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Decent work, inclusion and sustainability: a new era lies ahead

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Over the last year, millions of people's lives have been disrupted as a result of the pandemic. The Covid-19 outbreak, first reported in Wuhan in China, has resulted in more than 105m cases confirmed globally and more than 2.3m people have died (WHO, 2021). The pandemic has had a profound impact on lives and livelihoods around the world. There has been a tragic cost of human lives, whilst many people have also lost their jobs or seen their incomes cut. Unemployment rates have risen across major economies. In the United States, the proportion of people out of work reached a yearly total of 8.9 per cent, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2021), signalling an end to a decade of jobs expansion. There are other forecasts of additional job losses and a sharp economic contraction throughout the world (EU 2020; Kirby & Wheeler, 2021). Growing inequalities have also deeply affected individuals and communities and has had consequences for wellbeing and mental health. With the havoc caused by the pandemic and the impending impact on economies, social structures, and health systems, a global mental health crisis is on the rise (Rahman et al, 2020) Work provides a sense of identity, income generation and feeling of self-worth.

Although nearly all people around the world have been subject to some form of lockdown measures to contain the pandemic response, variations exist with respect to how each person is confined, within country specific contexts. For instance, during COVID-19 some people were allowed to go to work, whereas others were required to work exclusively from home. Furthermore, some people were propelled into home schooling combined with meeting paid work commitments. Others were forced to shield for months on end, with limited contact with the outside world, due to their health conditions. Students have been significantly affected in their day-to-day lifestyle. In the UK, results from three different surveys in November 2020 concluded that more than half of students reported that their well-being and mental health had worsened as a result of the pandemic (ONS,

2020). Also, given many people lost income as a result of the lockdown, this is a known risk-factor for poor mental health (Karsten & Moser, 2009; Lund et al. 2013).

The pandemic has brought people's differing life circumstances and opportunities to work into clear disparity. There have been winners and losers. Sectors that are functionally dependent on the internet and offer remote work options are likely to be less affected relative to those involving face-to-face interactions (Dingel and Neiman, 2020). Many people have made the abrupt shift to working from home, whilst millions have lost their jobs. There are calls for working from home to become 'the new norm'. In China, Tung (2020) has predicted that in 10 years' time, there will be a 60/40 split of onsite/remote work – described as 'hybrid' work. For those workers who can make this shift, it could level up gender equality and diversity. Equally it could compound existing inequalities. Moreover, it ignores those workers whose jobs are dependent on commuters. McKinsey Global Institute (2020) suggest that remote work – defined as “work that does not require interpersonal interaction or a physical presence at a specific worksite” - risks accentuating inequalities at a social level. For example, more than half the workforce has little or no opportunity for remote work. Some jobs require collaborating with others or using specialized machinery; other jobs, such as manufacturing widgets must be done on location; and some, such as making deliveries, are performed while out and about. Many of the low skilled jobs are low wage and more at risk from broad trends such as automation and digitisation. For career guidance specialists and counsellors, the psychological, physical and mental impact of people having to adjust to a changing world of work requires significant understanding of the many differing forms of what constitutes work or occupation in people's lives. The closer alignment of career guidance and counselling to support mental health and well-being alongside other talk therapies merits greater attention.

In different parts of the world, millions of workers have been put on government-supported job retention schemes, with some sectors such as retail, tourism and leisure industries coming to a near standstill. The numbers of new job opportunities remain very low in many countries. For example, job vacancies in Australia have returned to the same level of 2019 but they are lagging in France, Spain, the UK and several other countries. At the same time, because of the Covid-19

outbreak, other job opportunities have opened up, most obviously in essential services, creating job vacancies in key occupations (Cardenas Rubio et al., 2020). At present, there exists considerable flux in labour markets globally. Overall, almost half a billion workers worldwide are affected by some form of labour under-utilisation (ILO, 2020). For career guidance specialists and counsellors dedicated to human support services, this under-utilisation of talent and skills represents missed opportunities for the well-being of individuals, communities and economies.

