

"SUSTAINABLE WORK" - A New Way of Addressing the Employment Issue

Katherine Peet

Chairperson, NZCOSS
April 2000

Nothing less than a re-definition of what we call "work" will respond to the way in which our society is changing. Much of what people contribute to society is neither recognised or valued, because work is currently defined solely, and too narrowly, by economic labour market criteria.

In "normal" employment today, most people's jobs are defined for them. Citizens are being redefined only as employees, employers, self-employed or unemployed, at the same time as a permanent underclass of unemployed and employed poor is emerging. The strong, honourable concept of the citizen-producer is being reduced to a weak shadow, described by what is for most an increasingly precarious and passive role in the labour marketplace.

What is happening has consequences for us all. As we see it, we are not in an era of unemployment, which can be cured by economic growth and job creation alone. We are entering an era of misemployment, and that requires a whole new approach.

What if everyone's contribution were recognised and valued? What if we acknowledged all those activities which are seldom incorporated into conventional economic statistics: the community building, caring for the environment, looking after children and the elderly, support for social service agencies, kindergartens and schools, service clubs, and the visual and performing arts? For the sake of brevity, we will call all these human contributions SUSTAINABLE WORK.

This opens up an entirely new approach - and leads, of course, to important questions about money - since involvement in SUSTAINABLE WORK does not, of itself, guarantee an income.

If everyone's contribution to society is to be recognised and valued, then we must first acknowledge that the current "employment" society does not do this, and that the idea that employment is a fair way to distribute income, is profoundly flawed.



We all need an income sufficient to live on, but we cannot rely upon the market, which has neither social ethic or conscience, to distribute income fairly. Taxation systems and family support are incomplete mechanisms, too, as many social service agencies can testify. They do not provide an escape from the poverty trap, as was very clear to the Commissioners of the People's Select Committee who toured the country in 1992. They listened to submissions from those living on low incomes and experiencing the consequences of the cuts to benefits. Their single major recommendation was to establish an adequate minimum income, as of right, to enable all to belong to and participate in society - a basic income for all.

Most people are already involved in SUSTAINABLE WORK, but only some of it is recognised, and even less is paid. A guaranteed basic income would allow more people to respond to the SUSTAINABLE WORK that needs doing in communities. Where people cannot create meaningful lives, and find themselves in a vacuum, mechanisms might be put in place - a peer group perhaps - to assist them in identifying their SUSTAINABLE WORK and any necessary learning opportunities.

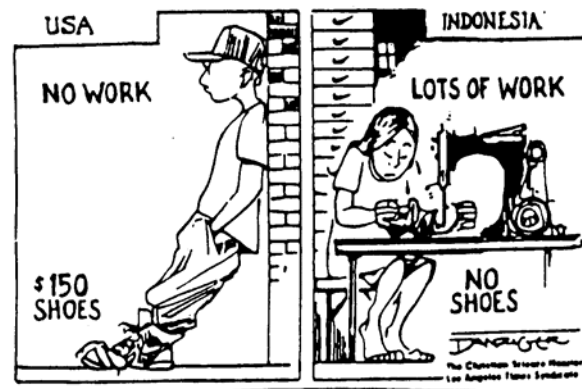
We would also need to put in place mechanisms to ensure both the supply of income and the acknowledgement and identification of people's SUSTAINABLE WORK - their contributions to society. Green Dollars - referred to overseas as Local Exchange and Trading Systems (LETS) - are one example of this.

You might think that remunerating all SUSTAINABLE WORK is preferable to a guaranteed basic income - but do we really want "user pays" for family cuddles? A Universal Basic Income would provide security and would enable people to enter employment for positive rather than immediate survival reasons. It would also address the uncertainty we all face as we enter a future where information technology is transforming employment options.

"Work" must be distinguished from "Employment". Active citizen-producers are currently being socialised into passive consumers. Recognition of people's SUSTAINABLE WORK should address this passivity; unions, whistle-blowers and searchers for better ways of living should have their rightful place; appropriate technology is to be welcomed; we will revisit notions of "skill", "wealth" and "wisdom".

The promotion of SUSTAINABLE WORK will encourage citizens to address their hopes and aspirations, and that will require the expansion and systematising of the knowledge that emerges. This could be the foundation for a new democracy, in which all people will be able to play a productive part in strengthening the development of livelihoods which are socially, culturally and environmentally sustainable.

The Maori word Mahi is often translated as "Work". Our understanding of Mahi is that labours of love are included. Mahi Tangata - the people's work - SUSTAINABLE WORK - is not just about earning an income. It is about the dignity of the person, and decisions made about the personal use of time. The Treaty of Waitangi - the invitation by Maori to share this land - is based on the retention of values which address communal need, not simply individual benefit. A focus on SUSTAINABLE WORK is, we believe, consistent with the vision of a society based on the Treaty of Waitangi. So our recent Electoral Reform would need to be complemented by Constitutional Change.



We cannot afford the luxury of treating the symptoms rather than the causes of social diseases. Government and commercial sectors need to acknowledge and resource the Third (community) sector, the Civil Society. Recognition of SUSTAINABLE WORK - mahi tangata - rather than an ongoing fetish with "employment" options, is a priority for a democratic solution to the future.