

## **Fostering diversity, inclusion, and sustainability in the labour market for all: The case of supported employment models**

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**Abstract:** A key objective of the Agenda for Sustainable Development is to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all. However, not only we are far from the notion of "decent" in face of work precarisation trends worldwide, but are also far from including "all" in this ambition. A wide range of vulnerable or disadvantaged groups continues to be excluded. This exploratory paper argues that more diverse and inclusive labour markets play a pivotal role in achieving sustainable development goals, fostering democratisation, reducing inequalities and achieving ecological sustainability. By analysing the field and its actors, models and practices, at the intersection of the public, private and social sectors, our research presents preliminary findings suggesting that supported employment for persons in situation of vulnerability fosters sustainable, inclusive, and decent work.

**Keywords:** decent work, social and labour integration, diversity and inclusion, supported employment. Sustainable Development Goals.

**Título:** Promover a diversidade, inclusão e sustentabilidade no mercado de trabalho para todas as pessoas: O caso dos modelos de emprego apoiado

**Resumo:** Um objectivo chave da Agenda para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável é alcançar emprego pleno e produtivo e trabalho digno para todos. No entanto, não apenas estamos longe da noção de "digno" face às tendências de precarização do trabalho a nível mundial, como também estamos longe de incluir "todos" nesta ambição. Um vasto leque de grupos vulneráveis ou desfavorecidos continua a ser excluído. Este artigo exploratório argumenta que mercados de trabalho mais diversos e inclusivos desempenham um papel fundamental na conquista dos objectivos de desenvolvimento sustentável, fomentando a democratização, reduzindo desigualdades e alcançando sustentabilidade ecológica. Ao analisar o campo e os seus actores, modelos e práticas, na intersecção dos sectores público, privado e social, a nossa investigação apresenta resultados preliminares que sugerem que o emprego apoiado para pessoas em situação de vulnerabilidade promove trabalho digno, inclusivo e sustentável.

**Palavras-chave:** trabalho digno, inclusão sociolaboral, diversidade e inclusão, emprego apoiado, Objetivos do Desenvolvimento Sustentável.

**Título:** Promoviendo la diversidad, inclusión y sostenibilidad en el mercado laboral para todas las personas: El caso de los modelos de empleo apoyado

**Resumen:** Un objetivo clave de la Agenda para el Desarrollo Sostenible es lograr el empleo pleno y productivo y trabajo digno para todos. Sin embargo, no sólo estamos lejos de la noción de "digno" ante las tendencias de precarización laboral en todo el mundo, sino que también estamos lejos de incluir a "todos" en esta ambición. Un amplio rango de grupos vulnerables o desfavorecidos continúa siendo excluido. Este artículo exploratorio argumenta que mercados laborales más diversos e inclusivos desempeñan un papel fundamental en la consecución de los objetivos de desarrollo sostenible, fomentando la democratización, reduciendo desigualdades y logrando la sostenibilidad ecológica. Al analizar el campo y de sus actores, modelos y prácticas, en la intersección de los sectores público, privado y social, nuestra investigación presenta hallazgos preliminares que sugieren que el empleo apoyado para personas en situación de vulnerabilidad fomenta un trabajo digno, inclusivo y sostenible.

**Palabras clave:** trabajo digno, inclusión sociolaboral, diversidad y la inclusión, empleo apoyado, Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible.

## Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, constitutes an urgent call for action to address critical issues of our times. Among its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 8 – “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” – holds paramount importance as it interconnects and directly contributes to all other SDGs. In particular, we refer to target 8.5, which aims to achieve “full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value” (UN, 2015, pp. 23 and 24).

Despite the universal recognition of the right to work, a wide range of groups classified as vulnerable or disadvantaged<sup>1</sup> still lacks adequate assurance of this fundamental right. Our central argument asserts that fostering more diverse and inclusive labour markets is crucial in attaining other development goals, such as promoting greater democratisation, reducing inequalities and achieving ecological sustainability. Various initiatives worldwide focused on the work integration of persons in situation of vulnerability provide compelling evidence supporting this argument, and they contribute to social innovation that drives sustainable development.

The methodological approach employed in this qualitative and exploratory study is founded upon direct observation of a Portuguese community of practice, which consists of professionals specialising in social and labour integration. These observations were conducted between January 2020 and June 2023, during bi-monthly sessions attended by professionals from social economy organizations and public sector institutions. The purpose of these gatherings has been to facilitate the exchange and discussion of strategies and challenges related to the successful integration of various vulnerable groups into the labour market. As participants within this ongoing community of practice, our research team closely monitored the interactions among professionals during a variety of initiatives, including online presentations, study visits, and face-to-face conferences. The culmination of these extensive observations has provided valuable insights for the present exploratory analysis of the field, its key stakeholders, and the prevailing models and practices.

