

EDITORIAL

This issue of TRANSFER examines the concept of 'flexicurity' and the international debate that this concept has sparked. The concept of 'flexicurity' aims to bring about a new balance between flexibility and security in the world of work. In many countries in recent years 'flexicurity' has been proposed as an alternative to the unbridled deregulation of labour markets as well as to the retrenchment of social security schemes.

Over the past few decades flexibility has constituted one of the keywords in political and academic debates on the future of work. In many European countries, labour markets, employment and work organisation have become more flexible. Flexibility and diversity on the labour market comprise different dimensions. Increasing flexibility is accompanied by increasingly differentiated patterns of employment from one country to another, and is leading to a rising proportion of the workforce being employed under non-standard employment such as part-time work, temporary work and subcontracting. At the same time, the nature and organisation of work within companies has also changed. Firms are adopting different strategies in order to adapt to changing market conditions. The flexibility adopted to support a continually shifting production of specialised goods which requires skilled, committed workers can vary significantly from the flexibility which allows a firm, when producing only a few products at the lowest possible cost, to take on and cast off low-skilled workers. Therefore we find 'enabling' strategies (when firms upgrade labour processes and cultivate long-term relations with a core workforce) as well as 'restrictive' strategies (when firms downgrade the employment relationship and de-skill work processes). As a result, some groups of employees benefit from these processes, and their prospects on the labour market improve, whereas others lose ground and have to endure unstable employment, low wages and new risks. On the other hand, workers themselves have developed new needs and preferences. Flexible jobs may enable them to adjust working life and working hours to their own preferences and to other activities, such as care responsibilities and leisure. In addition to the cross-sectional trend towards flexibility there is another, longitudinal, or time, perspective. Flexibility on the labour market and differentiation of lifestyles in a longitudinal view contribute to new 'patchwork biographies' of individuals.

These new conditions of, and transitions between, work and life differ greatly in terms of precariousness and the need for social protection. This leads to new challenges in the field of security for workers. European labour law and social security systems have so far adapted only in part to the new developments. Recent welfare reforms have been mostly focused on reducing expenditure by cutting benefits. In addition, the most prominent international trend in social security reform has been the 'activation' of welfare, substituting 'passive' cash benefits with activation measures, in line with a new ideology of reciprocity. Although several countries have enacted legislation to regulate non-standard forms of work, there are still many shortcomings in the protection of people doing such work. Shortcomings include insecure jobs, limited access to cash benefits, limited help to master transitions and low pensions due to gaps in employment careers. Furthermore, the life-cycle perspective, a perspective taking into account the whole course of an individual's life, is still neglected in most discussions of, and proposals for, social security reform.

Flexicurity aims to deal with these challenges by ensuring security for individuals within flexible labour markets and enabling diverse work biographies as well as lifestyles. Flexicurity involves many actors and many fields of action, such as social partners, labour law, social security systems and companies' strategies. On the one hand, the question is how social security systems and labour law can minimise the undesired outcomes of flexibilisation. On the other hand, the question has to be asked what types of social security and labour law regulations might actively support the flexibility desired by companies and by individuals. The pursuit of such a new 'flexicurity' balance between flexibility and security has become a key strategy in European policy-making, and is a key concept underlying the European Employment Strategy.

Although there is still no agreed definition of flexicurity within the academic or political community, there is some consensus that attention should be focused on the precariousness associated with the trends towards flexibilisation, and especially on the protection of the more vulnerable groups of employees. Examples of this are the protection of 'contingent' workers through labour law and social security systems (e.g. access to social security, minimum wage and minimum benefits), as well as the protection of workers who make frequent transitions in and out of the labour market. Such protection could be provided, for example, through opportunities to leave and to re-enter the labour market, empowerment strategies and lifelong learning.

In line with this general and more theoretical approach, it becomes clear that different European welfare regimes are not only differently prepared to meet the challenges of flexibility but also require different strategies and a different 'mix' of flexibility and security. Some countries, such as the Netherlands and Denmark, have been oriented towards the implementation of flexicurity for a while; other countries not at all.

This issue of TRANSFER aims to illustrate the complexity of the concept of flexicurity, while at the same time putting forward proposals as to how it should be understood and what flexibility implies in terms of political implementation. This is achieved through a mix of theory-based articles and four country studies. In an introductory article Ton Wilthagen and Frank Tros examine the concept of flexicurity and its implications for policy-making.

The authors, who are at the forefront of conceptual issues related to flexicurity, focus on the origins, conditions and potential of flexicurity as policy or strategy at various levels of industrial relations. They propose a definition of flexicurity that emphasises its coordination aspect. The article also outlines a research agenda.

To illustrate the political implementation of flexicurity in Europe, country studies demonstrate what are commonly seen as 'successful' flexicurity stories (the Netherlands and Denmark) and less successful implementations of flexicurity (Germany and Spain). Wim van Oorschot examines flexicurity policies and their implementation in the Netherlands, which has a high proportion of 'secure' part-time jobs but also a small but significant percentage of more marginalised 'flex' workers, and Per Kongshøj Madsen considers to what extent the high levels of employment of recent years in Denmark can be attributed to flexicurity. In Germany, combining flexibility and security has a long way to go, as Berndt Keller and Hartmut Seifert illustrate. The examination of part-time work in Spain by Fernandez Valdez Dal-Ré constitutes a perfect illustration of pure deregulation as opposed to flexicurity. These country studies illustrate the difficulty of applying a single concept of flexicurity to various institutional and cultural settings. However, to a certain extent, guidelines can be drawn up as to how to interpret flexicurity in various ways and how existing 'theoretical' labour market models could ensure the translation of a theoretical concept into practical policy-making.

Pierre Walthéry and Pascale Vielle's article discusses two complementary approaches, the transitional labour market approach of Günter Schmid and the professional status approach of Alain Supiot. These are often put forward as ways of implementing the concept of flexicurity in the context of the European welfare states. The article identifies shortcomings of these two above-mentioned approaches and suggests a normative perspective on welfare state reforms based on the theoretical framework developed by Amartya Sen. Ute Klammer deals with another important aspect of flexicurity, that is, the integration into the analysis of the life-cycle perspective. Demands for different types of flexibility and security over the life course of the individual will vary due to changing preferences and socio-demographic change. The concluding article by Matthieu de Nanteuil-Miribel and Mohamed Nachi deals with the important issue of the regulatory modes that suit the implementation of flexicurity. The starting point of their wide-ranging article is an analysis of the contribution and limits of flexicurity, in its differing guises. The article examines, more broadly, the various possible approaches open to political action in this field in the European context. Without describing national institutional arrangements in any detail, it identifies several possible 'stances' in relation to the changing features of the wage-earning relationship.

In the News and Background section Maria Jepsen highlights the gender dimension of flexicurity and Kevin O'Kelly gives examples of pacts that combine economic performance and security of employment. Sandrine Cazes and Alena Nesporova examine issues related to flexibility and security in central and eastern Europe.

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