

## **New Opportunities For Social Inclusion Through Useful and Satisfying Work, Paid and Unpaid**

**James Robertson<sup>1</sup>**

In the first half of the 21st century, two features of the emerging post-modern economy are likely to affect the nature of work, how it is organised, and our attitudes to it. These will be:

- a growing emphasis on greater economic self-reliance - for nations, for regions within nations, for cities and districts, for neighbourhood communities, and for people and households; and
- a growing emphasis on conserving natural resources and the environment.

### **A Historical Perspective**

In ancient European societies like Greece and Rome - and in some more recent societies too - most people had to work as slaves. The work of society was organised on the basis of a superior and a subordinate class - masters and slaves. Then in medieval feudal Europe most people - the “common people”, as they were called - had to work as serfs. The work of society was still organised on the basis of a superior and a subordinate class - lords and serfs. In modern industrial societies most people have had to work as employees. The work of society has still been organised on the basis of a superior and a subordinate class - employers and employees.

This has been a historical progression towards somewhat greater freedom and equality. But the basic assumption still is that most people should work as subordinates for superiors - employees for an employer - whether in the business sector, the state sector, the professional sector or the non-governmental sector. Most people do not have the opportunity to work for themselves and one another, on work of their own choosing, under their own direction, in accordance with their own priorities and values.

Is the employment age now ending? Will full employment ever come back? In many societies, in fact, full employment never existed in the sense of everyone being able to get the kind of job that would enable them to earn a good livelihood. In countries like South Africa where I was last year, and India where I have just been, it is transparently obvious to the visitor that conventional economic policies cannot conceivably create enough jobs to provide livelihoods for those who are now unemployed. But even in those countries where full employment was seen in the recent past as a feasible goal - in Europe, North America and other rich industrial countries - a number of factors, including increasingly intense competition in a globalised economy, is making it less and less realistic to hope that employers will be able to provide jobs for all. This applies to the Anglo-Saxon economies of the USA and Britain, where the official employment statistics give a misleadingly rosy

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<sup>1</sup>See Biographical Note at Annex.

picture, as well as to the economies of continental Europe and Japan which have less flexible labour markets.

### **What Comes After The Employment Age?**

Nobody is suggesting that there will be no more jobs. Employment is not going to disappear altogether! But we will increasingly need to recognise that valuable work includes more than simply finding employers to give people jobs. And we will need to develop ways of ensuring that people who do those kinds of valuable work are properly rewarded in terms of livelihood, status and self-esteem.

Other types of valuable work in addition to employment include:

- self-employment;
- working in a co-operative or community enterprise, and taking part in decisions about its operations and management;
- voluntary work, in non-business and non-government organisations - the “third sector”; and
- useful unpaid personal work, including managing the household, bringing up children, and doing things for relatives, friends and neighbours.

In my book *Future Work*<sup>2</sup> I referred to work of these kinds as “ownwork”. I see the transition from the age of employment to the age of ownwork as part of the transition from the modern to the post-modern era. Work - in the sense of socially useful activity which is important to the worker - will continue to be a central part of most people’s lives. But we should expect a continuing move away from employment towards ownwork, blurring the boundary between self-chosen work and productive leisure, and perceived by some as a shift from “work” to “activity”.

In terms of policy, this means a twin-track approach. We should continue looking for more effective policies to increase the *supply* of jobs. But we should also adopt policies that will reduce the *demand* for jobs by encouraging other forms of work as well. These policies should enable increasing numbers of people to organise useful paid and unpaid work for themselves - enable them to *own* their work. Society will then become less employer-centred and more people-centred than today’s societies. Citizens will then be freer than in today’s societies from dependency on employers and the state to provide them with jobs.

Against that background, then, the underlying theme of our approach to the future of work should be to encourage self-reliance. We need import-substitution policies at every level. At the national level these should help to reduce our dependence on imports, which we have to pay for by producing more exports to earn the necessary foreign exchange. Similarly at the levels of city, neighbourhood and household, policies are needed to enable many of us to become less vulnerably dependent on employers and suppliers of goods and services based elsewhere.

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<sup>2</sup> *Future Work: Jobs, Self-Employment and Leisure after the Industrial Age*: Gower/Temple- Smith, 1985. The Japanese edition was translated by Tuttle-Mori and published by Keiso Shobo.