While the paper primarily focuses on the Portuguese reality, it also considers the broader European framework, aiming to address three interconnected levels in promoting diversity and inclusion in labour markets: the policy level, the private sector, and the social economy, with a specific emphasis on Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs).

<sup>1</sup> According to the Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 of 17 June 2014 declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the internal market, there are several categories of vulnerable adults (Official Journal of the European Union, 2014, p. 17): “worker with disabilities” means any person who: (a) is recognised as worker with disabilities under national law; or (b) has long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment(s) which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in a work environment on an equal basis with other workers; “disadvantaged worker” means any person who: (a) has not been in regular paid employment for the previous 6 months; or (b) is between 15 and 24 years of age; or (c) has not attained an upper secondary educational or vocational qualification (International Standard Classification of Education 3) or is within two years after completing full-time education and who has not previously obtained his or her first regular paid employment; or (d) is over the age of 50 years; or (e) lives as a single adult with one or more dependents; or (f) works in a sector or profession in a Member State where the gender imbalance is at least 25 % higher than the average gender imbalance across all economic sectors in that Member State, and belongs to that underrepresented gender group; or (g) is a member of an ethnic minority within a Member State and who requires development of his or her linguistic, vocational training or work experience profile to enhance prospects of gaining access to stable employment”.

The main findings of the article underscore the pressing need for policies and practices that address the intersectional challenges of diversity and inclusion in the labour market as central for advancing the global pursuit of sustainable development, making the case for supported employment. By embracing the complexity and diversity of profiles that enrich both professional and societal contexts and reframing groups commonly labelled as “vulnerable” in terms of their unique potentialities and resources, this approach contributes to a new paradigm of sustainable development – one that respects a pace more aligned with planetary boundaries, while simultaneously reducing inequalities and democratising societies.

### 1. The paradoxes of the centrality of work and decent work

Decent and inclusive work is a pillar of international, European and national (in this case, Portuguese) strategic guidelines. On the global agenda, the promotion of decent work has been one of the main objectives of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) since 1999, defined as work carried out in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Decent work is legally recognised as a universal right and it still occupies a central place in the literature and in people’s discourses (Dejours & Deranty, 2010; Lopes, 2023), and it has been targeted as a central objective of the Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, with six years ahead to reach 2030, this goal is far from being granted. On the one hand, global trends deregulating labour rights threaten the possibilities of accessing decent and meaningful work (Schaffer & Streeck, 2013). On the other hand, for a wide range of groups classified as vulnerable or disadvantaged, it has never been assured in the first place.

The state-of-the-art regarding the work inclusion of people in vulnerable situations indicates that the complexity of this issue requires the development of integrated policies and practices (including social, labour and health policies and the articulation between public services, social economy organisations and employers) so that they can have a cohesive path towards a decent and lasting insertion in the labour market (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016). However, coordinated service provision would require profound changes to national and local governance structures (Heidenreich & Aurich-Berheide, 2014).

In the Portuguese case, there is still no truly integrated policy for social and work inclusion. Several measures of social support, training and/or employment coexist, but in a fragmented and precarious way, often with a perverse effect on people’s enclosure between unemployment and short experiences in informal or secondary labour markets, through cycles that are more vicious than virtuous. Yet, the country has a history of social innovation. In the 1990s, there was the transfer of good practices from the then-flourishing fields of local development, under the European Leader programme, resulting in measures such as the social employment market (1996), work integration enterprises (1998-2015), or territorial networks for employment (1998).

Social economy organizations on the ground break paths through dispersed and fragmented policies, in what has been called “*de facto* WISEs”, that is, organizations that integrate vulnerable people to work using legal forms that have not been designed specifically for WISEs. Within the scope of the Portuguese community of practices of Professionals for Social and Labour Integration, it was possible to identify a set of *de facto* WISEs and to generate the hypothesis that this paper aims to discuss in an exploratory manner: organizations supporting the work inclusion of persons in situation of vulnerability

develop approaches with great potential for social innovation contributing to achieving sustainable, inclusive and decent work.

## 2. Driving diversity and inclusion in the labour markets: an exploratory mapping of the field and the actors

Driving transformational change in diversity and inclusion comes from multiple sources (ILO, 2022). The main actors in this field include, but are not limited to, the following: (1) the public sector, which establishes the policies, laws, agendas and programmes; (2) the private sector, considering management practices of enterprises addressing inclusive recruitment and workplace diversity in the open labour market (3) the social economy organizations and their professionals, which develop practices specifically targeted at groups in situations of multiple vulnerabilities.

Historically, from the point of view of the public sphere, in the face of the social question of capitalism, which systematically has excluded sections of the population and threatened social cohesion, the emergence of Western Welfare States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century attempts to guarantee minimal levels of social protection (Castel, 1995). Its realisation reached higher standards with the economic prosperity after the Second World War and the consolidation of modern democracies, especially in the more developed European countries. After this period of economic prosperity, and in a context of consolidation of the European model, it became increasingly evident that economic progress had not fulfilled its promises in terms of social development and that poverty and social exclusion remained. The crisis of the 1970s was thus a turning point in the social approach of the European guidelines. Countries' attention began to focus on combating poverty and the first efforts to do so began to appear.

