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WeLaR Newsletter

Issue #11 / June 2025

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From the Editors

With the WeLaR Final Conference behind us, we're entering the final stretch of our journey. The conference was a fantastic day full of insightful presentations, lively discussions, and great exchanges. We extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who joined us in Brussels and contributed to making it such a memorable event. In this newsletter, we cover the research presented at the conference, which featured a great keynote by Francesco Vona.

And the conversation goes on! We still have two exciting events ahead that we invite you to join. On 26 June, we'll host the WeLaR webinar "Anticipating the future: Foresight approaches for labour Markets and welfare in Europe". And on 4 July, we look forward to welcoming you to our final Open Virtual Expert Café.

This edition of the newsletter also brings you three fresh policy briefs and several new research papers featuring the latest findings from Project WeLaR. The papers address the impact of fossil fuels, the situation of teleworkers, atypical work and migration. Meanwhile, our policy briefs examine key structural challenges facing the EU labour market and tax system, offering concrete actions and policy solutions to address them.

As we reflect on our progress, we remain focused on translating our research into actionable insights. Whether you're a policymaker, researcher, or practitioner, we hope our results offer valuable guidance for building more inclusive and resilient labour markets.

Stay connected with us through our website and social media - and be sure to join us at our upcoming events. There's still more to discover, discuss, and shape together.

Enjoy the summer,

The Editors

WeLaR Events
[Project WeLaR Final Conference: Labour Markets and Welfare States in Transition]

[WeLaR and ESSI's webinar brings together 25 participants to explore social innovation in rural areas]

Upcoming events

26 June, 14:00-16:00 CET - WeLaR webinar "Anticipating the future: Foresight approaches for labour markets and welfare in Europe"

4 July, 13:00-15:00 CET - WeLaR Open Virtual Expert Café

Follow us on social media or check projectwelar.eu to make sure you don't miss out!

Funded by the European Union

This project, WeLaR, has received funding under the Horizon Europe

programme.

Invitations to WeLaR events

WeLaR to host foresight webinar on the future of labour and welfare on 26 June

The WeLaR foresight webinar, "Anticipating the future: Foresight approaches for labour markets and welfare in Europe," will take place on 26 June 2025, online from 14:00 to 16:00 CET.

Join us for an interactive session exploring the role of foresight in preparing labour markets and welfare systems for long-term transitions. The event will present key findings from the WeLaR foresight exercise and offer insights into forward-looking policymaking and scenario development.

Speakers include Laurène Thil (HIVA – KU Leuven), Rafael Peels (ILO), Prof. Dr. Bart Los (University of Groningen), Dexter Docherty (OECD), Joanna Hofman (RAND Europe), and Michaela Bruckmayer (ZSI).

The full programme is available here.

Register here: https://hiva.kuleuven.be/en/calendar/forms/welarwebinar26062025

WeLaR invites contributions for its Open Virtual Expert Café on polycrisis, zeitenwende & de-globalisation

The final edition of WeLaR's Open Virtual Expert Café "Polycrisis, Zeitenwende, De-Globalisation, changing policy priorities: How did the world change in recent years, and what does it mean for our research on societies and economies?" will take place on 4 July 2025 from 13:00 to 15:00 CET. If you want to take part in the event or present your take on the topic, please email Michaela Bruckmayer (bruckmayer@zsi.at).

The event will provide a space to share reflections, early-stage ideas, or new research findings. Holger Stichnoth (ZSI) will present his new work on right-wing economic policies and Laurène Thil and Karolien Lenearts will talk about findings from project BRIDGES 5.0.

We look forward to your participation in what promises to be another engaging and fruitful session!

WeLaR Research

Eliminating fossil fuel subsidies will boost welfare and help countries meet climate targets

Governments worldwide granted 7 trillion USD of subsidies for fossil fuels in 2022, equivalent to 7.1% of global GDP. According to a new study by the EU-funded Project WeLaR, eliminating these subsidies – especially implicit ones – could significantly boost economic welfare and help countries meet their climate targets.

