

The Right to Time – perspectives for the 21st century

Policy brief

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It is time for the right to time

In every field of policy today, time is seen as an indispensable component of everyday life, and time welfare as essential for human beings' quality of life. This explains calls for a time policy governing specific areas, like working time, urban time schedules, leisure times, etc., and aiming to achieve a self-determined “unity of everyday life”. To achieve this comprehensive objective, we need an individual and collective right to self-determination regarding our own time, which means taking a critical stance on the patchwork-like fragmentation of our everyday lives and the alienation of time.

Time has always been subject to distribution processes, conflicts, and criteria-based assessments of its socially just distribution. We might say that time policy reflects a second-generation welfare state. The first generation configures and (re)distributes material prosperity, and the second generation configures and (re)distributes time. While the first-generation welfare state could proceed bureaucratically, or in a “top down” manner, time policy requires proven standards of justice and systematic participation of those whose everyday lives are at stake.

Numerous political acts have recognised “having time” as legally valuable, but without referencing a “right” to time. The European Court of Justice and national legislators have mandated compensation not only for material damage, but also for lost time, such as when flights and trains are delayed. The European Court of Human Rights has severely restricted excessive waits for trials and court hearings. With the “right to disconnect”, the European Parliament has limited the extent to which communication and information technologies can be used to keep workers available at virtually any time. In working time, more scheduling options have been opened for working people – e.g., drawing up rights for care leave and periods of further training. Legislators have granted patients the right to limited delays for appointments with medical specialists, and parents and children have obtained the right to places and hours in childcare facilities.

In the 21st century, such entitlements must be extended and consolidated. Economic, ecological, and social policies can only become sustainable when systemically enriched with time policies for better care opportunities for men and women; sustainable production, services and consumption, and temporal on working times which make it possible to adapt to future modalities of work. These fundamental requirements of the 21st century will only be achieved with comprehensive time policies – and a right to time as their legal catalyst. Hence, we propose the creation of a new human right, the right to time.

Five pillars of the right to time

The right to time embraces our individual and collective right to self-determine how we use our time. It can be defined through five characteristics:

- 1) The right to time is infringed when **the way individuals or groups use time is directed by others rather than self-determined**.
- 2) The right to time is infringed when time is distributed in ways that are structurally unequal between groups of people – specifically men and women (i.e., **bound up with discrimination**).
- 3) The right to time is infringed when **certain times systematically devalued** – as is frequently the case of with unemployed or elderly people.
- 4) The right to time **includes the option for individuals and groups to develop their proper time culture** and act accordingly.
- 5) The right to time **allows us to share time with others** in activities which can only be pursued with others (family, neighbourhood, the local community, associations, civil society).

The right to time empowers us, as individuals and groups, to insist that our time needs be taken seriously, and that terms of time use and distribution be negotiated according to standards of social justice – even under conditions of imbalanced power and conflicts of time interests.

Achieving self-determination in how we structure our time requires certain infrastructures i.e., transport, cultural and social facilities, daycare centres, etc. Hence, the scope of the right to time is not limited to people's individual or familial living conditions. As an exercised and fortified right, the right to time affects the structure and dynamic of societies, particularly at community and regional level, where everyday life predominantly takes place.

Socioeconomic and sociocultural diversity in how we use our time

Sociocultural diversity must be included when we define the concept of “right to time”. From an anthropological viewpoint, the right to time is an individual's right to experience time-use within a cultural context. That is, the right to experience our self-time boils down to our right to live our own temporality.

The right to time therefore takes into account that time is perceived and handled differently in different cultures. For example, certain temporalities in Latin America, such as the indigenous temporality, enable us to reconsider the hegemonic linear temporality that rules both economic behaviour and scientific and political thinking. As with many others around the world, this indigenous temporality exemplifies the importance of understanding cultural diversity in terms of temporality and life rhythms. The notion of the right to time must therefore be broad and reflexive enough to account for notions and uses of time characteristic of individual cultures and identities.

At the same time that it provides entitlements for individuals, the right to time paves the way to fairer, more equal, and more ecologically self-aware societies. We must therefore consider socioeconomic diversity when defining and especially implementing this right. It requires us to develop new modes of sociality, new ways of being in community, and new collective institutions which are self-organised and not mediated by the state or the market.

From the societal division of labour follows a diversity of time interests among individuals and groups and the temporal demands falling upon them. The daily re-creation of any complex society requires multiple tasks, in various locations, at different points in time. Every society may therefore be characterised as an ensemble of temporal rhythms whose differentiation provides conditions to enable each other mutually. For some of us to work standard hours, others need to work before, providing commuting services, and after, keeping retail shops open. These problems are more acute in market societies where the widespread commodification of leisure activities means that the leisure of some requires the work of others. Whereas economic activity requires synchronising the activities of individual agents, the right to time demands an analogous synchronisation of individuals' leisure time. It follows that any policy initiative aiming to guarantee our right to time must factor in these multiple interdependencies among the varying temporal patterns of which society ultimately. Hence, efforts to promote people's individual right to time are incomplete when we fail to duly acknowledge the necessarily collective dimension of such a right.

If, on an individual level, our right to time requires that we enjoy a modicum of free time, the collective dimensions of this right require participatory means of decision-making (round tables, future labs, citizens' inquiries etc.). Both dimensions take the right to time seriously and recognise that individuals' time interests might differ in complex ways. Yet again, this confirms the capacity to share free time collectively as a necessary precondition to exercising our right to time.

