human slavery and safety at work. Hence, work-related challenges can be seen as a key aspect of the social pillar, strongly affected by employment and human development, along with the economic and environmental dimensions.

The improvement of working conditions and employees’ welfare are main targets of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, which can impact the social sphere of sustainability. In fact, full and non-discriminated employment, safe and decent working conditions, may contribute to individual wellbeing, status and a more inclusive society.

Sustainability is also a key perspective for interpreting and assessing the societal and economic consequences of the technological innovation on workplaces and work processes and driving the subsequent regulatory choices.

Finally, a sustainable development approach is embodied also in the circular economy paradigm, which - as stated in the SDG n. 12 (UN, 2015) – may play a pivotal role in contributing to the diffusion of more sustainable production and consumption patterns.

Against such background, papers may address in particular the following (but not exhaustive) questions and issues:

- How may recovery policies and targets of SDG (like SDG 8) converge?
- Digitalization and social sustainability: driver or hindrance?
- Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence as enabling factors for SDGs and Circular Economy;
- The impact of AI technologies on vulnerable groups (i.e., disabled people): unemployment or greater inclusion?
- The legal and ethical implications of artificial intelligence on the employment relationship;
- Does the increased worker autonomy, generated by emerging working practices and AI, lead to higher worker engagement and job satisfaction?
- Enhanced workplace/remote surveillance and fundamental rights;

- How can digital transition combine workers' needs and sustainable development in a post-pandemic scenario?
- Risks and benefits associated with digital automation of work;
- Hard-to-automate jobs versus the risk of technological unemployment;
- Technological change, digital skills and vocational training;
- Costs and benefits of the environmental transition: the work v. health perspective;
- Sustainable development and employment in value chains;
- Green jobs for a greener future.

Track 4. European economy in the post pandemic: a real restart?

Since 2017 the European economy has stopped growing. It was not the case for the US and China, also due to the innovation process the two countries have started in the last 5 years: 85% of investments in AI are in fact recorded in American and Chinese companies (McKinsey Global Institute). Then, whereas China and the US were growing before the pandemic; Europe did not. Precisely to respond to this problem, since that moment EU has been working on a program – named *Green New Deal* – which finds shape in the work of the European council leading to the *Next Generation EU* (or *Recovery Plan*) (March-May 2020). The ultimate goal of this last is in fact to invest in industrial development to recover Europe's competitiveness gap and promote innovation of European companies and value chains in the direction of production sustainability.

The challenge of such a transformation involves the whole economic system as well as the training and work ones. Only the creation of innovation, competitiveness and new skills will produce a real restart, in particular in the direction of the ecological and energy transition. Together with the innovation planned by *Next Generation EU*, the growth of social rights (work, wages, equal opportunities, education, etc.) must be the final result, as provided by European Pillar of Social Rights. Against such background, papers may address in particular the following (but not exhaustive) questions and issues:

- *Next generation EU*: restart or decline (possible default and exit of Member States)?
- The relationship between *Next Gen EU*, the “Just Transitions” approach and the European Digital Strategy: assessment of targets and instruments in the perspective of employment and labour market issues;
- The new skills for the ecological and energy transition;
- The required upgrade of the education-work connection;
- Which labor market policies at European level?
- Which integration between Next Gen EU and the European Pillar of Social Rights?

SUBMISSIONS

1) Papers. Scholars who intend to contribute to one of the conference tracks should submit an expression of interest by **20 September 2021** with:

- the title of the proposed paper;
- an outline of about 500 words (not including the bibliography), specifying the topic and the nature of the paper (theoretical analysis, discussion paper, presentation of empirical data);
- the disciplinary (or inter-disciplinary) domain of the paper (e.g., Labour Law, Organisation Theory, Labour Economics);
- the author's affiliation;
- an indication of the conference track for which the paper is intended, bearing in mind that the Scientific Committee reserves the prerogative to assign papers to the track and session it deems to be most appropriate.

2) Panels/Round Tables/Book presentations. The organizers welcome the submission of proposals for full panel sessions (including the format of round tables or book presentation panels) addressing topics described in this call. Panels should consist of three papers and one discussant. The panel convenor may also serve as the chairperson of the panel. Proposals should be submitted by the panel convenor by **20 September 2021** and should indicate, in one single document:

- the title of the proposed panel and papers;
- the names of the speakers, discussant and chairperson;
- a brief outline of the objective and the rationale of the panel (about 500 words);
- an abstract of each paper (about 1000 words not including the bibliography).

Expressions of interest and panel proposals will be selected by the Scientific Committee by **1 October 2021**.

Only for paper proposals, selected authors will be invited to present an extended abstract (2000 words, bibliography excluded) no later than **5 November 2021** with a brief discussion of the results and conclusions of the paper.



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Extended abstracts will be selected by the Scientific Committee by **19 November 2021**.

Selected authors (including panel/round table/book presentation proposals) will be required to submit a paper of 8000 - 10000 words no later than **25 February 2022**. The papers should take the form of a research article rather than simply the description of work in progress.

In cases in which it is not possible to accommodate all the contributions in the plenary or parallel sessions, the Scientific Committee may offer authors the opportunity to present their work in the poster sessions.

The Scientific Committee reserves the right to reject papers and panel proposals that are not consistent with the conference tracks, or papers that are not consistent with the expression of interest/full abstract previously approved.

The Scientific Committee will select the contributions to be included, after revision, in the Conference Proceedings to be published in 2023 by an international publisher. By submitting their final papers, the authors agree to the publication of their paper in the proceedings in case of acceptance by the Scientific Committee, in compliance with the no-multiple-submissions rule.

The working language of the conference sessions is English, and interpreting services will not be available. Abstracts and papers should be submitted in English.

DEADLINES

- Deadline for submission of expressions of interest (papers and panels): **20 September 2021**.
- Deadline for submission of extended abstracts (papers): **5 November 2021**.
- Deadline for submission of full papers (papers and panels): **25 February 2022**.

COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS

The conference will be held in presence if permitted by the evolution of the pandemic and the public health regulations in force. Alternative arrangements for a hybrid or fully on-line conference, if necessitated by the circumstances, will be made and communicated in due course.

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CONTACTS

Expressions of interest, panel proposals, abstracts and full papers, as well as requests for information, should be addressed to the e-mail address: marcobiagiconference@unimore.it

The first draft of the conference program will be distributed by the end of **January 2022**.

Further information will be posted on the Marco Biagi Foundation website: www.fmb.unimore.it