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Social Rights and Sustainable Development: A Two-Way Street?

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Abstract

Sustainable development concerns the future perspective of natural systems in combination with the social and policy challenges faced by humanity. The three pillars of sustainable development (socio-cultural, economic, environmental) are closely interconnected. This paper examines the role of the social pillar of sustainable development. In particular, social rights aim at the establishment of degrees of social equity and security. Viewed as a component of human rights arising from the social contract, social rights are closely linked to notions of governance associated with social responsibility and social obligations. Their major development took place in the period after the Second World War. In this paper we will focus on employment, education and health care. While the pillars of sustainable development are interconnected, welfare policies are also obviously dependent on economic and cultural factors. We argue that social rights enhance social capital under certain conditions. More generally, we argue that sustainable development and social responsibility are mutually reinforcing. The purpose of this paper is, firstly, to discuss the role of social rights in the promotion of sustainable development and, secondly, to examine the policy paths and governance modes that enhance both social sustainability and sustainable development.

Keywords: Governance, social sustainability, policy, social rights, sustainable development, health policy

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Motto:
"One change always leaves the door open for the establishment of others*" Niccolò Machiavelli, "The Prince".*

1. Introduction

Humanity has always grappled with change. However the transformation of societies and of their relations with the environment has accelerated in the decades since the 1950s due – at least in part – to technological breakthroughs. Changes refer to several factors such as social, environmental, cultural, natural, technological and economic. The majority of the changes may create hazards to life and for this specific reason the importance of their recognition by systems of governance is critical. This new reality that is formulated by every minor or major change "*coincides with more positive developments new to this century"* (United Nations, 1987: 11).

In order to preserve humanity and societal development there was the necessity to introduce ideals and ways of governing multiple factors. Generally, this procedure is known as "Sustainable Development". However, its multidimensional and decomposite character led to the introduction of myriad definition attempts. According to Meadowcroft (1999) Sustainable Development tries to maintain a positive process of social change. Furthermore, it raises concern about the potency of natural systems along with the social challenges faced by humanity (including the social perspective).

The theory of sustainable development suggests a three pillar categorization which includes the social, environmental and economic factor. Specifically, the environmental can refer to the natural environment, its systems and processes (Meadowcroft, 1999). The economic refers to the notion of the creation of viable economies and, simultaneously, to the preservation of the environment and social equity. Moreover, social sustainability comprises both the necessary means of wealth and a shared sense of social action in order to promote social integration, cohesion, (Ekins, 2000) security and equity which are some of the commonly accepted social rights along with education, employment, health care and so on. These pillars are interconnected and interdependent although there are differences in the level of analysis and decision making, especially for the 'social'.

2. Policy and the Social Element in Sustainable Development

But before focusing on the social pillar of sustainable development more extensively, we need to look more carefully into the definition of sustainable development, its evolution and its practical implications. Hence, this analysis will highlight more sufficiently the social pillar existence and significance through its links with society's welfare and wellbeing. From a definitional perspective, sustainable development can be approached as synonymous with conventional approach to development (also called orthodox) the last 60 years (Thomas, 2004). The orthodox development model has brought significant global changes in the financial sector, trade, services, science, technology and international relations after the war. However, also many asymmetries have come to light through development's conventional view, which is mainly based on the free market economy, free trade and its institutional framework (WTO, IMF, WB). Sustainable development (SD) as a development concept doesn't oppose it's self with conventional view but rather provides potentials for integrating the economic with social and mainly environmental variables in the development project.

The brainstorming above was appeared in 60's during the Cold War (UNEP, 2002), when the environmental dimension of development has been approached in parallel with the welfare state improvement and social peace in Europe. That time issues and approaches such as sustainable

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development were not the mainstream views about development, which was mainly analyzed by the conventional methods of globalization process (UNEP, 2002). From a theoretical perspective the sustainable development conceptualization wasn't isolated in social and environmental issues but also posed the issue of management. The Hardin's (1968) argument via the "Tragedy of the commons" article provides an essential insight in sustainable development debate that time. Hardin argued (1968: 1245) that "The tragedy of the commons as a food basket is averted by private property, or something formally like it. But the air and waters surrounding us cannot readily be fenced, and so the tragedy of the commons as a cesspool must be prevented by different means, by coercive laws or taxing devices that make it cheaper for the polluter to treat his pollutants than to discharge them untreated".