When this Special Issue was first conceived in 2018¹, a key concern was the changing nature of the world of work and its impact on individuals' lives. At the time, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the potential for creating mass technological unemployment (WEF, 2018) was at the forefront of policy concerns. Also, the Paris Climate Agreement (UN, 2018) illustrated green economy transformations forecasted to reshape systems of production, distribution and consumption. In late 2020, for example, the UK Government (HMG, 2020) pledged to create a quarter of a million jobs through its new Green Industrial Revolution, with these jobs being explicitly projected to be 'good jobs'. More recently, there has been growing recognition that jobs are as likely to be created as destroyed and that the new technology might simply result in the reconfiguration of tasks and skills in existing jobs (Hunt et al. 2019; Warhurst and Hunt 2019). Globally, it is acknowledged that difficult transitions for millions of workers and those preparing to enter the labour market will lie ahead. Insufficient reskilling, upskilling and skills mismatch are dominant features in global policy discourse. Policymakers, regulators and educators will need to play a fundamental role in helping those who are displaced from learning and work to repurpose their skills or retrain to acquire new skills and digital competences. This requires proactive investment in developing lifelong and agile learners, skilled talent and making available careers support systems to meet the economic, social and cultural imperatives of nation states.

Earlier the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2018) called for sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. These goals

¹ Our sincere thanks to Prof. Kobus Maree in South Africa and Prof. Frans Meijjers (deceased) for their early thinking and original Call for Papers.

implicitly build on the ILO's Decent Work agenda (ILO, 2015), with its four 'core standards' – freedom from forced labour, freedom from child labour, freedom from discrimination at work; freedom to form and join a union, and to bargain collectively. Rai et al., (2019) highlight how the decent work agenda has been the product of “contentious debates between corporate and state actors, trade unions, NGOs, women's organisations, and emerging labour groups of the informal sector” (p.369) and in the context of increasing precarity in labour markets. One recent UK example includes a Supreme Court Ruling (FT, 2021) whereby Uber has lost a landmark battle which ruled that its drivers are employed workers. They are now entitled to rights such as the national minimum wage, holiday pay and Uber must set up a workplace pension scheme. This is one of the most significant UK employment cases for decades. Increasingly, formal and informal precarious work has emerged with neoliberal restructuring of the global economy. Blustein (2019) describes the psychological experience of working in precarious and unstable working conditions. For example, he provides compelling evidence that the nature of work in the US is eroding with powerful psychological and social consequences for individuals and families. This erosion has to be stopped in order to build more inclusive societies. Bayliss & Matioli, (2018) and Rai et al. (2019) argue privatisation, marketisation and deregulation have led to a decline in public services and compounded inequalities.

This Special Issues comes at a critical juncture. Decent work, inclusion and finding sustainable ways to tackle poverty, displacement and inequalities is considered vital to individuals, communities and economies.

“In 2020 between 88 million and 115 million people could fall back into extreme poverty as a result of the pandemic, with an additional increase of between 23 million and 35 million in 2021, potentially bringing the total number of new people living in extreme poverty to between 110 million and 150 million.” World Bank Group President David Malpass (October 2020, p.11).

Armed conflict and poverty in some countries and regions, particularly in parts of the Middle East, North Africa, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen are decimating lives and livelihoods. Amartya Sen (1999) offers a broader conceptual framework for understanding poverty. In this regard, poverty means that opportunities and choices most basic to human development are denied. Furthermore,

three years after Europe's biggest influx of migrants and refugees since the second world war, tensions between European Union member states on how to handle irregular immigration from outside the EU bloc remains high. Europe was ill-prepared to deal effectively with this phenomenon (Lehne, 2018). As a result, greater global efforts will be needed to develop new multi-cultural guidance and counselling theories and practical approaches that can be applied to inform more holistic person-centred services in differing cultural settings.