In the European context, WISEs have developed progressively, and in many cases spontaneously, showing enormous variability from country to country and region to region, according to the different national and regional traditions of action by public authorities and civil society organisations. Their main objective is “the social and professional integration of individuals who through their exclusion and their relegation to a marginal role in society have fallen victim to increasing social and professional handicaps”, as defined by the umbrella organization ENSIE - European Network of Social Integration Enterprises<sup>2</sup>.

The following is a historical review of the structuring of the field, closely following the emblematic works of the late 1990s by Estivill et al. (1997), Defourny et al. (1998) and Lipietz (2001), who reflect in depth on various European contexts. In Belgium, France and Italy, WISEs are tried and tested experiments, some consolidated and others emerging. In Spain, this process, although less structured, is marked by a tendency to recognise and frame the new dynamics of the social and solidarity economy at the regional level of public policies, and has been increasingly recognised at the National level of policymakers. Particularly in Belgium, France and Italy, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, these initiatives developed became more professional and were recognised through their own legal status, namely the status of Integration Enterprises, in the framework of the introduction of activation policies. This recognition was the result of interactions between the dynamics of public authorities and initiatives by civil society organisations. In addition to this recognition, the public authorities promoted a set of active measures that went through several orientations, particularly a strong investment in vocational training and a strong

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.ensie.org/wises-data/what-are-wises>.

experimentation of new methodologies and approaches to training and professional integration.

During the last decades of the 20th century, the quest for answers to the problem of social and professional integration of people in vulnerable situations intensified and diversified throughout Europe. It is from this new generation of active social policies that the concept of "insertion/integration becomes a keyword" (Hespanha, 2008, p.5). Governments search for different ways to deal with the major challenges of the labour market, along with societal changes such as population ageing, changes in family structures (Sarfati & Bonoli, 2002) or the refugee crisis, to mention only the most structural ones. Measures directly orientated towards professional insertion and measures for the development of skills competencies and the increase of qualifications are implemented (Oliveira das Neves & Graça, 2000). The success of modern welfare states depends on the relationship and interaction between social protection and employment policies (Sarfati & Bonoli, 2002).

Oliveira das Neves and Graça (2000) identify the different sets of responses that emerge at this time. The first set corresponds to career guidance measures, mainly targeting young people in their transition to the labour market, through the creation of follow-up services for young NEETs (Denmark and Sweden) or job search services (United Kingdom, Denmark and Luxembourg). A second type corresponds to measures encouraging entrepreneurship and self-employment (especially developed in the Southern countries), including technical and financial counselling services. A third set of measures are "work experience support measures", through subsidised work with hiring support for employers (notably quota systems for the integration of people with disabilities), training and work experience measures (throughout Europe, but especially in Belgium and Sweden) and sheltered employment schemes (targeted at people with disabilities).

In addition to these measures of direct influence on the social and labour integration of people in vulnerable situations, a set of anti-discriminatory social protection legislation has also emerged (Oliveira das Neves & Graça, 2000). The right to non-discrimination is recognised internationally, namely in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the United Nations Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the ILO Convention No. 111. At the European level, the various Member States are beginning to legislate along European Union lines, the so-called positive discrimination measures and other European law measures on non-discrimination.

Hence, the private sector is also a main actor in the field of diversity and inclusion, shaping the labour market through recruitment and management practices, as recognised in the approaches of *Strategic Diversity Management* and *Diversity and Inclusion Management*. The growing diversity of labour markets has led, since the 1990s, with the pioneering studies of Cox and Blake (1991), to the development of the theme of diversity management and its implications for the competitiveness of organisations. Indeed, the scientific literature is already considerable regarding the benefits of strategic diversity management. Chidiac (2020) presents a wide range of studies on the subject, which show tangible results in terms of improving organisational performance, increasing competitiveness and reducing turnover, as well as less tangible results in terms of improving the working environment, the relationship between employees and employer/management, and talent retention.



The argument in favour of decent and inclusive work is not only about the rights defended in a wide range of international standards, but also has repercussions in terms of social cohesion, as well as economic and financial benefits for employers. Indeed, the approach of Strategic Diversity Management in the workplace is based on the realisation of the added value of this diversity. Thus, the maximisation of difference is advocated, i.e. the transition from diversity management to the effective inclusion of the potential of diversity in human resources, through the creation of specific and specialised procedures tailored to the organisation (Chidiac, 2020). It is a question of conceiving this theme as a process that goes from diversity to inclusion. It begins with recognising the benefits of diversity - by implementing Human Resource Management and Development processes that ensure the right to equality and non-discrimination - and continues to the dimension of inclusion - by favouring an individualised approach to the specificities of each person (Kirton & Greene, 2000). While maintaining the focus on equal opportunities, the Diversity and Inclusion Management approach seeks to go beyond Strategic Diversity Management by combining a management approach focused on individuality and, as such, on the capabilities of each employee.