Fossil fuels remain at the heart of global economies, but their consumption comes at a hidden cost – pollution, climate change, and lost tax revenues. The study, "Efficiency, Distributional, and Fiscal Effects of Climate Policy," examines the local economic losses linked to fossil fuel subsidies and potential gains for countries from pricing fossil energy.

It finds that 95% of fossil fuel subsidies are implicit, meaning governments fail to charge industries for the local damage caused by fossil fuel use, such as health cost from local air pollution and costs related to oil use in motor vehicles associated with congestion, accidents, and road damage. The remaining 5% constitutes direct subsidies, where governments artificially lower energy prices through financial support.

"By correctly pricing energy, governments can unlock economic gains while reducing harmful emissions," said Sebastian Rausch, co-author and researcher at the ZEW Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research.

The study shows that eliminating direct subsidies alone would lead to only modest economic gains for societies (0.2% on average). However, removing implicit subsidies by implementing taxation of local damages could increase economic welfare by 3.9% on average, with countries such as China, India, Russia, and parts of Europe seeing gains of up to 23%.

The fiscal impact is equally significant. Eliminating both types of subsidies could generate an additional 2.5 trillion USD in additional government revenue annually, equivalent to 4.9% of global consumption. Major EU economies such as Germany, France, and Italy could each collect billions in new tax revenues.

If these revenues were used to lower labour taxes, economic growth would accelerate further. Under such a policy shift, Germany, France, and Italy could see additional welfare gains of 0.28, 0.40, and 0.24 percentage points of GDP, respectively.

"The way revenues from fossil fuel pricing are used is crucial," said Tim Kalmey, co-author of the study from ZEW Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research. "If they are used to lower labour taxes, the overall welfare benefits can be even greater."

Eliminating fossil fuel subsidies could also have a major environmental impact, cutting global CO_2 emissions by 32%. This reduction alone would allow 40% of countries—including India, China, and Russia—to meet their Paris Agreement targets.

Challenges and Trade-Offs

Despite the clear benefits of eliminating fossil fuel subsidies, the study warns of unintended global consequences. Since fossil fuel markets are interconnected, one country's policy shift can trigger economic disruptions elsewhere.

For example, Canada, Saudi Arabia, and Australia could face welfare losses due to reduced global demand for their fossil exports. On the other hand, most European countries, the US, China, and India would see economic gains from subsidy removal and pollution pricing.

"Despite these challenges, our findings suggest that subsidy reform could provide both economic and environmental benefits, and governments should accelerate their transition away from fossil fuel support" – said Sebastian Rausch.

The full paper is available here.

Tim Kalmey and Sebastian Rausch (2024) Efficiency, Distributional, and Fiscal Effects of Climate Policy: The Case of Fossil Fuel Subsidies and Externalities. (Deliverable D6.2). Leuven: WeLaR project 101061388–HORIZON.

Teleworkers face more intense work; AI, automation offer some relief

Employees working from home experience more intense work and lower well-being than their office-based counterparts, a new report by project WeLaR found. The study also revealed that while some digital technologies exacerbate work demands, others, such as AI and automation, help mitigate them.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking was relatively rare in the European Union, with only 5.4% of workers regularly working from home. By 2022, that number reached 10.2%, with an additional 12.2% teleworking occasionally.

While many hailed telework as a way to improve work-life balance, the study "Consequences of the Expansion of Work from Home and Digitalisation on Teleworkers' Work Intensification, Mental Health, and Well-Being", which examines data from 17 European countries, shows that the greater flexibility comes at the cost of more intense work. Remote workers often feel the need to prove themselves, leading to longer hours and more demanding workdays. At the same time, they are less likely to report high well-being levels.

Digitalisation has significantly shaped the telework experience, but its effect on work intensity and mental health is far from uniform and varies depending on which digital tools are used.

"Our study highlights the complexity of digitalisation's impact on telework and suggests that companies should focus on the types of digital tools used rather than just assuming that digitalisation is either good or bad for workers," said Ludivine Martin, a researcher at LISER and one of the report's co-authors.

