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Applying Sociological Knowledge to Produce Positive Social Change. - New Forms of Employment and the Case of Flexicurity

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Abstract

This paper considers flexicurity as a potential strategy to improve labour market, especially in times of economic crisis. Flexicurity is defined as a graded strategy aimed at simultaneously improving a) flexibility and security in the labour market b) social cohesion at a time of intense social changes with lack of social protection and instability c) flexible and reliable contractual arrangements (FCA) d) comprehensive lifelong learning (LLL) strategies e) effective active labour market policies (ALMP); and Modern social security systems (MSS). Thereafter, the paper presents a state of the art regarding the typologies of the flexicurity concept. Based on the state-of-the-art, and in order to explain the different levels of flexicurity strategies among EU member states, the authors suggest the criteria of examining and analysing the features of the good examples of flexibility policies at the regional and local level of EU. Based on those criteria, the authors then develop a typology of flexicurity initiatives. The specific characteristics of those initiatives are analysed. Finally, a discussion about the types of regions for application is taking place.

Keywords: Sociological knowledge, social change, flexicurity, typology of initiatives

Introduction

Flexicurity is defined by the European Commission (EC) as a “grated strategy aimed at simultaneously improving flexibility and security in the labour market” (EC, 2007a: 5). It has gained a prominent place in the European Employment Strategy, representing the balance between the labour market and the needs of employees for security against labour market risks. This strategic planning of balancing flexibility and security in relation to employment, income and social protection provides new innovative forms to combine economic growth and social cohesion.

In particular, the EC underlines the importance of an “*integrated flexicurity approach*” (European Commission, 2007, p. 4), which ‘*requires policies that simultaneously address the flexibility of labour markets, work organisation and labour relations, and security – employment security and social security*’ In practice, the EC reference to the flexicurity approach implies that the latter should guide the strategies and actions of the Member States (MS) in a broad range of policy domains and could possibly challenge existing relevant arrangements to a significant extent. The Basic components of flexicurity as identified by the EC are:

- Flexible and reliable contractual arrangements (FCA) (from the perspective of the employer and the employee, of “insiders” and “outsiders”) through modern labour laws, collective agreements and work organisation;
- Comprehensive lifelong learning (LLL) strategies to ensure the continual adaptability and employability of workers, particularly the most vulnerable;
- Effective active labour market policies (ALMP) that help people cope with rapid change, reduce unemployment spells and ease transitions to new jobs;
- Modern social security systems (MSSS) that provide adequate income support, encourage employment and facilitate labour market mobility. This includes broad coverage of social protection provisions (unemployment benefits, pensions and healthcare) that help people combine work with private and family responsibilities such as childcare.” (EC 2007, p. 5)

From flexible and active employment policies to the Flexicurity model

The European Employment Strategy (EES) has established full employment, encouragement of quality and employment productivity, cohesion support and better governance, especially through a large involvement of social organisations and consultation that is promoted by the political bodies, the institutional trade unions and the structural groups of NGOs and citizen communities as basic goals. In parallel, the European policy on social inclusion is characterised by the intention of a highly cohesion level and social protection and the enhancement of cooperation between members states forfighting against discriminations and exclusion from the labour market (Amsterdam’s Agreement, article 2, 136 vol, 139). In this framework, the National Action Plans for the Social Inclusion demonstrate the undertaking of a total national social plan, according to the integration guidelines (inclusive policies). It is

the first step for the development of a coherent community of active citizens (Nagopoulos, 20014). On the other side, the private sector as well as in independent bodies like NGOs, volunteer organisations and informal networks of social care participate in this new approach of welfare 'pluralism'.

Furthermore, the issue of labour relations in the European Union is a priority in the social agenda, proposing a comprehensive approach to address the transformations taking place in the global labour market and in European societies (COM/2000/0551 vol. I, Nagopoulos, 2013). Recognising the importance and significance of labour relations in the process of European integration, the Union is trying - through a series of policies, guidelines, strategies and concrete proposals - to achieve a reduction of unemployment rates, to improve the quality of jobs and to create new opportunities, mainly through the promotion of new flexible forms of work.

In the field of employment however there major developments have been ascertained focusing on the promotion of employment, the improvement of living and working conditions, the provision of adequate social protection, the social dialogue, the development of human resources to ensure a high and sustainable level of employment and combating of social exclusion, taking national specificities into account.