Thus, we can affirm that the theme of Diversity and Inclusion is increasingly visible politically and scientifically. This is reinforced in the ILO report published in April 2022 and entitled "Transforming enterprises through diversity and inclusion". This report rightly distinguishes between the concepts of equality, diversity and inclusion: *equality* aims to ensure that every person can thrive in and through work, experiencing equal opportunities; *diversity* in the workplace refers to similarities and differences related to personal characteristics (such as age, disability, gender, gender identity, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, people living with HIV), as well as values, responsibilities, hierarchical levels and roles; and *inclusion* is considered relational, i.e., it concerns the person's experience of the workplace and their sense of belonging.

Finally, in this field, social economy organisations historically play a central role in the social and professional integration of people at the margins of the labour market (Bengoetxea Alkorta & Fajardo García, 2020). Since the second half of the 1970s, there has been increasing attention to initiatives for the integration of people in vulnerable situations, i.e., inclusive employment centred on the social economy (Defourny et al., 1998). In the 1990s, in a study promoted by the European Commission (Estivill et al., 1997), WISEs were considered an effective instrument to combat poverty and social exclusion. It is in the context of individualised social support that initiatives are developed to support enterprises in their educational and socialising role (Ebersold, 2001), in a logic of insertion through economic activity. These initiatives seek to combine the integration of people considered to be outside the labour market with the development of productive activities that generate economic results. At the same time, they are part of a logic of measures to promote local development (Ebersold, 2001). Thus, in different European countries, a diverse set of insertion responses through economic activity emerges. At the European level, and despite the considerable differences among contexts, we can affirm that the field of social and labour integration of people in vulnerable situations has been consolidated. It is worth mentioning the foundation, in 2001, of the European Network for Social Integration Enterprises (ENSIE) which represents the interests of regional and national networks of WISE "striving for more inclusive and integrated forms of employment at European level". ENSIE brings together 29 social economy organisations representing 21 European countries.

Despite the conceptual polysemy, there is a common intention at the European level to address the problem of access to the labour market for all people. In this sense, the Lisbon Strategy represents a milestone with regard to employment policies aimed at marginalised groups in the labour market (Kerschbaumer & Boost, 2021). Active labour market policies seek to increase access to the labour market for disadvantaged groups by encouraging hiring and tackling barriers to accessing work (van der Zwan & de Beer, as cited in Bonoli, 2011). Integration policies shape the entire practice of professionals intervening in the field of labour insertion, which is itself also structured according to existing policies. We can say that integration policy measures foresee, organise and generate the trajectories and itineraries of the beneficiaries (Castra, 2003).

### 3. Supported employment – models and practices

The policies aiming to integrate people in vulnerable situations into the labour market vary according to the social-historical context as well as the approach adopted. Indeed, traditional approaches of vocational rehabilitation and reintegration remain characterised by their poor outcomes in terms of professional integration, particularly in an overstretched job market. In Portugal, measures such as Professional Internships, Employment-Insertion Contracts and Vocational Training prove to be ineffective in the effective and decent integration into the regular labour market (Hespanha & Caleiras, 2017). In contrast, supported employment is of considerable interest because of its higher efficiency according to the convergent results of a large number of studies (Pachoud & Allemand, 2013). This approach recognises that the work situation is the most favourable framework to develop skills, from a work-based learning perspective. Indeed, Roblot and Semedo (2018) systematise some of the potentialities that *Apprentissage en Situation de Travail* (Work-based Learning) has revealed regarding the progress of the person, namely through trial and error and self-assessment.

As it is a pedagogical modality that recognises the real work context as a potential for learning and developing skills, it also allows to give meaning to skills by highlighting their usefulness (Roblot & Semedo, 2018). Supported employment is based on a framework that translates into a set of principles of intervention with the supported person. As a polysemic concept and a complex reality (Paul, 2020), the concept of support has evolved significantly in recent years. Until the end of the 1970s, the dominant concept was that of *social suivi*, passing to that of social support in the early 1980s, being extended to the field of integration in the 2000s (Boulayoune, 2012; Lima & Trombert, 2017; Divay, 2012). In fact, in the 1990s, there was a massive and widespread use of the concept of support in various sectors - education, training, health, guidance, among others -, moving it away from a therapeutic logic (Paul, 2020). A concept that, until now, belonged to the realm of everyday life, gains a professionalising dimension (Paul, 2020) and, as such, is covered with theoretical-conceptual assumptions. In fact, support becomes social, with the reinforcement of social aid measures and, for instance in France, already includes supporting measures. The main principles of this approach are the individualised support; the empowerment of the supported person, reinforcing his/her self-determination; and the proximity between the client and the professional (Martinho, 2022; Paul, 2020; Pierrefeu & Pachoud, 2014; Castra, 2003; Ebersold, 2001). This professional acts as a job coach and guides the client to access, return to employment and have success in the regular labour market.