Hence the SD discussion was set from theory analysis to the institutional level due to the improvement of a policy interest, which had gradually focused on the environmental dimension of development after the Club of Rome (Limits to Growth) and the United Nations Stockholm Declaration in 1972 (UNEP, 2002; Baker et al, 2005). The Stockholm Declaration in 1972 was one of the most significant cornerstones in SD evolution in combination with the UNEP establishment by UN. The policy steps above in combination with significant environmental catastrophes in places around the world (Chernobyl, Alaska's oil catastrophe etc) accelerated the formulation of sustainable development definition towards mainly environmental sustainability (UNEP, 2002; Thomas, 2004). Another important point in the SD conceptual evolution is Castro's argument that "It did not grow out of the environmental movement... Rather, it was a product of the mainstream reaction against the radicalism of the environmental movement, which was not only proposing limits to growth but also emphasizing regulation as a means of stopping ecological degradation" (Castro, 2004: 196). In sum, these issues highlighted an effective and vivid brainstorming about the ideal elements and characteristics of development in a globalized society and economy; due to the fact that existing approaches to development has been largely market oriented and has therefore focused mainly on the economic dimension of development, which is based on quantitative criteria and tangible results.

The analysis above constitutes a conceptual pathway of SD introduction in international policy agenda, which was pictured further by the UN definition as the "development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland report) (WCED, 1987). Hence, this concept derived from Brundtland report, due to its President name, and although it is vague in its theoretical core it definitely served a common ground for common understanding and discussion among different perspectives. These perspectives either considered sceptical, supportive or reformist to the concept (Baker et al, 2005) Moreover Daly in 1990 underlined two main SD groups the weak and strong, which are analysed bellow (Castro, 2004).

The sceptics considered conventional and sustainable development as not compatible but as the formula of contemporary financial-political system domination in globalization process. The latter is not a linear process especially towards SD because by its definition is the intensification of cross national, cultural, economic, political, social, and technological interactions leading to the establishment of transnational structures and the global integration of cultural, economic, political, social, and environmental processes on global, supranational, national, regional, and local levels (Rennen and Martens, 2002). Another approach was the weak sustainable development, which considered that neoclassical economics' principles could be combined with environmental sustainability, the substitution and based on a more reformist view about development (Baker et al, 2005; Castro, 2004). Moreover, this approach is influential in international institutions such as World Bank, World Trade Organization etc (Baker et al, 2005; Castro, 2004). In conclusion, the strong sustainability is another approach which set in its analytical core the environment as the ultimate base for any economic development. Although this approach's political roots

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are also close to political ecology it is not sceptical but critical, it is based on the idea of environment's embracement in development process without any compromises due to its critical role (Baker et al, 2005; Castro, 2004).

Hence, due to the above contested nature of sustainable development the definition of UN in 1987 seems to provide the common ground, the compromise or even a discussion arena, where a significant ongoing debate with political implications is taking place since 1987 about the evolution of sustainable development (Castro, 2004; Baker et al, 2005; Maravegias and Taliouris, 2011). Moreover, Einstein used to claim at that point that "we can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them" (Laszlo, 2006), an argument which somehow but on a different extent is incorporated by the perspectives derived from SD definition in 1987. However, this definition is the common ground and pictures the adjustment that sustainable development is necessary because many risks and uncertainties related to environmental degradation and human development issues appeared nowadays not only in developing societies but in developed states too.

In this international policy arena, European Union by itself and some member states are characterized as sustainable development advocates on domestic policy level but on international too because of their vivid support to sustainable development initiatives such as Rio, Kyoto, Johannesburg etc. This fact occurred for many reasons but mainly because of the fact that European Union approached sustainable development as an alternative development path, where environmental modernization and European Social Model could in parallel coexist (Commision, 2010; 2001b; 2009; 2005). Moreover, these objectives are not isolated from the EU goal orientation for its competiveness' improvement in international market. The latter, especially after the welfare state decline and deregulation in 80s-90s, sometimes is compatible with the strong and long institutional tradition of welfare state in EU. Hence, this fact is essential in order to understand the EU political embrace of social welfare issues in sustainable development strategy and especially via the social pillar, which mainly refers to welfare state.