The notion of a 'new poor' forced into poverty by COVID-19 is gradually emerging (World Bank Group, 2020). A traditional view of 'extreme poverty' has now extended beyond developing countries. For example, the World Bank Group argues the 'new poor' will range from teenagers upwards, people most likely to live in congested urban settings, and likely to be displaced from sectors in which economic activity is most affected by lockdowns and social distancing restrictions. There is a certain irony for young people who, in many cases, are better educated than their parents and grandparents. Mann (In press) argues today's young people form the most ambitious generation ever. However, he also highlights:

"In many countries, as they make potentially life-changing decisions about their education and training, more than one quarter of 15-year-olds cannot say what job they expect to do by age 30. A comparison of results for 2000 and 2018 from PISA data shows that career uncertainty has risen by 81% across the OECD since the turn of the century."

Amidst uncertainty, people often delay decisions to engage in learning and work. Uncertainty can also reduce economic activity (e.g., suppress real gross domestic product (GDP) growth). Loss of self-esteem and confidence resulting from uncertainty are major barriers to progression. For many people, work provides both an income and a social network - often a reason for social interaction. Rising inequality and falling opportunities are evidenced through various factors such as the demise of many micro and small enterprises, the impact of youth unemployment, and reductions in earning potential of younger and lower-skilled workers, impacting most on disadvantaged households.

For many adults, access to work will tighten in the coming year(s) and those most vulnerable could be left behind. The pandemic has brought unforeseen experiences of isolation, loneliness, food insecurity, and variable access to broadband internet services, as well as reductions in wealth, health and well-being for those most vulnerable. For example, a global report on findings from the Covid-19 Disability Rights Monitor (2020) shows that persons with disabilities were being left behind in countries regardless of their level of development, across both wealthy and developing states (p.7). In contrast to much of the negative debate about gig work, Harpur and Blanck (2020) suggests that it offers not just challenges but also new prospects for people with disabilities to engage in meaningful work. They conclude this requires “innovative regulatory responses to gig work, especially during the pandemic era” (p.2). The rise of gig work is an increasingly common phenomenon changing customary work-based settings and employment models (Stewart and Sandford, 2017). For career guidance and counsellors this covers terrain currently under-researched and poses ethical challenges when advising clients on the career ideas and what constitutes decent work, particularly if there is some suspicion of the likelihood of exploitation.

There is increasing evidence that other marginalised groups are being disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Across the US, a consistent pattern has been reported across multiple states showing that black Americans comprise a disproportionately greater number of reported COVID-19 cases and deaths compared with white Americans (Millett et al., 2020). Geography matters and healthcare, for example, southern states in the US with larger ethnic minority populations had less access to private health care during the Trump administration. Other evidence is continuing to emerge that the pandemic is adversely affecting people from black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) communities. A UK Institute for Fiscal Studies report (Platt & Warwick, 2020) highlight Pakistani men are over 70 per cent more likely to be self-employed than the white British majority. The findings show ethnic inequalities are likely to manifest from the COVID-19 crisis in two main ways: through exposure to infection and health risks, including mortality; and through exposure to loss of income. Employment status presumably increases the likelihood of exposure to COVID-19 and this differentially impacts on those from BAME communities. For example, there is an over-representation BAME workers in

some jobs that require travel (e.g., bus drivers, train conductors), and those that involve regular interaction with the public (e.g., nurses, medical assistants, home health-care workers etc). Individuals from BAME backgrounds are concerned about their safety, losing their jobs and financial issues. The provision of career guidance and counselling support needs to take into account the different levels of need in the local population and the complex ways in which economic, social and health issues combine to create inequality of opportunity and inequity, a lack of fairness to opportunities.

Also, issues such as the breadth and depth of gender inequality worldwide remains persistent and pernicious, according to Bimrose (2019). A Deloitte survey of 400 working women globally found that 70 per cent of them had experienced negative disruptions to their career routines, with some fearing it could limit their future career growth (Deloitte, 2020). This report shows women's unpaid care work has increased exponentially as a result of school closures and /or caring for elderly relatives. Another factor for consideration is women in some countries may be suffering greater exposure to Covid-19 because of their over-representation in frontline health sector professions combined with their other care responsibilities. The pandemic could reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality, decent work and inclusion. For example, the UN reports that nearly 60 per cent of women around the world work are in the informal economy, earning less, saving less, and at greater risk of falling into poverty (United National Secretary-General, 2020). A clear focus for governments is to ensure women are not discriminated against in the aftermath of Covid-19 and for steps to be taken for women leadership and equality in decision-making power. Career guidance and counsellors can perform a key role in supporting individuals to build and articulate their career identity and narrative through career constructionism and constructivism (inter alia., Young and Collin, 2004; Savickas, 2005; McIlveen & Patton, 2007; Del Corso & Reh fuss 2011; and McMahon, 2017). Leadership and empowerment of individuals to harness their career stories is now evermore crucial.