The study finds that exposure to advanced digital technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, helped reduce work intensification and emotional exhaustion. However, these technologies have not completely eliminated the negative effects of teleworking on overall well-being. Older technologies like databases increased work intensification but did not significantly impact mental health.

The impact of digitalisation varies significantly across gender and age groups. For example, exposure to the past digital wave (including computer hardware, databases and communication tools) was linked to reduced well-being among men and older workers (45+). In contrast, women and younger employees were less affected.

"AI and automation have been effective in mitigating some negative effects of older digital technologies, and we may not have seen their full potential yet," said co-author Laetitia Hauret, a researcher at LISER. "With digitalisation shaping the future of work, the challenge for employers will be to harness technology in a way that enhances productivity without pushing employees to the brink."

The paper is available here.

Laetitia Hauret and Ludivine Martin (2024) Consequences of the Expansion of Work from Home and Digitalisation on Teleworkers' Work Intensification, Mental Health, and Well-Being (Deliverable D3.5). Leuven: WeLaR project 101061388–HORIZON.

Flexible work arrangements fuel migration across EU

Flexible job arrangements such as part-time jobs and self-employment are encouraging more people to migrate across Europe, while short-term contracts may be keeping them in their home countries, a new WeLaR study finds.

The report, "Atypical Work and Intra-EU Mobility Patterns", which analysed data from 17 EU countries between 2004 and 2019, examined how changes in employment flexibility affect migration flows. It found that when the proportion of part-time or self-employed workers rises in a country relative to a potential migration destination, this is often followed by an increase in outward migration. One possible explanation is that individuals with weaker ties to the labour market, such as part-time or self-employed workers, may find it easier or be more motivated to seek opportunities abroad. Conversely, a relative rise in short fixed-term contracts is associated with lower outward migration, which may indicate their stabilising effect on local labour markets.

"With the EU's principle of free movement, migration is often expected to reduce labour market imbalances, what economists call external adjustment," said Stella Zilian, economist at the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw) and co-author of the report. "At the same time, flexible employment is a tool for internal adjustment, allowing national economies to absorb shocks. Our findings show these two mechanisms are closely intertwined."

The study also explored the opposite direction, how migration impacts labour markets, and found that it can alter the structure of employment in both origin and destination countries. In countries that receive migrants, such as Austria and Germany, there is a lasting increase in the share of part-time employment compared to the sending countries. Meanwhile, sending countries tend to see a temporary rise in the prevalence of short-term contracts compared to the destination countries.

The findings highlight a potential trade-off between internal labour market adjustment, employment flexibility, and external adjustment via migration.

“Policies promoting temporary or flexible work need to account for their impact on mobility,” said Laurène Thil, researcher at HIVA – KU Leuven and study co-author. “This is particularly important during periods of regional labour shortages and skill mismatches.”

Researchers also called for stronger social protection systems for atypical workers, especially in destination countries, and warned against gender-blind policies, as part-time employment is disproportionately held by women in many countries.

“In many EU countries, part-time work is overwhelmingly done by women, especially in Austria and Germany. As the share of part-time jobs rises, it’s critical that policies don’t ignore the gender gap. Otherwise, we risk reinforcing inequalities,” said Stella Zilian.

You can read the paper [here.]

Stella Zilian and Laurène Thil (2024) Atypical Work and Intra-EU Mobility Patterns (Deliverable D3.3). Leuven: WeLaR project 101061388 – HORIZON.

WeLaR policy briefs

Europe needs stronger job market policies to address skills mismatches

Europe needs stronger job market policies, including greater investment in lifelong learning, to combat the threat of inequality and economic stagnation arising from labour shortages and skills mismatches, researchers from the EU-funded WeLaR project said.

In a policy brief, “Labour market matching and quality of work in a changing world”, the WeLaR researchers show how digitalisation, climate change, demographic shifts, and globalisation are reshaping the European labour market, making it harder to connect workers with available jobs.

