

**MEGATRENDS, THE NEW EUROPEAN STRATEGY ON  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATION,  
EMPLOYMENT AND RESKILLING IN SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY**

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**Abstract**

*In the era of perma-crisis (namely the multiple and consequent crises, from the 2008 credit crunch crisis and the resulting recession under the austerity doctrine to the onset of the refugee-migrant crisis in 2015, the COVID-19 crisis, and the current energy and inflation crisis), socio-economic problems and inequalities augmented, causing further strain on social cohesion of modern societies. Additionally, the impact of the ongoing Megatrends (i.e. digital economy) is more than evident and persistent in the above-mentioned.*

*The concept of social sustainability is related both to environmental issues and to issues of social well-being and cohesion, while considering the contribution of the private and public sectors to the processes of achieving these objectives, i.e. improving living conditions on equal terms.*

*Taking all the above-mentioned into account, the present paper analyzes the role of both Employment and Education (in their capacity as key components of the Welfare State), in social sustainability. The research methodology, use, is based on literature review and secondary quantitative analysis.*

*Hence, the paper briefly analyses a) the key determinants of the new European Strategy on Sustainable Development (2021-2030), b) the state of play in education and employment in the EU (emphasizing, among others, issues such as the rise of precarious employment and its correlation to social vulnerability and in-work-poverty, the association between educational capital and employability, the socio-economic inequalities' impact on education etc) and c) the ongoing transformations in the labour market, the (so-called) "future skills", aligned with "future jobs" and the role of reskilling (via VET) in coping with the demands of the changing Labour Market. Within this context it investigates the critical dimensions of the current and future role of Employment, Education and Reskilling in sustainability and in particular in social sustainability, as well as the major policy challenges in these substantial domains of the Welfare State.*

**Key Words:** *Mega-Trends, European Strategy on Sustainable Development, Social Sustainability, Education, Employment, future skills and jobs, Welfare State*

## 1. Preliminary Remarks

Gradually, during the political and academic discourse and the relevant policy initiatives on sustainable development, it became evident how necessary is to find viable solutions that combine ecosystem protection while promoting economic and social progress (Papadakis & Tzagkarakis 2024: 105; Baker et al, 2005; Castro, 2004).

Social sustainability is not only an analytical but also a normative concept, as it is based on rights derived from nationally and internationally recognized treaties as well as social norms. Consequently, social sustainability refers and relates to the quality of societies (see Papadakis & Tzagkarakis 2025 and Tzagkarakis 2023).

## 2. The EU Strategy towards Sustainable Development and Social sustainability

Sustainable development has become the focal point of the EU Strategy towards 2030. The High-Level Political Forum is the main United Nations platform on sustainable development. It has a central role in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on a global level.

Sustainable development is a core principle of the Treaty on European Union and a priority objective for the EU's internal and external policies (see: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/sustainable-development-goals\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/sustainable-development-goals_en)).

Hence, according to the European Commission, “the importance of consistently progressing towards the SDGs and engaging with partner countries and civil society as well as the Union’s representation at high-level international fora, including the United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, is crucial to advance the EU’s commitment to and leadership in sustainable development” (see: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/sustainable-development-goals/eu-and-united-nations-common-goals-sustainable-future\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/sustainable-development-goals/eu-and-united-nations-common-goals-sustainable-future_en))

The European Commission has adopted an holistic approach for sustainability and the SDGs. Within this context, the European Commission has focused on delivering concrete actions that will bring tangible progress in the areas of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The President’s political guidelines and the Commission’s annual work programmes constitute this Commission’s strategy to implement the SDGs (see analytically: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/sustainable-development-goals/eu-whole-government-approach\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/sustainable-development-goals/eu-whole-government-approach_en))

Figure 1: European Commission’s Priorities



Source: European Commission 2024

The Commission’s comprehensive or “whole of government” approach to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) comprises several strands (see analytically: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/sustainable-development-goals/eu-whole-government-approach\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/sustainable-development-goals/eu-whole-government-approach_en)), within the framework of a multi-level governance approach.

**Figure 2: EC Whole Government Approach towards SDGs**



Source: European Commission 2024

### 3. Social sustainability challenges in Europe: On the State of play

The Social Policy-related Factors that contribute to social sustainability include all those factors related to the satisfaction of basic needs and the improvement of life quality. Therefore, they are related to the level of individual income, poverty, income distribution, unemployment, education, training and lifelong learning, housing, health, insurance and employment that satisfies both material and psychosocial needs (see Papadakis & Tzagkarakis 2024 and Tzagkarakis 2023). The achievement of these goals-factors can only be realized if there is a level of social justice that implies fairness in terms of opportunities for quality of life and participation in civil society (Nussbaum & Sen, 2002; Löffler, 2004).