Bassingwaighte (2020) makes the case for four types of advocacy to help address issues of inequality and fairness of opportunity. Firstly, self-advocacy designed to empower clients to make choices and decisions that affect their lives. Secondly, professional advocacy serving as a bridge

between the client and those in positions of power. Thirdly, citizenship advocacy whereby practitioners expand their role and act as a resource to communities that may face marginalisation or discrimination. Finally, public advocacy through work with institutions and groups to draft public statements and inform policy processes. The pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of communities when health, food security, and freedom to work are interrupted. In 2021, layered on top of these challenges and opportunities are a magnitude of deeply emotional and practical issues concerning people's lives and livelihoods. Practitioners too have found themselves dealing with multiple challenges, including finding new ways to deliver services, while also negotiating changes in what clients are bringing to a guidance or therapy session. And they are having to navigate these challenges, while also managing their own anxieties about the extraordinary situation and its potential impact on health, loved ones and, in some cases, financial security for those self-employed.

There are no easy solutions in pointing to a particular theory or single practice that can address some or all of these issues. For example, there may be a broad temptation to consider using more positive psychology to increase 'positive mindsets' and induce feelings of well-being in society. Robertson (2017) indicates whilst this provides a fertile source of concepts and an empirical basis for some elements of practice, the application is problematic if it neglects the socioeconomic context in which careers are lived and experienced.

The contributors to in this Special Issue bring complementary theoretical and practical perspectives from their own research and analysis of decent work, inclusion and/or sustainability issues in Canada, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Singapore, the UK, US and West Africa. Ribeiro outlines an emancipatory strategy to foster decent working trajectories and social justice. Drawing on research and multiple case studies, he proposes greater use of discursive validation as a career counselling intermediary strategy to foster narrative changes and social repositioning. Based on the Innovative Moments Coding System (IMCS), the effectiveness of the approach was assessed by analysing clients' personal narrative changes. The findings highlight innovative moments in the

clients' narratives and social repositioning. Ribeiro also offers this approach as a potential solution to transcend the existing social and political barriers for constructing decent working trajectories.

To address the challenges of realising decent work, Young et al. propose Contextual Action Theory (CAT) as an innovative, relational approach. Grounded on the notion of goal-directed actions that occur in daily life, many involving significant others, the approach provides a framework for a relationally oriented supportive counselling intervention. This framework shifts the emphasis to one's relation with others as the way in which one constructs meaning in life and work. This intervention is illustrated with a case of young immigrants in pursuit of decent work as they transition to a new country. Eduarda Duarte and Cardoso focus on practice improvements responsive to individuals' needs and they outline a two-chair dialogue using an emotion focused technique applied to career counselling. Grounded in a dialectical constructivist perspective, this technique evokes the dialogue between two conflicting self-positions, each one in a different chair to facilitate career decision-making. An illustrative case is presented to describe the sequence of counsellor's tasks during the process of facilitating conflict resolution. In contrast, Cadaret and Hartung consider the efficacy of a three-week career construction counselling group intervention that was structured using a career story book. This intervention had pre- and post-test measures of vocational identity and a career adaptability measure involving youth from an urban high school, largely comprising African American, Puerto Rican and Dominican students. The implications for career invention with adolescents of colour and future research are discussed.