Sectors like healthcare, ICT, construction, and agriculture are struggling to fill roles. Meanwhile, the rapid growth of digital and green industries is creating new opportunities, but a lack of skills prevents many workers from finding employment. Eurostat data reveals that over 40% of employers struggle to find qualified candidates. Regional disparities add to the strain, with different parts of Europe facing distinct labour shortages and skill gaps.

The researchers argue that expanding access to upskilling and reskilling programmes and introducing other lifelong learning initiatives is essential, particularly for workers from declining industries.

“Labour market mismatches are not just a temporary disruption: they reflect long-term structural changes,” explains Mikkel Barslund of HIVA – KU Leuven, a co-author of the brief. “We must align workforce skills with industry’s needs, while improving working conditions. Otherwise, the shortages will persist, and inequality will widen.”

Fixing the crisis requires more than just upskilling, the researchers stress. Poor job quality – low wages, unstable contracts, and limited career prospects – is pushing workers away from critical sectors. Stronger worker protections, wage coordination, and restrictions on precarious contracts can make jobs more attractive.

For instance, limiting fixed-term contracts can encourage employers to invest in stable, high-quality jobs. Coordinated wage bargaining could prevent downward wage pressures that drive in-work poverty. Developing frameworks for regional or sectoral wage coordination can harmonise labour market conditions and address regional disparities in employment opportunities.

Furthermore, family-friendly policies, such as parental leave and flexible hours, can boost workforce participation, ensuring stable incomes for many families and also reducing in-work poverty.

Trade unions also play a crucial role in addressing job insecurity, negotiating fair pay, and pushing for better working conditions, particularly for low-income workers, migrants, and women.

"Tackling Europe's workforce challenges requires a coordinated effort from policymakers, businesses, and unions," says Karolien Lenaerts, of HIVA – KU Leuven, another co-author. "It's not just about filling vacancies. It's about creating jobs people want to stay in."

Read the full brief here.

Mikkel Barslund, Karolien Lenaerts, Cristiano Perugini, Fabrizio Pompei and Laurène Thil (2024). POLICY BRIEF: Labour market matching and quality of work in a changing world: the role of labour market regulations, collective bargaining and investments in up- and re-skilling.

Europe must act to address labour shortages

The European Union needs active policies to address profound shifts in labour demand across the bloc that are being driven by digital transformation, the green transition, and an ageing population, a new policy brief by the EU-funded WeLaR project shows.

In their report, "Labour Demand in a Changing World of Work", Mikkel Barslund and Karolien Lenaerts of HIVA-KU Leuven warn that despite historically high employment, shortages of labour and skills reveal a growing mismatch between available jobs and workers' qualifications. EU labour markets have held up through COVID-19, geopolitical shocks, and economic shifts, but long-term trends are set to reshape employment and worsen shortages. Without urgent action, the researchers argue, these gaps could derail Europe's green and digital ambitions.

"Europe is not running out of work – it's running out of workers willing and able to take on the jobs that are in demand," said Mikkel Barslund, research manager at HIVA-KU Leuven. "The real issue is the mismatch: having enough workers with the right skills, in the right place, at the right time."

The shortages are particularly acute in health and social care, construction, renewable energy, and transport. Yet poor working conditions, limited training pathways, and slow policy coordination are holding back progress. Barslund and Lenaerts call for a new EU-level strategy to secure labour supply for transition-critical sectors, supported by coordinated investment in skills, job quality, and workforce mobility.

As the green transition progresses, it is expected to increase demand for labour in areas like building renovation, sustainable energy, and environmental services. But many of these roles are already difficult to fill, so without major retraining and improved job quality, Europe risks missing its climate targets.

One of the most pressing developments is Europe's ageing population. By 2040, more than one-quarter of the EU's population will be 65 or older. This is already driving up demand for workers in healthcare – roles that are notoriously hard to fill due to low pay, irregular hours, and physically demanding tasks. Labour demand is also rising in the silver economy, the expanding market for goods and services tailored to older adults, from home adaptations to leisure and financial planning. This growing sector brings new pressures on training systems and workforce planning.