The economic crisis, the pandemic and the current energy crisis highlight the necessity of the welfare state in protecting citizens from the multidimensional social risks that are being reproduced, multiplied or readjusted (see Papadakis & Tzagkarakis 2025).

At the international level, the socio-economic context is becoming more complex, with more interdependence and a speed of events that is constantly increasing (Schwab & Malleret, 2021), creating new challenges for tackling social vulnerability and enhancing social cohesion.

The Permacrisis era (multiple crises which form a context of permanent crisis) highlights that the respective public policies need to be more prepared for phenomena that one might mistakenly consider rare (see Oyelere et al 2023 and Papadakis & Tzagkarakis 2025).

The Covid-19 pandemic, as well as all other crises occurred the last decades, is not a "black swan" phenomenon but a "white swan" phenomenon (Schwab & Malleret, 2021: 34), as humanity has experienced similar situations many times in the past (Huremovic, 2019). At the level of social policy, permacrisis legacy indicates the importance of an organized, effective and inclusive welfare state (Papadakis & Tzagkarakis 2024).

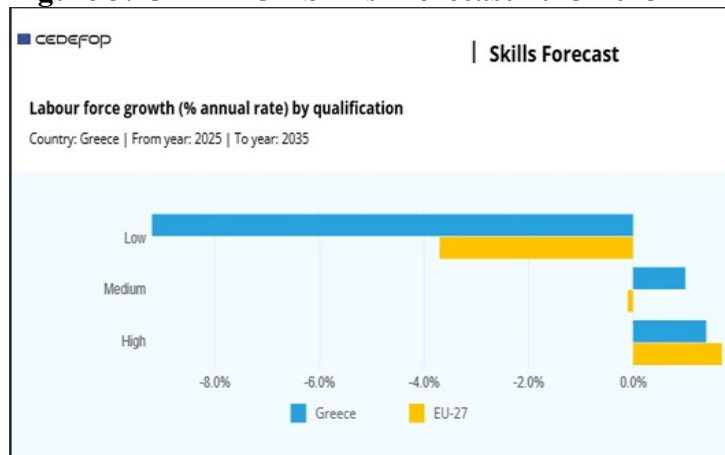
### 4. The role of employment for social sustainability

Employment is one of the key development factors and at the same time, constitutes the basic precondition for achieving social sustainability, as on the one hand, it plays a key role in meeting needs and on the other, it improves living conditions by combining the satisfaction of social and environmental factors.

Employment, which is the dominant factor for achieving individual autonomy, through the existence of appropriate norms, institutions and normative-protective frameworks, could achieve individual well-being if promoted in a socially just context within the framework of an active Welfare State (Drakaki et al 2022, Papadakis et al 2022).

Within the EU, despite the fact that the unemployment rate is at its lowest level since the onset of the 2008 Mega-Crisis (April 2024: 6%), the quality of employment seems to decrease, mainly due to the rising of precarious forms of employment (especially among youth- see Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018) which are associated with poverty and social exclusion (Papadakis et al 2021) and could result in a “new precariat” (Standing 2014).

**Figure 3: CEDEFOP Skills’ Forecast 2025-2025**

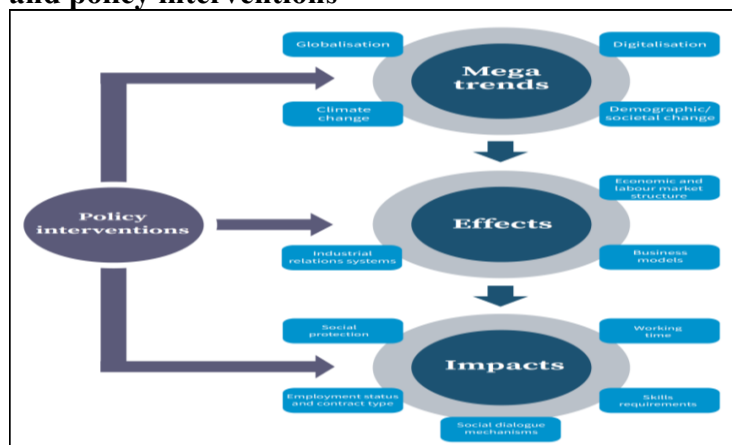


Source:CEDEFOP, 2024: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/skills-forecast>

The rising intensification and its social impact are due on the one hand to the impact of the multidimensional economic Recession on employment and labour market, and on the other hand due to Mega-Trends that are taking place and seem to gradually prevail (e.g. globalization, digital economy, digitalization, demographic and social changes, climate change, etc.) (Eurofound, 2020: 3-4).

