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## **Digitalisation and the future of work and social relations**

Conclusions of the CEC CALL conference, 23 – 25 April 2018, Berlin

The rapid development and technological change, often referred to as digitalisation, raise questions about its impact on work, society and social relations. During the coming decades will digitalisation create a golden age of job creation or destroy labour and exploit several groups of workers?

The CALL network, which gathered in Berlin, explored these questions. The digitalisation process has to be shaped and churches, as a part of society, need to contribute - a key question is: How?

As Christians, we can celebrate technological achievements developed by human beings as created co-creators; at the same time our prophetic calling urges us never to lose sight of those who are the victims of this development.

Newly emerging non-standard forms of work were recognised as in need of regulation. The speed of change means that laws are not keeping pace with circumstances.

In addition, education emerged as being a key factor for positive development within a cohesive society. This raises a further question: what are people educated for? Education takes varied forms including general education, vocational training, life-long learning and retraining in the work place.

### *Digitalisation and its impact on work*

Researchers have differing views concerning the effects of digitalisation. Some say that up to a half or third of current working places will be changed or disappear; at the same time, new jobs will be created. Some assume that new opportunities will compensate for lost jobs. We are concerned that the amount of precarious and non-standard work may increase.

Basic social political tools to confront the problems could be: shorter working hours, employee ownership, guaranteed jobs programmes and basic income. These options need to be discussed within society and across the field of political debate.

The challenge for churches is to be aware of these changes and in particular to notice those who may be in danger of losing their work or income.

### *New forms of work*

Structures of work are changing rapidly and are likely to have consequences for families and communities. We had a closer look at two main new forms of platform work: Crowdwork and Work on Demand via Apps (such as UBER and Deliveroo). These can be positive in that they create flexible work schedules. However, the status of the worker has become

precarious since workers are being treated as self-employed when in fact they are not autonomous but rather subordinated.

To overcome this precarious status, there is a need for a standard minimum wage for platform work, and the need for social protection for the workers. Platform work makes work possible seven days a week, affecting work/life balance, causing work to dominate life as a whole. Rest and the use of free time to reflect are key aspects of being human. This is why, for example, the protection of Sunday, as a day of rest, is an important matter and is under great pressure. Churches might also consider offering co-working spaces for crowd workers since they are typically isolated. This could help to provide a sense of community and social relationships.

### *Social relations and social cohesion*

There will be fewer semi-skilled jobs, and more high -skilled and low -skilled work. Society is being polarised, and such polarisation means that many workers are likely to lose their jobs. Society will find that there are people out of work who need to retrain and learn new skills, but who may well also become unemployed. Young people are particularly affected, and are at risk of both joblessness and depression. Changes in prospects can cause anxiety, discontent and a lack of security, which can lead to unrest and populism. Digitalisation makes it possible for companies to change outsourcing strategies quickly and frequently and this often has the effect that management decisions, which affect workers, are made far away from the work force. This development also undermines the political influence of local politicians in matters of local employment.

Parishes, operating at a local level, can contribute with the provision of meeting places for active reflection on values and social relations and can help to overcome social isolation. Yet, every level of church life should be involved, so that churches can influence social matters at the macro level.

### *Conclusion*

From this conference the participants took away some practical tools to engage with parishes and churches about the many issues raised through digitalisation. How do we live as Christians in an ever changing-world? The churches can provide a forum for reflection on local employment issues and support for those affected by these technological changes. The churches can also underline the significance of social justice and human dignity. Society is engaging with new models of communication that promise connectivity, but which are based more and more on profit. The churches are called to offer a model based on communion.

More than 50 participants attended the conference from European churches, many of whom had long-standing expertise and experience of Christian reflection on work issues. The CALL network offers opportunities for a European reflection on labour from a theological and social ethical perspective. It is under the auspices of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). We were supported by, and engaged in dialogue with, individuals representing different bodies: The ILO, trade unions, entrepreneurs, the business and financial sector, as well as theologians and academics, working in other fields of research.

Berlin, 25 April 2018