Historically, policy orientations in supporting labour market integration have shifted from sheltered employment models to supported employment models. Portugal is paradigmatic of this evolution since it currently has neither supported employment neither Work Integration Social Enterprise policy measures. Based on the reality observed, namely in the community of practice composed of job coaches, we have adapted Pachoud and Allemand (2013) proposal for classifying supported employment models. Figure 1 classifies the practices into three main models: i) the sheltered employment model - which corresponds to permanent employment enclaves; ii) the transitional employment model - which corresponds to the gradual development of skills for the regular labour market; iii) the supported employment model - through labour market intermediaries. The transitional model finds similarities with the sheltered model, because it is based on the selling of goods and services. It also finds similarities with the matching between supply and demand in the labour market, because of its focus on being a stepping stone to the regular labour market.

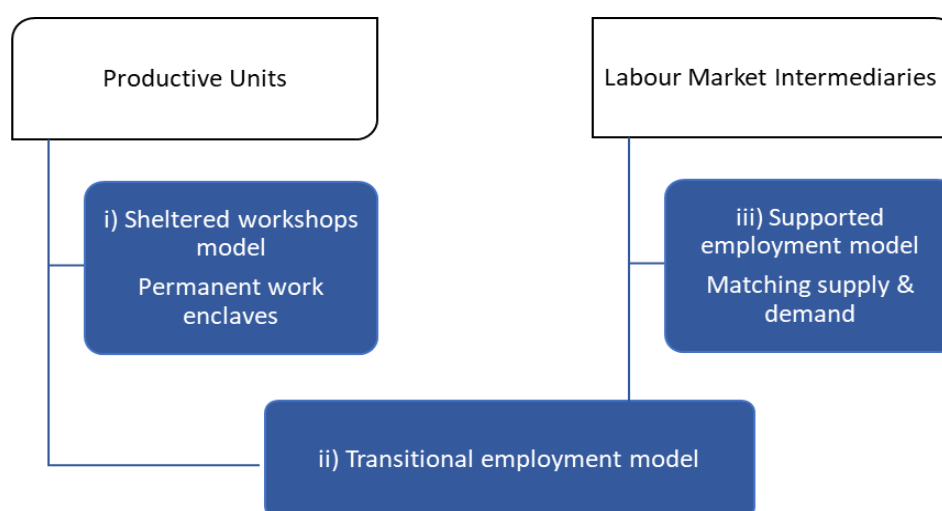


Figure 1. Supported employment models

Source: Adapted from Pachoud & Allemand (2013)

We proceed in this section to discuss a set of measures based on these three models and illustrate the practices of practitioners – as job coaches – who are part of the analysed community of practice.

### 3.1. The sheltered employment model

Before 1998, sheltered employment was the prevailing model in Europe, but there is now a trend towards community employment and the use of active labour market involvement strategies (Beyer et al., 2010). Sheltered workshops are among the proposed models to address the right to work and diversity of support needs of persons with disabilities. Broadly, the notion of sheltered workshops refers to work settings foreseen specifically for employing persons with disabilities, or where workers with disabilities are disproportionately represented when compared with those without disabilities. There are two main types of sheltered workshops: *traditional sheltered workshops* provide long-term permanent places of employment for people with disabilities, outside the open labour



market; *transitional sheltered workshops* aim to provide people with disabilities with the support and skills needed to transition to the regular labour market.

Debates on sheltered workshops have particularly focused on the statute of these workers in the face of the open labour market. Early debates in the U.S. have questioned whether sheltered workshops actually *accommodate* persons with disabilities (by adapting the workstation, job structure and work environment and providing training to maximise their proactive capacity and potential) or *exploit* these persons (by restraining their rights, such as the right to live in the least restrictive environment and the right to earn a decent income) (Whitehead, 1979). In the EU context, there is a wide diversity in terms of the legal status of people employed in sheltered workshops, which might differ from that of the open labour market, with an impact on salary norms and other rights (Hammersley, 2021). Most EU countries (Austria, Croatia, Portugal, Estonia, Cyprus, France, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Spain) entitle persons with disabilities to the same level of wage protection as other workers so that they cannot receive less than the minimum wage. However, in many countries, disabled workers employed in sheltered employment schemes (or similar) are excluded from this protection/entitlement to the minimum wage. For example, in Austria, the occupation of disabled people in sheltered workshops is not considered employment, although they go to work on a regular basis and produce goods or services – instead of having a wage for their work, they only get paid pocket money.

Another question that has been raised concerns the fact that people with intellectual disabilities, by being placed in sheltered work, can remain segregated and excluded from their wider communities (May-Simera, 2018). This idea comes from the sheltered workshops being facilities protected from regular work settings, often in isolated places. Yet, it is hard to make comparisons between sheltered workshops and other work forms, once sheltered workshops continue to be regarded as therapeutic or rehabilitative.