These Mega-Trends had a clear impact on the structure of economy and labour market, industrial relations systems, and business models, having, in turn, direct impact on work relations, forms of employment and contracts types and, consequently, on social welfare systems in Europe (Eurofound, 2020: 3-4) (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Relationship between megatrends, effects and impacts on the labour market, and policy interventions**

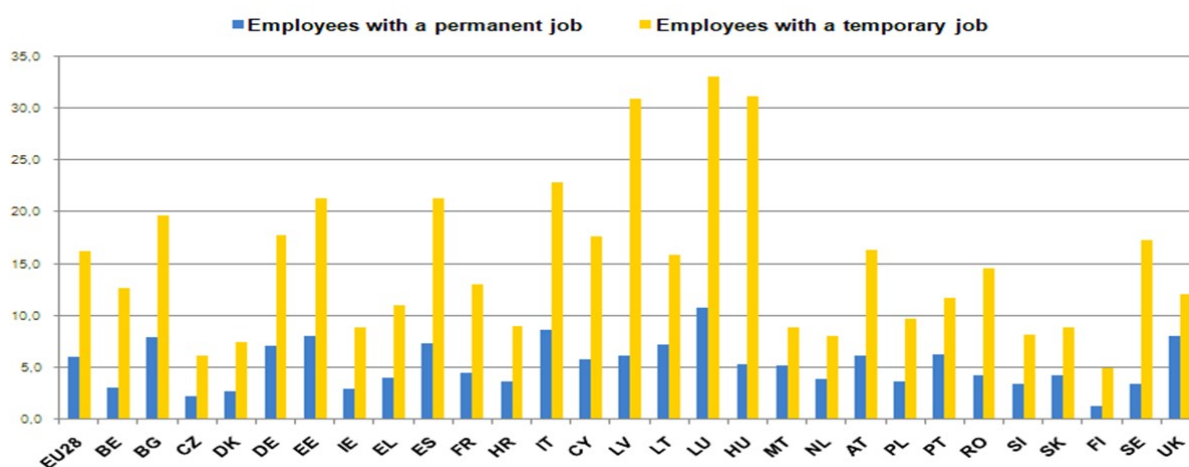


Source: Eurofound, 2020: 4.

At the point we should also mention the rising of precarious employment and its association with social vulnerability.

According to Eurostat (2020c), in 2020, part-time workers in the EU28 were twice the risk of poverty than those employed full-time. Moreover, during the years 2010-2019 the poverty risk rates (Eurostat, 2020a) recorded in part-time employment, were consistently higher for workers aged 16-24 than for those aged 25-54, with differences ranging from 1.6 to 3.3 percentage points. During the years 2010-2018, the risk of poverty in temporary employment increased considerably in the majority of EU28 countries (Eurostat, 2020b). The risk was almost three times higher for employees with temporary jobs, than for those with permanent jobs (Eurostat, 2020c).

**Figure 5: EU28 Member States, 2018 In-work at-risk-of-poverty rate by type of contract**



**Source:** Eurostat, 2020c (EU-SILC Survey, online data code [ilc\_iw05]), elaborated by the authors

## 5. The role of Education in Social Sustainability

### 5.1. On the current state of play

The role of Education is of vital importance for social inclusion and subsequently for social sustainability. However, in the EU severe and multi-parametric socio-economic inequalities affect education, where the inter-generational transition of educational achievement (or even poverty) is evident all across Europe and affects young people’s life chances (Papadakis 2022, Papadakis et al 2024).

Based on the data, published in the Education and Training Monitor 2021 (see European Commission 2021: 4 and Figure 2), at the end of the EU2020 strategy and its Educational branch, we can be optimistic in terms of the achievement of objectives set for tertiary education attainment, early childhood education, early leavers from education and training as well employment rate of recent graduates.

At the same time, we cannot be equally optimistic concerning the achievement of goals related to the reduction of low achievers in key competences (reading, maths, science), and participation in LLL till 2020. There is a clear progress within the recent years, yet several key challenges remain.

Figure 6: EU targets in education and training by 2020



Source: European Commission, 2021: 4

## 5.2. Socio-economic inequalities and Education

The EU average of early leavers from education and training is very close to achieve the 9% (specifically less than 9%) EU benchmark by 2030 (European Commission, 2021: 84). However, in 2021, the EU average of native-born early leavers was much lower (8.8%) than the respective EU average of foreign-born early leavers (22.4%) (see in detail Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey 2020. Online data code: [edat\_lfse\_02] and [edat\_lfse\_30] as cited in European Commission, 2021: 89).