Labour market activation policies that seek to reduce unemployment is important role during and after the pandemic. Changes in government public policies in Ireland that impact on career development and employment support services are discussed by Whelan et al. They argue that as economies re-open, COVID-19 will test the capacity of governments to respond to what unemployed workers need to enable them back to employment. They highlight the need for the Irish public employment service (PES) to be primed to deal responsibly with rising unemployment. They emphasise a risk post-pandemic is that an 'any job is better than no job' mantra may prevail due to political, economic and societal pressures to curb welfare caseloads. The authors argue the ambition

instead should be decent work that enhances well-being and provides opportunity for all. Hughes et al. consider the changing careers support landscape for young people and adults in the UK. They set out similarities and differences in national careers service systems prevailing in each of the four home nations of the UK. The findings demonstrate stark differences in young people and adults' access to professionally trained careers advisers and fragmentation of services particularly in England.

In contrast, Sampson and Toh put the spotlight on adults, in particular improving the career decision making of highly skilled discouraged workers and those unemployed in Singapore. They examine the career decision readiness of the unemployed and discouraged based on a nationally representative sample of highly skilled workers. This study shows that for highly skilled workers in Singapore, the CSI (measuring career decision state) and MVS (measuring vocational identity) are measures that are highly correlated with each other. Moreover, upgrading one's education (tertiary or non-tertiary) is important in reducing the likelihood of weak career decision-making readiness, improving employability and decreasing the shelf-life for skills.

Young workers experiences and perceptions are investigated by Vilhjálmsdóttir in Iceland. She examines the experiences of young workers aged 18 to 29 without formal qualifications and their experience of work and the connections to career adaptability and decent work. Results show that participants work mainly in low-skilled jobs. Nevertheless, many aspire to become professionals or technicians. Unexpected results concern gender differences, for example the fact that women feel their jobs are less decent compared with the men. This gender difference in perceiving one's work as decent warrants more research. Results also indicate that self-determination is not met at work, whereas it fulfils financial and social needs.

Cultural context really matters. The combined perspectives of a psychologist and sociologist, Ouedraogo et al., focus on volition, decent work and work fulfilment in the formal and informal economy in Burkina Faso, West Africa. They look at how people working in the formal and informal economy in Burkina Faso describe their working conditions and the notion of decent work and how economic constraints and marginalisation influence work volition, decent work and work fulfillment. They draw on findings from two studies which highlight interesting findings such as social

recognition is an especially important aspect of decent work in this context. Also, the level of education and social class have an impact on obtaining a decent work, mediated by work volition, both being related to work fulfillment outcomes.

Ginevra et al. consider the role of career adaptability and future orientation of refugees in Italy. The study aims to explore refugees' future goals and examines the relationship between career adaptability and future orientation in considering a breadth of future goals. Results showed that refugees set more frequently materialistic goals and less frequently goals connected to be able to have a 'decent job'. They emphasise the relevance of helping refugees to set goals related to decent work and to develop career adaptability resources and future orientation. The labour market integration of young refugees and asylum seekers in Switzerland is considered by Udayar et al. This research sheds light on the labour market integration of immigrants—especially of young refugees and asylum seekers. The results show that language proficiency is the main barrier and that individuals must rely on a host of resources to achieve sustainable labour market integration.

Finally, personal agency and its relationship to employment, socio-economic, racial and mental health issues in the US are considered by Seth et al. They explore personal agency and make the case that counsellors encountering individuals with complex and interconnected challenges with career and mental health, need sophisticated interventions designed to enhance their agency. They reflect on the potential for permanent alterations in many occupations threatening career agency. Besides the immediate impact of COVID-19 on decent work, the expected increase in digitalisation of services they argue threatens to limit decent work opportunities for individuals who lack access to computers and training in emerging technologies.

In conclusion, this Special Issue does not provide definitive answers to inequalities and widespread decent work and inclusion deficits. The notion of sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all presents both challenges and opportunities. The contributions highlight the complexity of this new terrain and the opportunities for career guidance specialists and counsellors to further develop new theories and practical approaches. It does however bring multiple disciplinary and expert lenses to bear on the challenges and opportunities. In doing so,

it represents an opening up of debate and its contributors offer important insights as part of that debate.

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