"Too many of the jobs that Europe needs most are also the jobs people want least," said Lenaerts, an Associate Professor at HIVA-KU Leuven. "If we're serious about labour demand, we have to make these roles worth doing."

Digitalisation and AI present additional challenges: while the technologies could raise productivity and expand remote work, they also risk displacing roles and reshuffling labour demand. IMF forecasts show that as many as 60% of existing jobs in advanced economies could be impacted by AI. The researchers call for stronger support for vulnerable groups, particularly older, less educated, and migrant workers, who are at the greatest risk of exclusion.

Enhancing working conditions, investing in skills, and supporting inclusive access to good jobs should be viewed not as social spending, but as a precondition for economic growth, the authors argue.

You can read the policy brief [here.](#)

Mikkel Barslund, Karolien Lenaerts (2025) Policy brief: Labour demand in the changing world of work global megatrends, working conditions and labour market exclusion.

Europe needs bold tax, social security reform to protect its welfare states

Europe must overhaul its tax and social security systems to safeguard welfare states against mounting pressure from globalisation, climate change, demographic shifts, and digitalisation, researchers from the EU-funded Project WeLaR warned.

In their latest policy brief, "Taxes, social security, contributions and redistribution: Welfare state and public finances," the researchers argue that traditional models for financing the welfare state, especially those heavily reliant on labour-based contributions, are no longer adequate to sustain today's systems.

"We're seeing a clear mismatch between how Europe funds its welfare state and the economic realities it faces," said Laurène Thil, one of the authors and a senior researcher at HIVA-KU Leuven. "Without major reforms, public finances will fall short of what's needed to protect people and respond to long-term risks."

One major threat to public revenue stems from harmful tax competition and corporate profit-shifting. As EU countries compete to lower corporate tax rates, governments lose the fiscal space needed to maintain essential public services. The brief calls for stronger EU-level coordination to harmonise tax policies, set minimum corporate tax rates, and enforce existing rules under frameworks like the OECD's Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) initiative and the EU's Anti-Tax Avoidance Directive.

Climate change also presents both a fiscal burden and an opportunity. Despite the EU's climate targets, fossil fuel subsidies remain widespread, slowing the green transition and straining public budgets. The authors argue that eliminating these subsidies and adjusting energy prices to reflect environmental costs could unlock $2.4 trillion in global revenues and cut carbon emissions by nearly a third. Reinvesting funds from carbon taxes in renewable energy, public transport, and targeted support for vulnerable households would ensure the green transition benefits all.

Europe's ageing population and declining birth rates are placing unprecedented pressure on pension and healthcare systems. With fewer workers supporting more retirees, the sustainability of pay-as-you-go pension models is increasingly uncertain.

The brief urges policymakers to boost labour force participation through re-skilling, and support for working parents. In the longer term, to cope with the shrinking of its working population the EU will need to diversify how welfare is financed, introducing new sources of revenue such as property, wealth, and environmental taxes to complement labour-based contributions. The rapid rise of digital platforms and automation is transforming economies, while also exposing critical gaps in traditional tax systems and social protections, the researchers said.

The current frameworks often fail to capture the value created by digital business models, while automation is weakening the link between employment and tax revenue. To address these challenges and ensure fair contributions from tech-driven sectors, the researchers suggest taxing digital services, financial transactions, and automation technologies. Investments in AI and data analytics will be essential to improve compliance, reduce evasion, and expand the tax base.

The brief makes a clear case for reframing welfare as a long-term investment, not merely a short-term cost. It argues that timely reform of tax and social security systems is crucial to curb rising inequality and equip Europe to withstand future shocks.

"Tackling the fiscal sustainability of welfare systems is not just about balancing budgets – it's about preparing for the future," said Sebastian Rausch one of the authors and researcher at the ZEW Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research. "If we act now to modernise how we fund welfare, we can build a fairer, greener, and more resilient Europe."

Read the full brief [here.]

Laura Arnemann, Tim Kalmey, Ramón Peña-Casas, Sebastian Rausch, Holger Stichnoth, Laurène Thil (2025) Policy brief: taxes, social security, contributions and redistribution welfare state and public finances.

