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What decent work looks like

Instead of measuring success by salary and profit margins, we should measure it by how much it contributes to the well-being of people and the planet

What do we really mean when we say 'decent work'? Too often, we reduce its meaning to jobs with fair pay and dignified working conditions. These are crucial elements, but if work is to be truly decent, it must go further.

In our society, not all work is valued equally. Well-paid and 'prestigious' jobs often carry higher social status, while essential roles like caregiving or cleaning and maintenance are overlooked and underappreciated. These are the very roles that keep our communities functioning. In our growth-driven economic system, work that increases GDP is often considered more important than work that strengthens our society. This imbalance distorts our understanding of success at work and often leaves those who provide the most fundamental support with the least recognition. What would a world look like when trash is not being picked up? Or no one to drive the bus you take to go to your office job? Or when there is no one to care for elderly family members, children, or people who are sick?

The real value of work lies not in how much we earn or how important our job titles sound, but in how we strengthen our communities, support people's well-being and ultimately contribute to the common good. By doing so, we show that every person has dignity and that our environment is worthy of protection. This understanding should shape how we define 'decent work.' Work is not decent unless care for humanity is at its heart.

Decent workmeans caring for people

Guaranteeing labour rights, fair wages, and inclusive jobs is essential, but it is only a starting point. Work must also avoid causing harm — not only to the workers themselves but to all those affected by it. For instance, a company selling clothes in Europe cannot claim to provide decent work for its employees if its profits rely on factories abroad where workers face

unfair pay, unsafe conditions or the denial of basic rights. Work built on exploitation, or that comes at the expense of others, can never be called decent.

More than avoiding harm, the main aim of work should be to actively promote and protect human dignity. It should create value that benefits local communities and society as a whole, not just profits for a few.

In France, Secours Catholique — Caritas France and partner organisations have been implementing a project they co-founded in 2016 called Territoires Zéro Chômeurs de Longue Durée. The initiative provides meaningful, local and tailored employment for people struggling to find work, while addressing social and environmental needs. Participants benefit from fair wages, supportive working conditions and on-the-job training, while providing social and environmental services to their local communities, such as elderly care, local clean-ups and repair cafés.

But for work to be truly decent, it must go further still — it must care for the planet too.

Decent work also entails actively contributing to the regeneration of nature.

This means operating within planetary boundaries, refraining from activities that excessively deplete natural resources, pollute air and water and destroy ecosystems or which put future generations' ability to live with dignity at risk.

Jobs in polluting industries - such as the fossil fuel sector - may provide good wages and secure contracts, but if they poison rivers, deforest land and accelerate the climate crisis, they fail the test of decency.

Going a step further, decent work also entails actively contributing to the regeneration of nature, restoring and preserving ecosystems and helping communities adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change. Only in this way can work create opportunities for future generations to thrive.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Caritas Austria and local partner organisations are working with women and rural communities to introduce energy-saving stoves, agroforestry and sustainable farming. The project reduces deforestation, lowers carbon emissions and improves food security, while at the same time creating new sources of income and strengthening social inclusion. This is a concrete example of how work can become a driver of both sustainability and dignity.

The original purpose of work is to enable people and the planet to thrive.

The reality today, in Europe and around the world, often falls far short of this vision. Many of the most sought-after jobs often contribute little to the common good. They may offer high pay and comfortable conditions, but exist mainly to generate profit rather than to serve society. These jobs play into an economic system centred around GDP that values work according to its ability to generate growth rather than its ability to care, steward and protect. Others, while meaningful and reasonably paid, demand long hours and lead to excessive stress, undermining health and dignity. And then there are the jobs most vital to people and the planet - care work, education, community services and many more - but they are often underpaid and undervalued with poor working conditions. None of these jobs meet the standards of decent work.

Redefining decent work in this way may seem like raising the bar too high. But in reality, it simply reclaims the original purpose of work: to enable people and the planet to thrive.

This World Day for Decent Work, we must re-examine what 'decent' really means. Instead of measuring success by salary size, fancy titles and profit margins, we should measure it by how much it contributes to the well-being of people and the planet. Because in the end, work is only decent if it cares.



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