The welfare state can be approached as an institutional system that implements policies aimed at creating social sustainability through the protection of social rights. These policies aim to reduce social inequalities through the realization of the social solidarity idea that enforce policies to prevent from and reduce the social vulnerability phenomena. This term refers to a situation of increased social and economic risk as a result of social inequality. The factors that exacerbate these effects are social and economic, such as poverty, social discrimination/exclusion, limited access to resources, domestic violence and disability (Cutter, Boruff, Sirley, 2003). Therefore, the welfare state policies aim at reducing from all forms of social risk (poverty, social marginalization) and thus to improve living standards.

The above objectives especially during the deregulation and welfare state decline were approached further though the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) which was linked with the sustainable development strategy in EU in 2001 and 2009. The business responsibility and the creation of synergies towards sustainability appeared via the call of the Commission President Jacque Delor in 1993. This decade (90s), EU essential participation in the formulation of businesses' international codes of conducts (OECD guidelines, UN Global Compact, ILO Tripartite Declaration) have introduced explicit CSR in EU domestic policy agenda (Lisbon Counsil-2000, Strategy for SD -2001) (Commission, 2001a; 2001b; 2006; 2011; Taliouris, 2013). In 2002, EU via the Communication of CSR: A business contribution to sustainable development (Commission, 2002), have linked the CSR public policy with SD objectives and social cohesion in a more explicit way (Commission, 2001b; 2005; 2009).

The following years CSR public policy was incorporated further in SD strategy review (2009) and the Europe 2020 strategy for smart sustainable and inclusive growth (Commission, 2009; 2010). Thus,

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these policy steps in combination with the negative outcomes of the contemporary financial crisis were the main driver of the renewed European CSR Strategy 2011-2014 in 2011, which approached both the business case of CSR and its socio-political dimension towards environment and society's welfare (Commission, 2011; Taliouris, 2013). Moreover, a new definition has been introduced, which defined CSR as "the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society" (Commission, 2011: 6). Summing up, this fact in a meta-analysis stage underlines further the existing pluralism in EU policy approaches about SD, CSR and social policy which is mainly affected by the member states governance contexts and their institutional tradition (EC, 2007; 2011; Albareda et al., 2007; 2009; Gjolberg, 2009; Aaronson and Reeves, 2002; Taliouris, 2013). These facts have indicated different social models (Sapir, 2005), CSR public policy models in EU (Albareda et al., 2007; 2009) but also different types of CSR government roles (mandate, facilitate, partnering, endorsing) (Fox et al., 2002; Albareda et al., 2007; EC, 2007a; 2011) for sustainable development. This institutional tradition of welfare state is not an isolated political function for states but highlights further the potentials of private sector involvement in SD and the welfare state European objectives (Taliouris, 2013), which mainly posed on the SD social pillar.

3. A Social Pillar for Sustainable Development

In scholarly literature on the social dimensions of sustainable development, there is no commonly accepted and documented definition to be found regarding the social component – not least, because of a lack of consensus about the meaning of the concept of the "social".

At the same time, however, this pillar has been commonly recognized as the weakest one. As Lehtonen (2004: 201) suggests, it "may not be analyzed through the same analytical framework and tools as the other pillars because of the reflexivity, multidimensionality and relational character of the 'social' and also the difficulty, if not, impossibility of quantifying most social phenomena". Moreover, some of the main features of the social pillar are: its bipolar character, which is contradicted at individual and collective levels, it is its immateriality which makes difficult the quantitative analysis and its reflexivity which can change over time (because of different social circumstances).

An integral part of the context of social sustainability comprises the social rights. They contain rights such as provision of food, pension, education, employment, health care that constitute a fundamental part of several national constitutions. Social rights, as they are generally known, were subsumed in the constitutions later than the civil and political rights under intense political-economic pressures and aspirations. After the Second World War they were established in a more generalized form in the constitutions of most European countries.