The first direct EU intervention in this field, was achieved with the adoption of the "Green Paper: partnership for a new organisation of work" (1997, Rontos K. – Nagopoulos N., 2014). According to the Union this initiative aims at informing about the flexible forms of the organisation of work and to determinate the content of these forms in order to improve the organisation of work. According to the European Commission the EU initiative "aims to introduce the Member States, social partners and other stakeholders to an open debate about how labour law can contribute to the promotion of flexibility combined with employment security, regardless of the form of the contract of employment". (Green Paper,COM (2006) 708). This is the first time that the term "flexicurity" (flexibility and security), appears in a community text, making the context of labour changes being promoted clear.

Having flexibility as a priority, the attempted changes are designed to reduce the protection of labour law, in particular through the reduction of the guarantees in collective redundancies and the cost of the individual ones, in return for creating a security system for employees, in order to be reintegrated into the labour market. Safety is also constituted, through the recognition of basic rights, the consolidation of the principles of equal treatment to the flexible employees and the redefinition of the concept of the unemployed.

Furthermore, the European strategy for Flexicurity relies on four main pillars: a. conclusion of flexible working contracts through modernising labour law, the conclusion of collective agreements and better organisation of working time, in the light of the interests of workers and employers, b. Use of reliable and flexible lifelong

learning strategies with a view to upgrading the skills of workers, particularly those, who belong to vulnerable social groups, c. Implementation of effective labour market policies aimed at the re-integration into the labour market, or the support of the transition to new jobs, d

Introduction of modern social security systems with a view to strengthening the social welfare state.

In fact, there is an effort made in the direction of balancing out the deregulation of the labour market resulting from the flexibility (mobility, fixed-term contracts, etc.) in order to achieve a higher level of adaptability of employment on entrepreneurial needs, satisfying the requests and demands of workers to secure employment and income but also the needs of vulnerable social groups, such as young people, mothers, immigrants, etc.

Empirical examples of flexicurity

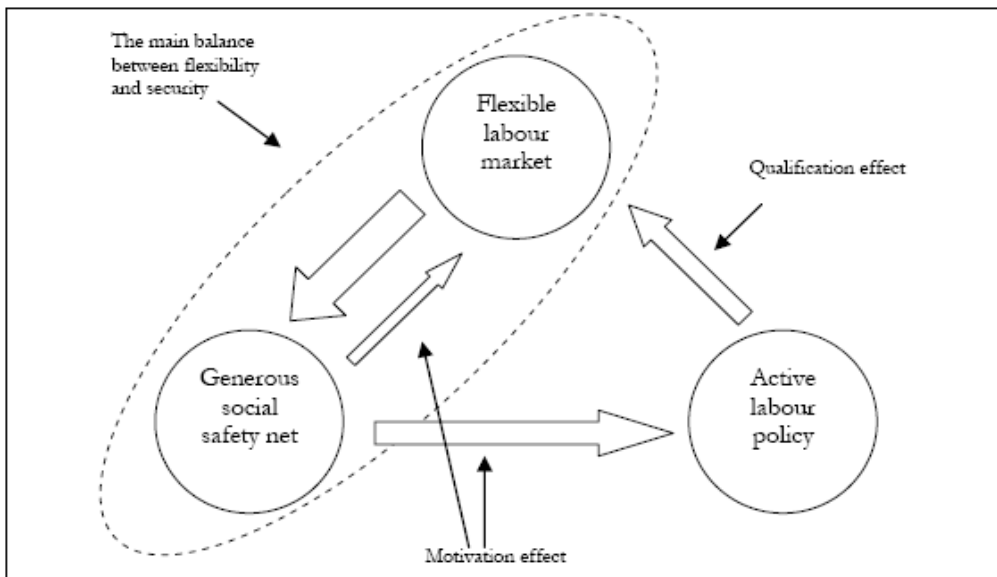
The flexicurity debate emphasises the interactions between policies and institutions; and flexicurity might be seen as an integrated approach aiming to optimise the combination of (or trade-off between) the above mentioned four components. However, paths towards flexicurity policies might be hampered by existing policy mixtures or trade-offs (Viebrock and Clasen, 2009). Many countries with strict employment protection tend to have less generous unemployment benefit programmes, whereas “*flexicurity countries*” adopt low levels of employment protection in combination with relatively generous unemployment benefits. Boeri et al. (2006) examined the trade-offs empirically for 28 countries and found that such trade-offs represent fairly stable politico-economic equilibrium. Calls for increasing labour market flexibility by reducing employment protection for regular contracts have therefore proved difficult to achieve politically. However, Boeri et al. 's (2003, 2006) theoretical assumptions and empirical analyses suggest that flexicurity policies consisting of less employment protection and more generous unemployment benefits should emerge in countries with less compressed wage structures. Accordingly, consensus of employment protection reforms is feasible when labour market flexibility is traded with unemployment insurance which re-distributes in favour of the low-skill segments of the labour force.