WeLaR events

Project WeLaR Final Conference: Labour Markets and Welfare States in Transition

Project WeLaR's final conference, held on 12 June 2025 in Brussels, showcased the newest research on how digitalisation, globalisation, climate change, and

demographic shifts impact EU labour markets and welfare systems.

Featuring 20 papers across six sessions, the event brought together researchers from various disciplines to discuss work-related transformations. Keynote speaker Francesco Vona (Università degli Studi di Milano) addressed how to make the green transition both viable and equitable, calling for place-based policies, reskilling programmes, and a shift from occupation-based to task-based measures of green jobs for more accurate policy targeting.

Session 1, chaired by Ilse Tobback (HIVA-KU), explored the global and institutional dimensions of digitalisation and automation. Piotr Lewandowski (IBS) showed that workers' AI exposure is higher in wealthier countries and grows mainly through evolving job tasks rather than occupational shifts. Sabrina Genz (Utrecht University) found that firms with collective bargaining agreements tend to invest more in automation, highlighting the role of institutions in shaping technology adoption. Tommaso Ciarli (University of Sussex) revealed that emerging technologies are adopted in bundles, with varying patterns across countries and sectors, and that only a few are linked to wage increases.

Session 2, chaired by Ilda Durri (OSE), focused on training, qualifications, and social innovation in the context of labour market transformation. Elisabeth Felbermair (Arbeiterkammer Wien) presented the Öko-Booster project, which trains young immigrants, especially women, for green energy jobs in Vienna, promoting inclusion and gender equity. Ursula Holtgrewe (ZSI) explored how social innovations across Europe respond to megatrends with flexible, person-centred approaches that either support labour market reintegration or drive systemic change. Angela Ulrich (IAB) examined vocational guidance in Germany, showing that while large firms support upskilling, smaller firms and vulnerable workers face access barriers, highlighting risks of widening inequality.

In Session 3, chaired by Karolien Lenaerts (HIVA-KU), participants focused on the multifaceted impacts of technological change on work and skill demand. Mantej Singh Pardesi (Maastricht University) showed that firms investing in technology-complementary capital tend to expand hiring and training across all skill levels, highlighting the importance of vocational training and apprenticeships. Roman Klauser (RWI) found that digitalisation, especially AI, has shifted firms' skill demand from analytic to interactive capabilities, particularly post-COVID. Alireza Sabouniha (Universität Innsbruck) revealed that offshoring and technological change have led to more atypical employment, especially in services, with employment protection laws influencing outcomes. Finally, Ekaterina Prytkova (University Côte d'Azur) presented evidence from the TechXposure database showing that digital technologies have mixed employment effects across skill levels—boosting high- and low-skilled jobs while eroding middle-skilled roles.

Leading off the afternoon, Session 4, chaired by Piotr Lewandowski (IBS), explored how climate change and the green transition affect labour markets. Jessica Wiest (IAB) found no clear wage premium for green jobs, suggesting that the lack of financial incentives may slow worker movement into green occupations. Cesar Barreto (OECD) showed that workers displaced from energy-intensive industries suffer significant income losses and job instability, particularly older, less-skilled employees. Nicola Gagliardi (Université Libre de Bruxelles) demonstrated that rising temperatures reduce firm productivity, especially in sectors reliant on outdoor or manual labour. Finally, Toon Vandyck (KU Leuven) presented a model showing that wage rigidities amplify the economic costs of climate policies and deepen labour market inequalities, highlighting the need for targeted policy design in the green transition.