In some political systems, social rights developed through phases – we need not concern ourselves in detail with T. H. Marshall's influential view at this point – that acquired various forms in different systems. In other cases, including most states in South and Southeast Europe, the political systems attained the characteristics of authoritarian corporatism, marked by an organic conception of society and by the organization of interests into corporatist structures of interest intermediation. Different trajectories – despite regime change in the 1970s – left behind different and often divergent capacities for crisis management and resulted in states with apparently strong traditions of social responsibility experiencing (due to weak economic fundamentals coupled with a catastrophic approach to the financial and fiscal crisis after 2008) comparatively huge losses in social rights (Lavdas, Litsas and Skiadas 2013).

Despite different trajectories and considerable variation, there is today a common denominator which functions – for some actors, at least – as a basic principle guiding social sustainability in policy. It consists of implementing policies aimed at creating a decent standard of living for all citizens as members

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of the society, providing equal opportunities at least in employment, education and health care[1] through appropriate welfare state policies. The implementation of such policies aims at a general increase in societal sustainability. At this point, the following question can be raised: under which conditions do social rights provide sustainable development?

4. The Contribution of Social Rights to Sustainable Development

Social rights can be considered the basis for the promotion of sustainable development if combined with criteria aimed at the equitable implementation of environmental protection, economic and social sustainability. Rights to education, employment and health care could ensure the level of social security that is necessary for the protection of socially vulnerable groups.

Education is an essential policy for social sustainability. Unquestionably, the high level of education at all of its stages, along with equal opportunities, creates these conditions in order to reveal new ways of life which are designed to improve citizens' overall standard of living. Moreover, education is one of the contributory factors to the development of both states' economies and societies resulting in the improvement of living standards and life expectancy. The education process can deliver all the collaterals which are needed to promote an environmental protection concept, the exploitation of renewable energy resources and to instigate the sustainable development theory.

In most European countries health care is recognized constitutionally as a public good whose protection requires the provision of health services from the state in care, rehabilitation, reintegration and in terms of prevention measures aimed at promoting positive health behavior. It is generally accepted that disease is a symptom of social unrest (Ferro, 1998), while health is the expression of an individual's adaptations to the challenges of everyday life (Dubos, 1987). Under these conditions, public health protection through the provisions of health care systems is vital for maintaining social cohesion.

Although there is disagreement about the significance of the distributive components, the view which is accepted by the wider range of the scientific community is that, in addition to the moment of conception of each person and the provided health care services, the demographic structure, the living conditions, the housing lifestyle, the employment status, the education level and the income levels affect the populations' mental and physical health. Aggravating factors to health could be low economic development level, poverty and social exclusion, psychological circumstances that cause stress, poor working conditions and unemployment, lack of social support, poor housing conditions and feeding, personal habits and lifestyle, demographic trends, political and natural environment (Schaapveld et al. 1992; Badura, 1995; Garrin and Politi, 1997; Wilkinson and Marmot, 1998; Woodward et al. 2000; Brenner, 2001; Marmot, 2002; European Commission, 2003; Souliotis and Lionis, 2004).

Economic and social prosperity and the improvement of health care status appear to be closely related. However, as underlined by Sen (1999), the fact that the intensity of this relationship depends on political decisions and on the socially productive allocation of the available resources should not be overlooked.

The right to work is one of the most important policies of the modern welfare state. Employment offers the opportunity to be independent, survival of the individual and impels him to socialization. On the other hand, total employment can become a utopia (Rivero and Savatier, 1989) since the social structure is distorted. As a result, modern states face this problem, namely unemployment. Therefore employment

[1] There are several more benefits such as child care, pensions etc.