The Danish model of flexicurity rests on the combination of three elements:

- Flexible labour markets,
- Generous unemployment support and
- Strong emphasis on activation.

This combination has become known as the ‘golden triangle’ of the Danish labour market policy (see Madsen, 2004, p. 101). Given the international interest in the Danish flexicurity approach, the literature is plentiful (Madsen 2002, Bredgaard et al. 2005, Oorschot (2001, 2004a), Visser (2003) and Wilthagen et al. (2003). According

to the argument of the flexicurity idea “such policies can be beneficial to the firm, employees (on training leave) as well as unemployed persons because employers receive a grant which covers the cost of hiring an unemployed person replacing employees on leave” (Wilthagen, 2008). Additionally, the role of the social partners in this model is pivotal. The liberal employment protection system with its relatively easy hiring and firing of workers became acceptable for trade unions owing to the existence of a generous and state supported but mainly trade union-based unemployment insurance system. “For employers, on the other hand, generous unemployment benefits became acceptable as they facilitate flexible responses to shifting market demands in the form of laying workers off” (Clasen and Viebrock, 2008). The third element, in the form of active labour market policy, is crucial, as it supports the flow of workers between unemployment and employment by upgrading the skills of unemployed people through training. (Viebrock and Clasen, 2009).



Compiled using: Madsen (2003, 101), Bredgaard, Larsen (2007, 12), Andersen, Svarer (2007, 392).

Graph 1: The ‘golden triangle’ of the Danish labour market policy

Source: Viebrock and Clasen (2009)

The key feature of the Dutch flexicurity model is the combination of typical, flexible types of work with social security rights which are similar to those for persons in standard employment. The approach can be shortly described as “normalising non-standard work” (Visser, 2002; Wilthagen, 2008, p. 3). Active labour market programmes have been extended and regulations have been introduced to provide temporary agency workers with employment protection, rights to training, wage guarantees and supplementary pensions (Wilthagen, 2008).

As in Denmark, flexicurity policies have been portrayed as a primary cause of the positive labour market performance in the Netherlands. Similarly, the role of the social partners and social dialogue in developing and legitimising flexicurity policies has been emphasised in both countries. It is noted that, both Denmark and the Netherlands illustrate that alternative ways of combining flexibility with security are both theoretically possible and practically feasible. It has to be noted, however, that *“what is now called flexicurity is not the result of a rational policy design in either country but the outcome of gradual processes over time as well as political struggles and compromises”* (Madsen, 2002).

State of the art regarding flexicurity indicators and performance

The Employment Committee (EMCO) of the EU (2009), via considering the concept of flexicurity, as an important issue in the work programme of EMCO in 2007 and 2008 suggested that integrated flexicurity policies are examined as a critical tool for dealing with the effects of the economic crisis. They underlined that the assessment of flexicurity is complex and a holistic approach is essential showing the combination and the interaction between the four dimensions (based on the above mentioned four basic components of flexicurity drawn by the EC): contractual arrangements, lifelong learning, active labour market policies and modern social security systems.

EMCO (2007) used indicators regarding components of flexicurity which are directly linked to employment (*Flexible contractual arrangements* and *Active labour market policies*) and the employment related aspects of the two remaining components (*Lifelong learning* and *Social protection systems*). They also noted that the Social Protection Committee (SPC) has contributed to the selection of indicators for the social security component. They suggested that the indicators must be understood as measures indicating more or less of a phenomenon and that there may be other variables with a potential influence. In addition they suggested the following typology regarding flexicurity indicators:

- Input indicators of flexicurity (i. e. quantitative assessments of rules and regulations),
- Process indicators of flexicurity (i. e. the shares of particular groups of persons affected by policy),
- Output indicators (which should be identified for the four flexicurity components).