Progress is continuing in the headline target for tertiary educational attainment, since the EU has met its target of raising the rate of tertiary educational attainment to at least 40% of the population (30-34 years). Within this context, Member States have agreed on an EU benchmark, that the share of 25-34 years with tertiary educational attainment should by at least 45% by 2030 (European Commission, 2021: 95). However, it should be mentioned that, “there are clear discrepancies between urban and rural areas; the average rate in cities (50.9%) being substantially higher than it is in rural areas (28.9%).” (European Commission, 2021: 95).

In spite of the prioritization of adults’ participation in LLL, even since the Lisbon Strategy period, in terms of the target related to adults’ participation in learning (aged 25-64), the progress that has been made from the M-S is very slow. In 2019 the EU average was 10.8%, decreasing by 1.6pps (9.2%) in 2020, 5.8 pps below the EU2020 benchmark of 15% (European Commission, 2021: 110). Additionally, a major deficit in the LLL, namely the under-representation of socially vulnerable groups and low skilled, is still visible and remains a challenge. As European Commission points out in 2018, low-skilled adults, -who need more than anyone else the access to learning, - participated the least in learning, while the age group of adults aged 25-34 are almost three times more likely to participate in learning than adults aged 55-64 (see in detail European Commission, 2019: 71-73, Papadakis 2022 and Papadakis & Drakaki 2023).

To conclude: It becomes evident that that there is a strong association between educational attainment and social outcomes (Papadakis & Drakaki 2023: 7), while the inter-generational transition of educational poverty still affects various aspects of both education and social inclusion (Papadakis 2022: 217-219).

“People with only basic education are almost three times more likely to live in poverty or social exclusion than those with tertiary education” (European Commission 2017: 9), while major inequalities “do not only raise concerns in terms of fairness, as they usually reflect a high risk of poverty and social exclusion, but also in economic terms, as they lead to an underutilization of human capital. Inter-generational transmission of poverty compounds these negative impacts” (E.C. 2017: 22).

Further, even though supply and demand in skills seem to move towards the same direction, supply seems to rise quite faster than demand when it comes to Higher Education Graduates, namely highly skilled human resources (see European Commission, 2017: 55-67). According to the CEDEFOP “Skills forecast (regarding labour force) on the basis of qualifications in the EU & Greece (2025-2035)”, there is a persistent tendency towards the increase of the gap, in terms of employability, between Higher Education Graduates and their less qualified peers (CEDEFOP 2024: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/skills-forecast>).

All the above mentioned set a challenge “that cannot be confronted by just a new Education, Training and LLL strategy (without underestimating its importance and necessity). It requires major transformations in the public policy complex and a new equilibrium between the macroeconomic agenda and the Welfare policies (in fond of the second) and subsequently a “brave” turn towards a new “re-distributive pragmatism” (Papadakis & Drakaki 2023: 7).

### **5.3. The role of Education in Environmental Sustainability**

As social sustainability means an inclusive society and welfare for all there should be a focus on the knowledge society as well as on investments in education, training, reskilling innovation and new technologies. In times of permacrisis, the welfare state is more necessary than ever. It is therefore essential for the state to undertake systematic interventions to boost demand and thus create new jobs, while enchasing environmental awareness and “sustainable-driven” ethics and actions. Integration into the labor market and investment in innovation should guide the educational process from infancy through the phases of vocational training and university education. Thus, closer cooperation between employment services and employers, as well as social economy players, is essential (see in detail: Papadakis & Tzagkarakis 2024: 110).

It should be noted at this point, that “EU Commission (2015) defines green as a skill to minimize resource consumption, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, recycle, use environmentally friendly products, protect the environment, and so on. It also refers to decision-making skills, including selecting processes and technologies in performing an activity considering environmental factors. Meanwhile.... UNESCO-UNEVOC (2017) defines green skills as the technical skills, knowledge values, and attitudes required in a job and in turn supports the socio-economic outcomes and a more sustainable environment. This argument coincides with the statement of (CEDEFOP European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2014) that the balance of generic skills, green skills and the improvement of existing work-related skills is more important in developing a sustainable economy” (Ramli et al 2022: 63-64). Within this context, the role of education and subsequently the role teachers in developing green skills, through both their teaching and their daily actions, becomes self-evident.