More recently, the issue of participation in society by persons with disabilities has also been raised in relation to sheltered workshops. An ethnographic study of sheltered workshops in the Netherlands and Portugal (Sebrechts & Tonkens, 2023) has questioned the meaning of the ideal of participation from the perspective of people with intellectual disabilities, analysing how it is experienced inside sheltered workshops and to what extent it offers meaningful experiences of participation. This study shows that the three aspects of participation that people with disabilities value cannot be easily reconciled: the Dutch context is focused on *having a choice* (what you do for yourself), while the Portuguese one is focused on experiencing *social interaction* and *making a contribution*, both failing the other dimension.

From another standpoint, stakeholders in this field have argued that “rather than opposing sheltered and mainstream forms of employment, they could be seen as various options that a worker with a disability could get support from over his or her career pathways” (D-WISE Network, 2020). The Academic Network of European Disability Experts (ANED) asserts that sheltered employment is, for many people with disabilities, the only possibility of obtaining employment, especially for those who are perceived as having a reduced work capacity or who are unable to find employment in the open labour market. In some cases, employment in a sheltered workshop will reflect the free choice of persons with disabilities. However, in many cases, people may feel or know that they have no choice but to accept a placement in a sheltered workshop, whether this is against their wishes or not (Waddington et al., 2018).

*Centros Especiales de Empleo* is a Spanish public policy which has been recognised since 1982, by Law 13/1982 of 7 April on the social integration of the disabled. In its article 41, it is stated that people with disabilities whose incapacity makes it difficult for them to enter the labour market must be professionally integrated into Special Employment Centres. People access these centres via employment centres and are referred to this protected employment policy measure. The person with disabilities integrated into a Special Employment Centre signs an employment contract for an indefinite period. The main objective of the Special Employment Centres is to carry out a productive activity, with the aim of ensuring paid employment for persons with disabilities (Art. 42). The Special Employment Centres have undergone legislative changes since their recognition in 1982 (Rodrigues González, 2020; Pachón, 2020). We highlight, in 2013, Royal Legislative Decree 1/2013, of 29 November - of the consolidated text of the General Law on people with disabilities and their inclusion in the labour market - and, in 2017, Law 9/2017 - of creation of the Special Employment Centres of social initiative. These are promoted and owned more than 50% by one or more public or private entities, non-profit or that have their social character recognised in their statutes. In Portugal, in 1983 (Decree-Law no. 40/83, of 25 January), the measure – *Centro de Emprego Protegido* – was enacted as a sheltered workshop. Those productive structures are oriented to support people with disabilities and incapacity, as well as people with reduced working capacity. Although the measure is no longer active, the productive structures that were set up remain in operation. One of the members of the community of practice of professionals for work integration considers that this measure has revealed great results over the years. In fact, we could even observe directly the integration of different workers with disabilities that have been integrated for over 20 or 30 years. Those workers are very productive, but their health situation, namely regarding mental health and cognitive disability, makes daily labour life unstable. According to the job-coach, this instability would have made it difficult to maintain such a long-term employment relationship in the regular labour market.

### 3.2. The transitional employment model

Different models of WISEs serve the purpose of skills training and as a stepping stone for integration into the regular labour market. The common idea of the different models is that in WISEs people will have training and will have the opportunity to practice and to improve their employability skills. For instance, in France, Austria, Spain and Portugal, it has been legislated as a transitional employment model, mostly through on-the-job training.

In France, there is a range of measures to create enterprises for the work integration of vulnerable groups, such as WISEs – which operate in the commercial sector with a social purpose, through productive activity, *atelier* and *chantier d'insetion* – which offer a professional activity to unemployed people facing social and professional issues (Dewandeler et al., 2021). Those are different measures for specific target groups and pathways into the regular labour market, from the far away to the closest to employment.

In Austria, there are mainly three types of social enterprises: *Sozialökonomischer Betrieb* (socio-economic enterprises), *Gemeinnützige Beschäftigungsprojekte/ Gemeinnützige Beschäftigungsgesellschaften* (non-profit employment projects/companies) and *Arbeitstrainingszentrum* (work training centres). More recently, some studies focus on ECO-WISEs in Austria that are defined by their ecological orientation (Anastasiadis, 2017). The main difference between these three types of enterprises lies in the financial

guidelines defined by the Austrian Labour Market Service for each type of enterprise (Gruber, 2003). Anyway, there is strong government intervention in policy and funding, with a clear focus on the transition model for the regular labour market (Associação A3S, 2016).