Table 1: Flexicurity indicators

Source: Employment Committee (EMCO) of EU (2009)

Chart showing input indicators	
Contractual arrangements	Access to flexitime
Lifelong learning systems	Public spending on human resources
AMP	Expenditure on LMP measures per person wanting to work
Social security systems	Expenditure on unemployment benefits per person wanting to work
Chart Showing Process indicators	
Contractual arrangements	Employees in permanent contracts of voluntary fixed-term or part time
Lifelong learning systems	Participation in lifelong learning
AMP	Participants in regular activation per person wanting to work
Social security systems	Unemployment benefit recipients per person wanting to work
Chart showing output indicators	
Contractual arrangements	Persons with upwards mobility or with the same employment security as previous year
Lifelong learning systems	Persons with upwards mobility or with the same employment status as previous year
AMP	Follow up of participants in regular activation measures/ training measures (depending on the data available)
Social security systems	At-risk-of-poverty rate of unemployed

Furthermore, a research was carried out in 2010 by the Joint Research Centre and DG Employment of the EC. This study developed statistical tools to measure flexicurity achievements of EU MS through a set of four composite indicators corresponding to the four dimensions of flexicurity as identified by the EC and presented above (LLL, ALMP, MSS and FCA). The classification of the EU-27 Countries according to their performance on those indicators is presented in the Table 2 following.

Table 2: The level of flexicurity performance of EU-27 MS

Source: JRC (2010)

	High Performance	Medium Performance	Low Performance
FCA Flexible and reliable contractual arrangements	Austria, Belgium,	Czech Republic	Hungary
	Bulgaria	Denmark	Ireland
	Spain	Germany	
	Finland	Italy	
	France	Lithuania	
	Greece	Luxemburg	
	The Netherlands	Sweden	
	Poland	Slovenia	
	Portugal	Slovakia	
	UK		
LLL lifelong learning	Austria,	Germany	Bulgaria
	Belgium,	Spain	Estonia
	Cyprus,	Malta	Greece
	Czech Republic,	Poland	Hungary
	Denmark	Portugal	Lithuania
	France	Slovenia	Latvia
	Luxemburg	Slovakia	Romania
	The Netherlands		
	Sweden		
ALMP active labour market policies	Austria,	Germany	Bulgaria, Czech Republic,
	Belgium,	Spain	Estonia
	Denmark	Finland	Hungary
	Luxemburg	France	Italy
	The Netherlands	Ireland	Lithuania
	Sweden	Poland	Latvia
	UK	Portugal	Romania
			Slovenia
			Slovakia
MSS Modern social security systems	Austria,	Czech Republic	Estonia
	Belgium,	Finland	Lithuania
	Cyprus,	Greece	Poland
	Germany,	Hungary	Slovenia
	Denmark	Ireland	Slovakia
	Spain	Luxemburg	
	France	Latvia	
	Italy	Malta	
	Portugal	The Netherlands	
	UK	Sweden	

In recent days, a number of typology and criteria about the concept of flexicurity have been developed. Viebrock and Clasen (2009) suggested that “...*the notion indicates a carefully balanced combination of flexibility, where it matters for job creation, and protection, where it is needed for social security. Flexicurity is based on the co-ordination of employment and social policies. Employment policies must create the best conditions for job growth, whereas social policies must guarantee acceptable levels of economic and social security to all, including those who enter de-regulated labour markets*”. They considered four different types of flexibility and the same for security. Based on Atkinson (1984) and on Wilthagen and Tros (2003, 2004) the types of flexibility identified are the following:

- External-numerical flexibility: the ease of hiring and firing workers and the use of flexible forms of labour contracts;
- Internal-numerical flexibility: the ability of companies to meet market fluctuations;
- Functional flexibility: the ability of firms to adjust and deploy the skills of their employees to match changing working task requirements; and
- Payment or wage flexibility: the ability to introduce variable pay based on performance or results.