Promising applications of the right to time

Even though no policy is explicitly linked to the right to time, in several countries and under the auspices of various social policies and local or national initiatives, we can find innovations helping to implement citizens' right to their own time.

For a long time in Sweden, local authorities have had the legal obligation to provide **childcare facilities** like daycare centres and kindergartens. This helps to avoid time discrimination against mothers, as it enables them to remain in the workforce while their young children are taken care of. The same country provides for **flexible and gender-friendly parental leave** arrangements.

As for **working time**, several initiatives are moving towards giving individuals greater control over their working hours and even achieving a different balance between mandatory working time and personal time, allowing for greater personal time management. In January 2021, the European Parliament has urged the Commission to legislate on the right to disconnect. A similar measure was introduced in France in 2016. In November 2021, Portugal made the right to disconnect more tangible by passing a law creating fines for reported violations.

In the post-COVID phase we have seen a significant increase in **remote work**. This has the potential to provide workers with a better balance between their personal and professional life and to partially escape employer control over their working time.

From Australia and New Zealand to the USA and across Europe (UK, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, France, Germany), numerous countries around the world are moving towards a **four-day work week**. Current initiatives are driven by the goal of achieving better work-life balance. In the past, of the labour movement demanded reduced working hours. But nowadays, interestingly, apart from the German IG Metall, which has put the issue on the agenda for upcoming wage negotiations, employers are often the ones backing the initiative.

The right to time appears most explicitly as a lever for innovation in the realm of **local time policies**. For example, the city of Rennes is seeking to address unequal working hours affecting the cleaning staff of municipal offices. Desynchronised university course schedules have also meant that riders can use the metro service more smoothly and comfortably. There are numerous examples of local authorities in varying contexts in France, Italy, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands implementing initiatives moving in this direction. In October 2010, these led to the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities' resolution and recommendation on the right to time and the launch of the Local and Regional Governments Time Network in 2021.

A right in the making

The right to time is not yet a right, but rather a right in the making. Becoming a positive right will require many intermediary steps, and the global time-use movement must trigger them.

Many rights are initially articulated as moral pleas. With luck, they then gain social momentum and gradually, or through radical action, become legally protected. Universal suffrage has been recognised for a mere 100 years. Many equal rights for men and women have existed for less than 70 years. The right to informational self-determination, as well as the rights of animals and nature, have emerged only recently.

Often rights thus proclaimed existed previously under general labels – such as the right to time, for instance, or our entitlement to human dignity, freedom, and the right to personal development and equality. Under certain conditions, they may reach critical mass and become concrete and assertive – a right “with teeth to bite”. As a result, existing norms are reconfigured and new ways of dealing with certain cases and constellations are explored. Often it takes concrete events symbolically and concretely illustrating what could be the case if the respective “right” were validated.

All this is true for the new right to time. Existing in a concealed manner, it must gain a voice at local, regional, national, and international level. It must win and encourage partners in civil societies, transnational NGOs and among economic and political decision-makers. The TUI and this policy-brief are steps in this direction.

Policy recommendations

As seen in the previous chapter, once we conceptually and formally recognise the right to time we will be able to apply it in various fields. Let us now point out practical policy consequences of our right to time at local, national, and international level.

At the **local level**, the right to time will have at least the following implications:

- ✓ Developing time policies in key areas like urbanism (with, at its core, the concept of proximity); public services (reworked schedules and location); social and care services; equality and work-life balance; mobility; reducing travel times, and cultural activities, to name a few.
- ✓ Creating a dedicated office or responsibility for time policies in local government that ensures a holistic view of time policies, dealing with time-use conflicts and facilitating the synchronisation/desynchronisation of times in cities, metropolises, and regions.
- ✓ Implementing specific time policies through participatory methodologies, following the examples of Italy (*Tempi della città*), France (*Tempo Territorial*), and Spain (*Pacto del Tiempo*).

At the **national level**, the right to time must be officially recognised and applied in important fields of state law:

- ✓ Legislating towards the recognition and protection of the right to time in areas which frequently fall to national authorities, including working time, social security measures, childcare facilities, and more>.
- ✓ Drawing up laws requiring local governments to implement time policies, following the example of the Turco law in Italy.
- ✓ Revising and improving key infrastructures in mobility, education, leisure, and care allowing people to enjoy their right to time.
- ✓ Providing financial and personal resources to test time policy models and/or laboratories to exchange best practices.

At the **international level**, the right to time requires that organisations such as the United Nations, European Union, Council of Europe, International Labour Organisation, World Bank and International Monetary Fund, to name a few, to disseminate and mutually exchange applications of best practices:

- ✓ Recognising the right to time in charters of rights and guiding policies.
- ✓ Reviewing current programmes from the right to time perspective – e.g., including it in the current EU Care Strategy, the UN Habitat programme for resilience in cities, or other UN development programmes.
- ✓ Measuring time uses and, specifically, time poverty, when designing programmes, analysis frameworks, and other tools for practical intervention in their areas of action.
- ✓ Establishing opportunities to exchange best practices and research on time policies transnationally (e.g., European Academy for Time Policies or other forms of transnational time political laboratories).

Contributors

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