Session 5, chaired by Laurène Thil (HIVA-KU), examined the intersection of social policy, welfare preferences, and inequality in Europe. Fabrizio Pompei (UNIPG) highlighted that family policy reforms, particularly those supporting households with children, are most effective in reducing in-work poverty across the EU. Marko Vladisavljević (University of Belgrade) found that while support for redistribution rose after the 2008 crisis, it declined post-COVID, influenced by trust in institutions, personal values, and voting behaviour. Pol Barbé (HIVA-KU) introduced the Education Investment Effort (EIE) index, revealing stark differences across countries, with Northern and Central Europe leading in educational investment. Finally, Jaewook Lee (Universiteit Leiden) showed that macroeconomic growth alone does not reduce welfare chauvinism, which is more closely tied to personal economic insecurity, underscoring the need for policies addressing deeper fears about the future.

To wrap up the day, Session 6, chaired by Ursula Holtgrewe (ZSI), focused on remote work and new work modalities. Ilse Tobback (HIVA-KU) examined why younger workers are less engaged in telework, finding that access to remote work significantly increases job attractiveness. Young job seekers are willing to accept lower incomes, particularly for the first day of remote work. Women, those already employed, and individuals with telework access show the highest willingness to accept lower pay, while strong workplace social capital slightly reduces the appeal of remote work. Jarne Heylen (KU-Leuven) explored how telework affects psychosocial risks, showing that while telework has increased overall since the pandemic, women and mid-aged workers (35–55) face higher risks related to work intensity, low support, and work-life conflict. In contrast, older and more educated workers tend to experience fewer of these challenges.

WeLaR and ESSI's webinar brings together 25 participants to explore social innovation in rural areas

The WeLaR webinar "Social Innovations in/with/for the Welfare State in Rural Areas", hosted in collaboration with the European School of Social Innovation (ESSI), brought together 25 researchers from across Europe. The 3 June 2025 event showcased WeLaR research case studies on social innovations and explored how these initiatives are reshaping welfare systems and addressing rural challenges, especially for marginalised groups.

Ursula Holtgrewe (ZSI) opened the webinar with insights from WeLaR research. She introduced case studies showing how initiatives support marginalised groups such as people with disabilities, migrant care workers and rural women. The presentation highlighted both opportunities and barriers for social innovations, including institutional support, funding limitations and political constraints. Overall, she emphasised that while social innovations vary in ambition, they often share practical strategies and require strong connections to public institutions to create lasting impact. The presentation is available here.

Laurène Thil (HIVA/KU Leuven) shared findings from a WeLaR case study on care farms in Belgium, a social innovation supporting individuals experiencing burnout. Through nature-based activities like gardening, animal care, and selling produce, participants engage in meaningful work that supports mental health recovery and reintegration into the labour market. The model connects farmers, healthcare providers, and researchers to reduce the risk of disability and relieve pressure on the healthcare system. Despite challenges in scaling and regional disparities, Thil emphasised care farming's strong potential for broader adoption.The presentation is available here.

Sonja Avlijaš (University of Belgrade) explored the WeLaR case study of the *Hobotnica* (Octopus) project, a grassroots initiative helping women in rural Serbia deal with the heavy burden of unpaid care work. Created by the women's group ŽUKO during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project offered eight flexible services, such as mental health support, legal help, digital training, and transport, to reduce isolation and support women's wellbeing. The project focused on inclusion, adaptability, and listening to the real needs of women, offering new opportunities and challenging the limits of Serbia's strict welfare system. While it sparked national debate and inspired some local action, long-term support is still lacking due to funding and legal barriers. See the presentation [here](#).

Stella Wolter and Ursula Holtgrewe presented findings from a WeLaR study on live-in care in Austria, focusing on initiatives to address the challenges faced by mostly migrant women working under precarious self-employment. Known as "24-hour care," this model is especially common in rural and peri-urban areas with ageing populations and limited public services, and leaves workers isolated, overworked and underprotected. The presentation highlighted a support ecosystem of initiatives, volunteers, peer groups, and activist networks offering legal aid, information, and skill-building. Despite grassroots collaboration and visibility, political and structural barriers limit deeper reforms in the care regime and leave migrant workers in precarious positions.

The presentation is available here.

The event concluded with reflections from Franziska Görmar (Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde, Project DICES), followed by a Q&A session and group discussion.

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Funded by the European Union

This project, WeLaR, has received funding under the Horizon Europe programme.