Wilthagen and Tros (2003, 2004) present a typology of the employment security as follows:

- Job security: the certainty of retaining a specific job (with the same employer);
- Employment security: the certainty of remaining in paid work (but not necessarily in the same job or with the same employer), e. g. via training and education (and high levels of employment);
- Income security: the certainty of receiving adequate and stable levels of income in the event that paid work is interrupted or terminated; and
- Combination security: the reliance on being able to combine work with other—notably family—responsibilities and commitments, often discussed under the heading of “work–life balance”.

In addition, Bredgaard and Larsen (2008) suggested that the possibilities of combining flexibility and security are often presented in a matrix showing several possible combinations, presented at the Table 3 following. From this point of view, Bredgaard and Larsen (2008) suggested that “*Wilthagen and Tros’s matrix offers a heuristic tool which can be used to identify different flexicurity policies or combinations of flexibility and security for certain arrangements. It can also be used to identify relationships between flexibility and security in different national labour market regimes*”.

Table 3: The flexibility matrix

Source: Bredgaard and Larsen (2008), Centre for Labour Market Research at Aalborg University (CARMA), Denmark

	Job security	Employment	Income security	Combination security
Numerical flexibility				
Working time flexibility				
Functional flexibility				
Wage flexibility				

Other dimensions of the concept concern the level (national, regional, local or individual) and the range of coverage of different groups and sectors (the entire labour market, sectors, job types or groups). Finally, flexicurity arrangements can be established through different forms of regulation: law, collective agreements or individual work contracts. Interpreted this way, flexicurity is a complex and multi-dimensional concept that implies integration of different policy fields. Flexicurity arrangements are embedded in broader national contexts (welfare state models, collective bargaining systems, national traditions), just as there are many different forms of flexicurity both in Europe and within individual countries.

However, the criteria for the selection of some successful flexicurity examples and the analysis of their results are complex but challenging. A typology of flexicurity initiatives among EU countries and regions is developed in this paper and presented at the following section.

Development of a typology of flexicurity initiatives

In order to explain the different level of flexicurity performance of various EU member states, some previous scholars examine different characteristics (criteria) of the countries and regions. The first criterion is related to previous presented typologies of the flexifutity concept. In particular, each region or local area has different “level of each of the four dimensions of flexicurity” such as FCA Flexible and reliable contractual arrangements, LLL lifelong learning, ALMP active labour market policies and MSS Modern social security systems (Wilthagen and Tros, 2003, 2004). Additionally, in order to explain the different levels of flexicurity strategies among EU member states, important factors are considered to be the following:

‘The geographical and natural resources features’ of a region or local area. The distinguished geographical and natural characteristics of regions facilitate the development of different types of entrepreneurship venture and job creation. For

example, some regional and local areas have insular features and others continental features, while various areas have different natural resources for utilize.

‘The present local and regional infrastructure and administrative level’. Indeed, countries where LRAs have a better performance should be distinguished in comparison to those where that performance is less effective. In Northern Countries, such as Sweden, Denmark and the UK, this performance seems to be more effective. Nevertheless, the need for better co-ordination of the Local and Regional Agencies (LRAs) is noticed in the UK. In the Countries of the Central European, Asian and Balkan area the LRAs face more serious problems. The Czech Republic seems to be an exception to the above rule as the LRAs’ performance in this country is much better, with a large number of positive results (EU, 2010).

‘The role of social partners’ in implementing flexicurity policies. In particular, different European regions have different regulatory frameworks and a different political regime.

‘The employment - unemployment rate relationship’ at country level. There are regions in Northern Europe that have a low unemployment rate and a more permanent employment character, whilst several regions in southern Europe have high unemployment rate.

‘The level of technological development’ of region or local areas will play a critical role in flexicurity performance, due to the fact that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) constitute a prerequisite for flexible work arrangements.

Table 4 presents the criteria of examining and analyzing the features of the present “good examples” of flexibility policies, in the regional and local areas of EU. The first column includes the criteria and the second column presents some analytical characteristics of typology initiatives.

Table 4: Criteria and Keywords (Source: Author)

a. a	Criteria	Characteristics of typology Initiatives
1	The level of each of the four dimensions of flexicurity	FCA Flexible and reliable contractual arrangements, LLL lifelong learning, ALMP active labour market policies and MSS Modern social security systems
2	The geographical and natural resources features	Sunny weather, northern and southern countries, geothermic field, urbanisation level, natural isolation, social cohesion, cross-border cooperation.