In Spain, WISEs are legislated (Ley 44/2007, de 13 de diciembre) and also correspond to an insertion model of transitional employment model into the regular labour market. The national law aims to establish a legal environment that promotes the labour insertion of people in situations of social exclusion (Art. 1). Like the regulations of the pioneering autonomous communities, Law 44/2007, of 13 December, establishes that the activities carried out by the Insertion Companies must have an economic nature of production of goods and services, whose social purpose is the integration and training of people in situations of vulnerability as a transition to integration into the regular labour market (Elizaga, 2016). Thus, it is also a transitional model, lasting between 1 and 3 years (Art. 15), and the monitoring methodology is explained through a socio-labour insertion itinerary (Art. 3). Calavia (2020) also classifies integration companies as labour market intermediation agents.

Portugal presents a peculiar situation in the European context regarding the legal recognition of the public policy measure of WISE (Quintão et al., 2018). In fact, from 1998 to 2015, there was a formal Law of Insertion Companies in force in Portugal, embodied in Ordinance No. 348-A/98, 18 June. This measure was assumed as an active employment policy. It was aimed at vulnerable groups in relation to employment, namely: people with low qualifications and self-esteem, lack of a support system, as well as specific health problems and/or drug addiction (Preamble to Ordinance No. 348-A/98, 18 June). It was a transitional model, in which the mentee was for a period of up to six months in training and up to two years with a labour contract in the WISE.

Although the legislation is no longer in force, some of the job coaches who are part of the community of practice have set up what could be considered businesses for inclusion. Faced with the lack of specific measures for WISEs, productive units have been created whose main objective is to develop employability skills and prepare people for effective integration into the labour market. Some social economy organisations that support these target groups create social and inclusive businesses as incremental activities, others even create enterprises with their own status. One of the community of practice members created a classic commercial enterprise in order to achieve the objective of the economic dimension. However, this enterprise, not being considered social, does not differ from those operating in the profit sector, and therefore did not have access to support for the development of its social activity. As a result, and due to the paradox between the pursuit of social and economic objectives, it was forced to close its activity, and it was not possible to continue in the regular market, in competition with capitalist companies. In fact, in a company dedicated to the integration of people in vulnerable situations, not only professionals from the productive and management areas are needed, but first of all, job coaches who ensure the pedagogical and social dimension of the enterprise. Thus, despite the success of the company in relation to demand, the lack of subsidies to support women who were away from the labour market became unsustainable. In addition, the professionals also experienced difficulties in the management of the enterprise, since the basic training of the team is in the areas of social sciences. Even for the social and inclusive businesses, the job coaches mentioned that

they face a range of formal barriers, regarding the legal framework to be able to sell goods and also the way they can remunerate the workers.

### 3.3. The supported employment model - Labour Market Intermediaries

The last model is the one that is recognised as the most inclusive. It corresponds to an approach based on supported employment and follow-up after the integration into a regular enterprise, but also the idea of diversity and inclusion of each company.

Some countries (e.g. Belgium, Italy) have regulated their Work Integration Social Enterprises as permanent jobs in the regular labour market. Those organisations have a mix-audience of workers – disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged workers. In fact, the Italian social cooperatives (Law No. 381 of November 1991) type B are recognised as organisations dedicated to promoting the integration of disadvantaged workers into the labour market through real activities of production of goods and services aimed at private consumers or public entities (Borzaga et al., 2017; Fajardo García, 2013). Belgium legislation varies from one region to another, but for instance the Wallonie has implemented the measures *Work Integration Social Enterprises* and *Employment development Initiative in the sector of proximity services with social purposes*<sup>3</sup>. There is a strong social economy movement and a strong partnership with the state. After extensive experimentation and coexistence of different models, the predominant model nowadays involves creating permanent jobs for the disadvantaged. It is possible to externalise the function of job coach into specialised networks, because there are public funds to finance mainly wages of people in the integration process and also job coaches (Associação A3S, 2016).

Those kind of organisations can be classified as labour market intermediaries – as organisations that stand between candidates and employers (Cooney et al., 2022; van Berkel et al. 2017). These labour market intermediaries are precisely dedicated to support people in vulnerable situations towards increasing autonomy in a path that aims to end with work integration in the regular labour market. As they specialise in the labour market integration of people in vulnerable situations, they are an important partner for employers, in particular because of their specific know-how and the possibility of reducing the costs of the recruitment and selection process (Bonet et al., 2013; van Berkel et al., 2017). Labour market intermediaries provide counselling services for candidates and also for regular companies, as it is the case of the specialised networks in Belgium.

Some countries seek to diversify these models, for example, in Spain, the *Centros Especiales de Empleo* (Special employment centres) can also have *Enclaves de laborales*. *Enclaves laborales* which are a public policy for the employment of people with disability (Royal Decree 290/2004, of 20 February 2004). This measure aims to promote the transition from employment in *special employment centres* to employment in companies in the regular labour market for people with disabilities. These people carry out productive activities in a company, but they are supervised all the time by a job coach.