Two examples of policy approaches on these lines are to do with:

- taxes and welfare benefits, and
- local economic self-reliance.

### **Taxes and Welfare Benefits.**

The growing interest in environmental taxes or ecotaxes - taxes on the use of natural resources and on polluting activities - has a direct connection with the future of work. In this respect social and economic sustainability are closely linked to environmental sustainability. As the possibilities for introducing environmental taxes have been studied and discussed, it has become increasingly clear that environmental taxes should be balanced by the reduction and perhaps eventual removal of other taxes, including taxes on employment and incomes and enterprise.<sup>3</sup>

The logic behind such a change is simple: it doesn't make sense to tax people on the value they add through useful work and enterprise, and fail to tax them on the value they subtract by using common resources and values. (By common resources and values I mean resources and values created by nature or society as a whole, and not by the work and skill and enterprise of the individuals or organisations that use them or own them. One example is the capacity of the environment to absorb pollution and waste; another is the site value of land.) So the proposal is that people and companies should pay society for using these common resources - "the polluter pays" in the case of pollution, and the landowner pays "rent" in the case of land.

However, there is an important problem with environmental taxes. If they fall directly on consumers, they hurt poor people relatively more than richer ones. We had a good example of this a year or two ago in Britain. Value Added Tax (VAT) was imposed on household energy. Quite naturally, there was a big political outcry against the regressive nature of the tax. This problem is one that has to be solved

One part of the solution will be to make sure that ecotaxes on consumers are accompanied by taxes that fall more heavily on rich people than on poor. The site-value land tax is a good example of this. The people who own valuable land are usually richer than people who don't. Another part of the solution is to use some of the revenue from the ecotaxes to reduce their net impact on poorer people. Studies in Switzerland and Germany have shown that, if the revenue from such a tax can be distributed to everyone in equal shares as an "ecobonus", the regressive effect of the tax can be offset.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the fact that rich

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<sup>3</sup> Recent publications include: *Environmental Taxes*, European Environmental Agency, Copenhagen, August 1996; *Policies for a Better Environment and High Employment*, an English Summary of the Norwegian Green Tax Commission, Oslo, September 1996; and Timothy O'Riordan (ed), *Ecotaxation*, Earthscan, London, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> See: Ernst Ulrich von Weizsacker, *Earth Politics*, Zed Books, London 1994; and *Ecological Tax Reform even if Germany has to Go it Alone*, German Institute for Economic Research, Economic Bulletin, Vol. 31, No. 7, July 1994, Gower Publishing, England.

consumers tend to use more energy and resources than poor ones and will therefore pay more in tax, the ecobonuses will be relatively more valuable to poorer citizens, since receiving the same amount of money is worth relatively more to poor people than rich people.

I have suggested elsewhere<sup>5</sup> that ecobonuses distributed to all citizens out of the revenue from a growing number of ecotaxes could eventually add up to a Citizen's Income, which every citizen would receive as a right of citizenship.<sup>6</sup> I don't want to go into this in greater detail in this paper. But there are the makings here of a new package of policies, based on the following principles:

- people should pay society for the value of the common resources they use;
- all citizens should enjoy an equal share in the resulting public revenue; and
- people should not be taxed on the fruits of their work and skills and enterprise.

These principles could underpin a new social compact for the post-modern era, whereby basic economic rights would be more fairly shared among all citizens, while hard work and skill and enterprise would be fully rewarded.

So far as work is concerned, changes on these lines would reduce the present incentive to replace workers with energy-intensive and capital-intensive machinery. So they would make it easier for people to get jobs. By providing a basic income (the Citizen's Income), they would also make it easier for people to do useful unpaid work and to enjoy a livelihood without having to find full-time paid work.

### **Local Self-Reliance.**

Another result of raising the cost of energy by taxing it will be to raise the cost of transport. This will make it more economically attractive to produce goods locally for local consumption. This will create additional opportunities for local work. Indeed, successful local development, social and economic, is likely to be crucial for the future of work. That has been recognised by the European Commission, for example in Directorate-General V's sponsorship of the recent TASC project on Territorial Action for Social Cohesion. In my paper on "New Employment for Social Cohesion", written in November 1996 for the final TASC seminar, I emphasised the potential role of greater local economic self-reliance in creating a better future for work.