Alteris verbis, life skills for sustainable development, taught within the school system, are of vital importance (Fien et al., 2009), while “UNESCO has also been working with other agencies, most notably Cedefop, ILO and OECD, to develop a concerted approach to green skills, as reflected most clearly in the Inter-Agency Working Group’s policy recommendations on “meeting skill needs for green jobs” (IAWG, 2013) and Cedefop and OECD’s two recent Green Skills Fora (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2013, Cedefop and OECD, 2015)..... (and) the Cedefop OECD Green Skills Fora emphasized the link between skills and knowledge needs and inclusive green growth (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2013; Cedefop and OECD, 2015). This is further supported and reinforced by the policy trajectory committed to by individual nations” (McGrath & Powel 2016: 14).

## **6. On future jobs and skills, within the digital Era and the Lego-Flexibility Economy**

In the coming years, global employment supply is expected to increase jobs related to new technologies, artificial intelligence, digitization and automation, while it is expected to decrease traditional forms of employment such as secretarial support, accounting, administration and unskilled labor (World Economic Forum, 2020).

It is no longer a question of simply knowing some computer and videoconferencing skills, but of combining specialized digital technology knowledge with soft skills (such as problem-solving, team work, leadership, creativity & flexibility- see in detail: World Economic Forum, 2020, McKinsey Global Institute, 2021, Marr 2022, Papadakis 2019, Papadakis, Petousi, Tzagkarakis 2023).

Labor markets and economies that invest in this combination can identify opportunities of investment in innovation and, through, a truly, inclusive education as well as targeted training and retraining interventions, can lead the workforce in these directions and thus become better (leaders) in accelerating new digital age (Tzagkarakis 2023). Otherwise, they risk becoming laggards, which will have adverse effects on economic growth, employability (given the increasing role of the transformed economy- based society- see Garrouste & Rodrigues, 2014; Azmat et al 2012) and social sustainability (Papadakis & Tzagkarakis 2024).

Lego flexibility raises a new challenge, since it refers to the fact where the production of each product is divided into its component parts (see in detail Garud et al., 2002; Sennett, 2006, Tzagkarakis, 2023, Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2025: 7).

Lego flexibility depends on having an organizational form in which multifunctional teams are the smaller units and global competence teams are the global unit (Azmat, 2012; Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2024: 109).

Within this context of rapid digitalization of the economy and the labour market, there are different predictions on which are the most need future skills.

One of the most precise and inclusive is probably the one of Bernard Marr. According to him, the 20 Skills and Competencies Everyone Needs are the following: “*Digital Literacy/ Data Literacy/ Technical Skills/ Digital Threat Awareness/ Critical Thinking/ Judgment and Complex Decision-Making/ Emotional Intelligence and Empathy/ Creativity/ Collaboration and Working in Teams/ Interpersonal Communication/ Working in Gigs/ Adaptability and Flexibility/ Cultural Intelligence and Diversity Consciousness/ Ethical Awareness/ Leadership Skills/ Brand of “You” and Networking/ Time Management/ Curiosity and Continual Learning/ Embracing and Celebrating Change/ Looking After Yourself*” (Marr 2022: vii).

It becomes crystal clear that Education and Teachers’ role in the development of the vast majority of them (and especially the soft- transversal ones) is of vital importance.

## **7. Conclusions**

Globalization and increasing internationalization of Education has clearly resulted in a persistent demand for the further transformation of Education & Training Institutes, towards competitiveness and contribution to development and employability. “What is actually in stake is the employability, while another key issue is the harmonization with the economy and the labor market. That raises, of course, a lot of issues concerning the gradual transformation of the Education and the relation between Education and Society at Large” (Papadakis & Drakaki 2021: 105).

In addition, Mega-Trends such as digitalization have substantially affected all the above mentioned, which is crystal clear in large scale initiatives, in Europe, such as the “Bologna Process”, as well as the Education & Training Work (Framework) Programmes 2010 & 2020, within the framework of the relevant EU strategies (Lisbon Strategy and EU2020- see in detail Papadakis 2022b), while it affects the imitative towards the European Education Area in 2030.

It has become clear that the new policy priorities, at the EU level, focus on the strengthening of the close connection of Education, Training and HE with employability. However, according to the European Commission “some countries continue to suffer from the effects of the crisis on the employment levels of recent graduates” (European Commission 2019: 65; European Commission 2020a: 65-66; Papadakis, Drakaki, Kyridis, Papargyris 2017: 8- 10). All the above-mentioned pose new challenges both to Education Policy, the Active Employment Policies and subsequently to the whole public policy complex. In case it still remains without a viable and holistic policy response, both at the supranational (EU) and the national level, it could result in further undermining the social cohesion.

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