By way of illustration, and because it is precisely an intervention methodology that works both on the supply side and on the programme side, we highlight the *Incorpora* programme. This programme was launched in Spain in 2006 and implemented in Portugal in 2017, financed by private actors - *La Caixa Foundation*, with *Banco BPI* and *CaixaBank*. It is a mechanism specifically geared towards the work integration of people in vulnerable

<sup>3</sup> Originally in French, *Entreprises d'insertion* and *Initiative de développement de l'emploi dans le secteur des services de proximité à finalité sociale*.



situations, whether they are employees or self-employed. It is, however, essentially an intermediation programme between the business community and beneficiaries at risk of vulnerability. In addition to the job coach function, the programme also includes the function of prospecting for potential employers.

In Portugal, the employment and social policy paradigm is very clear, with a total shift towards the regular labour market. With the extinction of previous measures such as WISE or the sheltered employment centres, now the focus is on employment in the labour market with some support measures to the hiring and to oblige hiring diverse human resources.

Decree-Law no. 290/2009 of 12 October lays the foundations for the so-called open market-supported employment measure. This is aimed at employers of people with disabilities and reduced working capacity (not less than 30% and not more than 90%), in supported employment. It aims to promote the exercise of professional activity and the development of personal, social and professional skills, for a duration of 36 months, potentially extendable annually.

In line with the international trend, in Portugal, policies are oriented towards the supply side, namely Law No. 4/2019<sup>4</sup>, 10 January, which is paradigmatic of this approach. This law defines employment quotas, in the private sector, for people with disabilities, with a degree of disability equal to or greater than 60%, covering medium and large companies (more than 1% in medium-sized companies and more than 2% in large companies).

For other groups in vulnerable situations, besides people with disabilities, policies are mainly aimed at supporting counselling work and matching supply and demand. All members of the community of practice work as counsellors and as bridges between candidates and employers. They act as labour market intermediaries. Most of them referred that employers are unfamiliar with the target groups of insertion, manifesting in some cases initial prejudice in joint work and intermediation. The job coach therefore plays a role in deconstructing stereotypes, in particular by clarifying the capabilities of the people they support, as well as by providing support for hiring. They therefore play an educational and awareness-raising role. Calling for employers' social responsibility and/or advocating for the advantages of Diversity and Inclusion in the labour market are indeed roles played by integration agents, along with matching supply and demand.

#### 4. Contributions towards sustainable, inclusive and decent work

The conclusion of this exploratory research highlights the importance of reframing target groups commonly labelled as vulnerable not solely in terms of their needs and weaknesses but also in terms of their capacities and potentialities, such as resilience and creativity, developed in adverse contexts. It advocates for a shift away from the deficit logic and recognises the complexity of individuals' profiles by combining their specific needs with their unique resources. Emphasising a decent and inclusive labour market should not merely focus on equal opportunities for all, but also on embracing the diversity of profiles that enrich both professional and societal contexts. This also implies that any model should take into account the intersectionality of situations that supported persons face. For instance, European and national statistics show that women with disabilities face even more barriers than men, both in terms of access to education and to employment (Pinto &

<sup>4</sup> This law defines employment quotas, in the private sector, for people with disabilities, with a degree of disability equal to or greater than 60%, covering medium and large companies (more than 1% in medium companies and more than 2% in large companies).



Pinto, 2023). Moreover, the potentially slower rhythms of people in vulnerable situations and of supported employment frameworks contributes to a new paradigm of sustainable development that prioritises eco-social sustainability over continuous growth.

Based on a model of activation of the labour market and people in unemployment, the monitoring of people who are not in the labour market is of greater importance. Portugal has shown progress in addressing the labour market integration of individuals with complex needs, following a trend observed internationally. The country has implemented policies, such as employment quotas for people with disabilities, and there has been an increase in attention to diversity and inclusion issues.

The involvement of employers in employment policies has become a global trend, where corporate social responsibility plays a significant role (see Commission of the European Communities, 2001). Entities dedicated to the intermediation between supply and demand, such as Intermediation Agencies, are gaining visibility in facilitating the inclusion of vulnerable individuals into the labour market. Their specialised expertise in supporting people in vulnerable situations is crucial for employers, as it helps reduce recruitment and selection costs.

Overall, the analysis we have advanced in this paper underscores the pressing need for policies and practices that address the intersectional challenges of diversity and inclusion in the labour market. Beyond these concerns, it is imperative that such efforts also address the issues of precarious and limited employment opportunities. A labour market that includes a diversity of profiles, resources and rhythms of people contributes towards making work more sustainable, inclusive and decent to all, and should be viewed as integral to achieving not just the aims of SDG 8, but also the broader ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, related to reducing inequalities, promoting greater democratisation, and achieving ecological sustainability. In sum, this article advocates for a paradigm shift in labour market policies and practices, recognising the potential and unique contributions of individuals in vulnerable situations and aiming for a labour market that benefits everyone. Ultimately, it recalls that labour is a force for positive transformation and for advancing the global pursuit of sustainable development.

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