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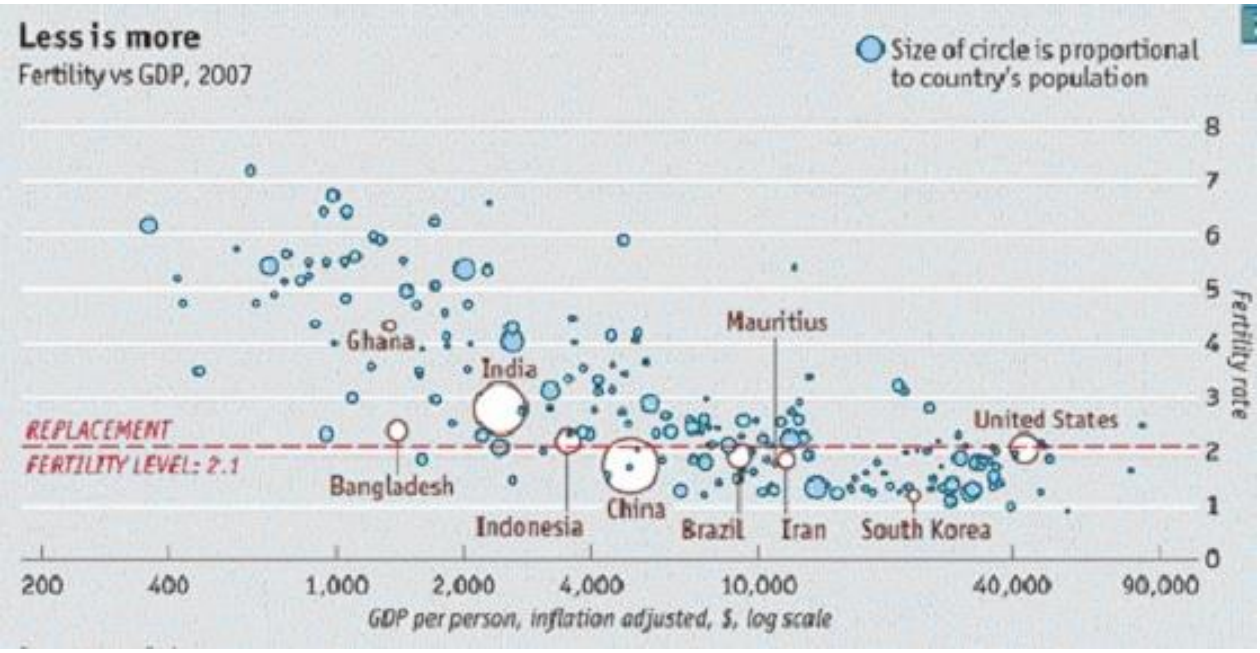
security and unemployment reduction are at the core of welfare state policies, in terms of ensuring social sustainability.

Accordingly, the achievement of low levels of unemployment and the maintenance of a satisfactory income level along with other factors such as the psycho-social functions of gainful employment (time structure, identity, etc.), citizens' integration (due to the high social status of paid work), and the significance of paid labour for social cohesion, contributes to the attainment of social sustainability (Senghaas-Knobloch, 1998; Bosch, 1998).

Another way of ensuring social sustainability is the implementation through welfare state policies of social security. This principle consists of universal coverage against risks during employment and retirement periods. The financing of the social security schemes in most European countries that were expanded after the Second World War is mainly public and its implementation aims at creating a better standard of living (Kulke and Morales, 2007).

Social sustainability from a social policy perspective interacts with demographic changes. The economic and social prosperity of a country in conjunction with environmental protection and proper exploitation of renewable energy resources increases living standards and life expectancy and also stabilizes demographic characteristics. As figure 1 depicts, when income per capita becomes higher, birth rates become lower. Therefore, better education, improved health care and public health, high levels of employment and income are the main factors shaping new living-trends conditions and culture.



Source: *The Economist, 2009*

Figure 1.
Fertility rates and GDP (General Domestic Product) per person

Demographic trends determine the age composition of the population of a country, which has implications for the sanitation sector, the scope and intensity of utilization of health care services, health