We need to accept, not only how important it will be to enable unemployed local people to use unused local resources to meet unmet local needs, but also how closely linked this is with sustainable development and the Local Agenda 21 initiatives now being pursued in

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<sup>5</sup> *Towards a New Social Compact: Citizen's Income and Radical Tax Reform*, Political Quarterly, Vol. 67, No. 1, Jan/March 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Information about proposals for citizen's income (or basic income) is available from: Citizen's Income Study Centre, St Philips Building, Sheffield Street, London WC2A 2EX; and Basic Income European Network (BIEN), 3 Place Montesquieu, B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

many countries following the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>7</sup> Properly organised study is needed of the various possible ways in which localities could produce locally a larger proportion of the staples - such as food and energy - needed for local consumption, of possible ways in which local waste could be recycled locally for local re-use, and of other possible ways of using local work to provide useful local resources. Governments, national and local, will need to encourage the development of new local economic institutions, such as local development banks and credit unions - and Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETSsystems) providing their members with a new medium of exchange, parallel with and separate from the normal currency, to enable them to trade goods and services with one another. This is an area in which experience and information has built up rapidly in the past few years in European countries - and in USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>8</sup>

### **Men's Work and Women's Work<sup>9</sup>**

In pre-industrial peasant societies men and women worked around the home and neighbourhood, and shared the tasks that had to be done there. As modern societies developed, the split between men's work and women's work became wider. Men began to take on most of the paid work. This was mostly work done away from the home, for employers to whom the workers sold their working time. It was work done for the employer's profit, or to achieve the employer's goals and concerns, not the concerns of the person doing the work. As time passed, men's paid work acquired higher status than the unpaid work of women in and around the home and neighbourhood.

Looking at this objectively now, it seems strange that in industrial societies the crucial people-centred work that women have traditionally done - giving birth to children, looking after them and bringing them up while they are young, caring for other family members, managing the household, and providing most of the "social glue" that makes their neighbourhoods into communities - came to be seen as having lower status than the more impersonal work of men, shuffling things around in factories, shuffling paper around in offices, and shuffling ideas around in places like universities and research institutes.

Of course the past half-century or more has seen in most countries, though not all, the growth of greater equality between men and women. So women now enjoy more equal opportunities to co-operate and compete with men in the work of the paid (or formal)

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<sup>7</sup> *Towards Local Sustainability: A review of current activity on Local Agenda 21 in the UK*, jointly published by the United Nations Association, 3 Whitehall Court, London SW1A 2EL and the Community Development Foundation, 60 Highbury Grove, London N5 2AG, is a recent account of the practical links between environmental, social and economic policy at the local level.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Richard Douthwaite, *Short Circuit: Strengthening Local Economies for Security in an Unstable World*, Green Books, Dartington, England, 1996. Information about LETSsystems is available from Letslink UK, 61 Woodcock Road, Warminster, Wiltshire BA12 9DH, England.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: Barbara Brandt, *Whole Life Economics: Revaluing Daily Life*, New Society, Philadelphia, 1995; and Marilyn Waring, *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*, Harper and Row, New York, 1988.

economy. But women are still expected to take a much greater share of responsibility for the unpaid work of the household and family. This means they can often give less time and energy and commitment than men to the paid work of the formal economy, and so they continue to be at a career disadvantage there. It also means that the essential work of home and family and neighbourhood continues to be regarded as less important than the paid work people do for employers.

Conventional economists don't consider the household to be a "workplace", although a great deal of essential work is done there. Conventional economists don't consider the people doing that work to be "economically active" - not even members of the "workforce". Conventional economists consider people doing that kind of work in the informal economy as the "economic dependents" of people working in the formal economy. They forget that people's availability for paid work in the formal economy is dependent on the unpaid basic work of survival and subsistence which is done to keep the household and family going. The point is that, because conventional economists are able to count what happens in the formal economy - the amount of production, the amount of profit, the rate of economic growth, the number of jobs, the revenue from taxes, and so on - they regard it as real; whereas, since they cannot count what happens in the informal sector, they assume it does not exist. If they can't count it, it doesn't count.