3	The present local and regional infrastructure and administrative level	Central or regional decision making, LRAs administration.
4	The role of social partners	Employment association, NGOs
5	The employment – unemployment rate relationship	The level of unemployment, the level of employment.
6	The level of technological development	Advanced technological development, R&D

According to a combination of the above mentioned various characteristics of the flexicurity typology initiatives and based on the state-of-the-art, a typology of flexicurity initiatives could be considered, among the EU regions. Those types of regional flexicurity initiatives are presented at Table 5 following.

Table 5: Types of Regional Flexicurity Initiatives

Source: Authors' own

a/a	Type of initiative	Type of regions for implementation
1	Creation of more and better jobs and strengthening social cohesion and economic growth	All regions
2	Flexibility for both employees and employers	All regions
3	Equal opportunities and equality between different social groups	Regions in Southern Europe
4	Guarantee for full pension rights for flexible careers	All regions
5	Income protection and security	Underdeveloped regions, Geographically isolated regions (rural, island)
6	Investing in education and lifelong learning	Regions in Southern Europe
7	Improving access to the European labour market	Underdeveloped regions, Geographically isolated regions (rural, island)
8	Investing in Technological Developments, as a tool to improve human capital	Underdeveloped regions, Geographically isolated regions (rural, island)

Conclusions

Flexicurity is defined by the European Commission (EC) as a “grated strategy aimed at simultaneously improving flexibility and security in the labour market” (EC, 2007: 5). It has gained a prominent place in the European Employment Strategy, representing the balance between the labour market and the needs of employees for security against labour market risks. As it evokes a joint commitment to flexibility and security, it has always been a likely candidate to represent the European aspirations to combine economic growth and social cohesion. The “Basic components of flexicurity” as identified by the EC (EC 2007: 5) are considered to be the following: Flexible and reliable contractual arrangements (FCA); Comprehensive lifelong learning (LLL) strategies; Effective active labour market policies (ALMP); and Modern social security systems (MSS).

Flexicurity is usually considered as a potential strategy to improve labour market, especially in times of economic crisis. The cases of the Danish and the Dutch flexicurity models are the most popular. The Danish model of flexicurity rests on the combination of three elements: flexible labour markets, unemployment support and a strong emphasis on activation. This combination has become known as the ‘golden triangle’ of Danish labour market policy. In addition, the key element of the Dutch flexicurity model is the combination of typical, flexible types of work with social security rights which are similar to those for persons in standard employment. This approach is commonly described in the relevant literature as: “normalising non-standard work”.

Based on the state-of-the-art, and in order to explain the different levels of flexicurity strategies among EU member states, the authors suggest that the criteria of examining and analysing the features of the good examples of flexibility policies at the regional and local level of EU relate to: 1) the geographical and natural resources features’ of a region or local area; 2) the present local and regional infrastructure and administrative level; 3) the role of social partners for the application of flexicurity practices; 4) the level of the employment – unemployment rate relationship at the country level; 5) the present local and regional infrastructure and administrative level); and 6) the level of technological development of regional or local areas.

Finally, based on those criteria, the paper presents a typology of regional flexicurity initiatives. It is suggested that all the EU regions could implement the following initiatives: a) creation of more and better jobs and strengthening social cohesion and economic growth; b) development of flexibility policies for both employees and employers; and c) guarantee for full pension rights for flexible careers. In addition, Regions in Southern Europe could focus on: a) equal opportunities and equality between different social groups; and b) investing in education and lifelong learning. Especially underdeveloped regions, together to geographically isolated areas (rural, island) should develop flexicurity policies focusing additionally on: a) Investing in

Technological Developments, as a tool to improve human capital; b) Improving access to the European labor market; and c) Guarantee Income protection and security.

In any case, analysing flexicurity initiatives as well as making a comparison between regions in the EU about the flexicurity initiatives possible so to promote the important results of such initiatives are a necessary challenge now more than ever. Future work aims to focus on such a comparative analysis between EU regions in order to get more insight to the complex flexicurity concept, in the frame of regional and local level.

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