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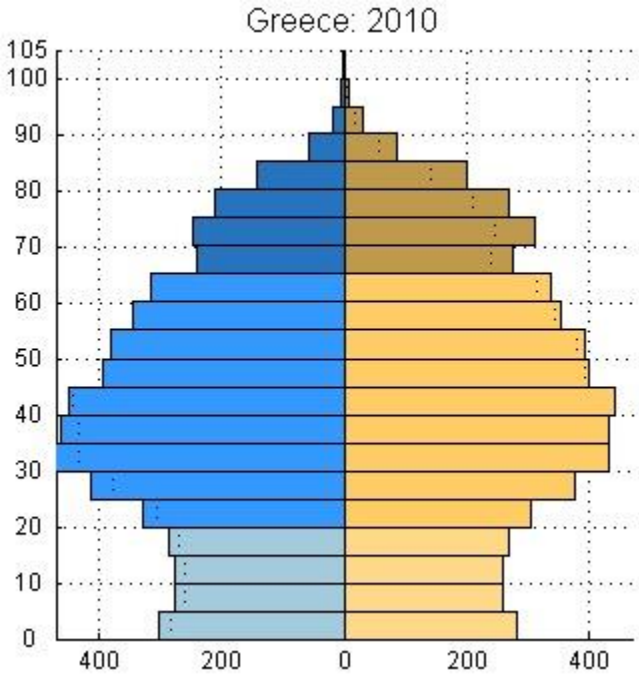
care costs and their funding (OECD 1996), employment, social security, retirement, social inclusion and generally most of the social benefits resulting in the welfare state's economic unsustainability.

As a case study, the population's age density of the European Union's member states and candidates leads to the conclusion that in both groups of countries there has been a clear trend towards an aging population. According to projections by the United Nations (Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, 2012) during the period 2001-2015 there is a decline expectancy of up-to-15 years-age category, as a percentage of the total population and an increase in the age group over 65 years old, resulting in the deterioration of the dependency ratio.



Source: *Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, 2012.*

Figure 2.
Population Density of Greece

As an amplification of the previous argument we present the case of Greece. According to the United Nations (Figure 2) there are far fewer people aged between 0 and 20 years old than there are in the older age groups. In particular, it is clear, for Greece that the largest percentage of people-age groups are in the 40s, and so these are people who are leaving the family-formation stage, that additional birth stage which appear in the youngest age groups.

According to estimates by the OECD (2011), in Greece as in all EU countries, life expectancy has been increasing during the last four decades and this trend will continue. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the active/working population is continuously decreasing while pensionable population aggravates. Therefore, it is clear that the financing of the pension system is becoming harder as the population that offers insurance contributions is becoming constantly fewer while the pensionable population continuously

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grows. The implemented reforms during the last three years combined with the effects of the economic crisis on unemployment rates, create even more pressures on the welfare state financing. Therefore it is necessary that policies tackling unemployment should be implemented accompanied with reforms on the welfare state, such as the implementation of specific social benefit policies, mainly to socially and economically vulnerable citizens.

In conclusion, the improvement of living standards (education, health, employment) through the implementation of policies that promote social and economic sustainability while reducing economic inequalities, contributes to the construction of a sustainable society. Moreover, this improvement increases life expectancy and creates conditions for population viability. Simultaneously though, the following question can be raised: what policies should be implemented in order to develop a viable social model?

5. Tentative Conclusions on Crucial Links

Linking social rights and sustainable development is particularly worthwhile as an objective but can be elusive as a programmatic course. It may best be structured as an approach to a two-way street. Sustainable development and various – contextually dependent – notions and practices of a system of social responsibility, social rights and social obligations can be mutually advantageous. Sustainable development of the "social" consists of implementing specific effective and coordinated measures to achieve full and equal opportunities to employment. In this context, an increase in public spending on social structures, health care, environmentally-friendly urban redevelopment and development of renewable energy resources is essential. But only an increase in public spending will not offer a viable solution. It is also important to reform the welfare state policies keeping a balance between economic rationalization of social spending and the existence of qualitative and efficient social benefit provisions (Tzagkarakis and Kamekis, 2013). Also, in order to reduce unemployment, it is essential to increase public investments. It is true that public investments are not accompanied with profit and they will foster productivity while attract new private investments with respect to the employment and other social rights.

Additionally, the development of 'green' forms of employment through the promotion of renewable energy resources and public investments in that sector can both create new job vacancies and use the profits for social benefits. But this aim requires a different approach about the necessary strategy that should be implemented in order to encounter the huge economic and social issues that the financial crisis has generated.

In fact, as Littig and Grieβler (2005) suggest, a socially sustainable European employment policy which respects social rights providing social security and a sense of fairness will be essential in order to protect low income citizens from the very real threat of social marginalization. A society that ends up involving in economic, social, and political life no more than two-thirds of its members (Glotz & Thomas 1994) cannot be sustainable itself in the longer-term and will almost certainly not be in a position to address the needs and prospects of the planet.

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