This brings us back again to the question of money and people's dependence on it. A Citizen's Income, as part of the package of changes in taxes and benefits I discussed earlier, would encourage more people - men, as well as women - to undertake the unpaid work involved in good parenting and good household management.. That is one specific proposal. But in what other ways could we make it easier for more people to do the essential unpaid work on which our societies depend for their survival now and for their healthy and sustainable future development.

## **Technologies**

In order to enable more people to work for themselves in socially and environmentally sustainable ways, technologies need to be developed and disseminated which are empowering and conserving, i.e. which can be used on a human scale by people in their households and neighbourhoods, and on a local scale, to provide necessities of life such as fuel and power. "Soft" energy technologies - including especially technologies contributing to energy efficiency and conservation, and to small-scale renewable energy supply - are among the most important. Other examples include food technologies - for domestic cooking and small-scale organic farming and horticulture. Others include technologies for maintaining, repairing, reconditioning and recycling equipments that might otherwise be thrown away and replaced; and information and communication technologies which can be used by individuals and local communities for their own purposes.

## **Education**

A big change in education policy should aim to equip children, young people and adults to lead self-reliant and conserving lives - develop the practical skills they need to manage their own work, their household and family, their money, their health, and their leisure. Education should cease to be mainly about skilling people to work for employers. It should encourage people to acquire the confidence and aptitudes to think independently about what kind of life and society they want for themselves and their children, and to learn what other people in other parts of the world are thinking. Everyone needs to learn the personal and interpersonal skills to live and work with one another, in the kind of society which gives everyone maximum freedom so long as they do not use it to diminish the freedom of others.

### **Good Work and Bad Work**

This means we cannot ignore the philosophical, or even theological, questions that should underlie our approach to the future of work. Is work a good thing or a bad thing? Is it a blessing - a form of prayer to God, as one Christian teaching tells us? Or is work a curse - laid on the human race following the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, as another Christian teaching tells us? The answer is that work can be good or bad, depending on what kind of work it is.

So what is good work? Good work is work which we do for ourselves, our families and our societies, because it is valuable work and we believe it to be worth doing. In a self-reliant and conserving society it will increasingly be seen as work that provides ourselves and other people with the necessities of life, enables us and them to develop our human skills and capacities, and to conserve - or perhaps even help to enrich - the resources and blessings of Nature. Bad work will be work that we do under duress, because we have to, not because it is valuable in itself but because it serves the interests of employers and other people on whom we are forced to depend for our livelihoods and survival. Bad work will be seen to include the kinds of work that damage our own and other people's health and capacities for self-reliance and self-development, or damage the natural environment.

We should increasingly perceive the right to do good work as a central part of the right to be responsible. And we should increasingly perceive the right to be responsible as a central human right.

ANNEX

### **JAMES ROBERTSON: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

James Robertson studied history, philosophy and classics at Oxford. In the 1950s and 1960s he worked as a British government policy-maker - first on decolonisation and development, accompanying Prime Minister Harold Macmillan on his "Wind of Change" tour of Africa in 1960; then in the Cabinet Office. Then, after three years in management consultancy and systems analysis, he set up and led an inter-bank research organisation for the British banks. Between 1965 and 1973 he took part in enquiries into British government, civil service and parliament, and London's future as a financial centre.

Since 1973 he has worked independently as a writer and adviser on alternative futures and economic and social change. He has lectured in many countries on the need and scope for a post-modern transition to socially equitable and ecologically sustainable development. In 1984 he helped to set up The Other Economic Summit (TOES) and the New Economics Foundation (NEF).

Robertson's books include:

- *The Reform of British Central Government*, Chatto & Windus, 1971;
- *The Sane Alternative: A Choice of Futures*, Robertson, 1978, 1983;
- *Future Work: Jobs, Self-Employment and Leisure after the Industrial Age*, Gower/Temple Smith, 1985;
- *Future Wealth: A New Economics for the 21st Century*, Cassell, 1990;
- *Beyond The Dependency Culture*, Adamantine (forthcoming).

The Forward Studies Unit of the European Commission will shortly publish his Briefing for Policy Makers on *The New Economics of Sustainable Development* (1997). Meanwhile, the text of the Briefing is at <<http://www.the-commons.org/tp2000>>, together with the latest issue of the twice-yearly newsletter *Turning Point 2000*.

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