



Labour, Care, and Economic Democracy



POLICY PROFILE 2.1

EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE

A contribution to the Roadmap for Eradicating Poverty Beyond Growth

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Persistent unemployment, underemployment, and precarious work are structural features of contemporary economies, contributing to poverty, inequality, and social exclusion even in contexts of economic growth. At the same time, significant unmet social and environmental needs—ranging from care deficits to climate adaptation—coexist with underutilised labour. These dynamics reflect a systemic failure to ensure the right to work and to organise labour toward socially useful purposes. They also expose the limits of growth-dependent development models, which often fail to deliver stable, inclusive, and sustainable livelihoods. An Employment Guarantee addresses these challenges by establishing a public commitment to provide access to decent, paid work for all individuals able and willing to work, with the State acting as employer of last resort.

The policy sets a living wage floor, strengthens labour standards, and directs labour toward socially and ecologically useful activities defined at the local level. While the full realisation of a rights-based guarantee is progressive, practical models already exist across diverse contexts. India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has generated billions of days of work while reducing poverty and supporting rural development. Initiatives such as the Marienthal programme in Austria, France's Territoires Zéro Chômeur de Longue Durée, Argentina's Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados and South Africa's Social Employment Fund demonstrate the feasibility of locally anchored public employment schemes in both high- and middle-income settings.

The significance of an employment guarantee lies in its ability to transform access to work from a policy objective into an enforceable right, while redistributing income, strengthening workers' bargaining power, and fostering social inclusion. By acting as an automatic stabiliser, it enhances macroeconomic stability without relying on growth alone. At the same time, by prioritising care, environmental restoration, and circular economy activities, it supports a just social-ecological transition and reduces dependence on carbon-intensive development pathways. As part of a broader policy mix, including income support measures, an employment guarantee enables governments to meet human needs directly, expand economic security, and reorient economies toward sustainability and equity beyond the imperatives of GDP growth.

1. POLICY GOAL

An Employment Guarantee is a policy framework through which the State assumes the role of employer of last resort, providing a legally enforceable entitlement to work for all individuals who are willing and able to work at a socially defined wage, typically linked to the minimum wage. Unlike conventional labour market interventions, the defining feature of an employment guarantee is its rights-based nature: access to work is guaranteed rather than rationed, and the obligation rests on the State to provide employment when private labour demand is insufficient^{1,2}.

Building on this rights-based foundation, the primary rationale for an employment guarantee lies in the recognition that contemporary economic structures systematically generate involuntary unemployment, precarious work and macroeconomic instability, including persistent in-work poverty, where individuals remain below the poverty line despite being employed. These dynamics are key drivers of poverty and inequality and reflect a structural mismatch between available labour and unmet social and environmental needs³.

The employment guarantee seeks to address these challenges by ensuring access to work for all, establishing an effective wage floor, and strengthening labour standards across the economy. It aims to redirect underutilised labour toward socially useful, productive, and/or ecologically regenerative activities that contribute to structural transformation, with a strong emphasis on local resource-based and demand-driven approaches. Socio-demographic and ecological transition challenges vary significantly across regions depending on their level of exposure and vulnerability. Accordingly, the type and nature of work undertaken must be adapted to local conditions. In this context, the redirection of labour also implies a reorientation of economic activity toward more sustainable models and more stable economic frameworks.

An employment guarantee can transform the right to work from an obligation of means into an obligation of result, making access to decent work an enforceable entitlement rather than a policy aspiration. It thereby operationalises the right to work as a concrete and enforceable public obligation⁴. This reframes structural unemployment not as a temporary deviation, but as a persistent feature of modern economies requiring systemic policy responses⁵.

¹ Tcherneva, P. R., *The Case for a Job Guarantee* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020)

² EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE must be distinguished from Public Employment Programmes (PEPs), which constitute a much broader and more heterogeneous category of labour market interventions. PEPs may provide temporary income support and work opportunities to unemployed or underemployed workers, particularly in informal and rural economies, and often function as a safety net pending the expansion of social insurance or social assistance systems. However, most PEPs are not legally anchored in an employment guarantee framework and do not establish an enforceable right to work. Coverage is typically limited, duration is short, and access is often rationed or targeted to specific groups. By contrast, only a small number of existing programmes can be considered true employment guarantees, where the State is explicitly bound as employer of last resort.

³ Atkinson, A., *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* (Harvard University Press, 2015)

⁴ Tcherneva, P. R. (2020)

⁵ Mitchell, W., and Muysken, J., *Full Employment Abandoned: Shifting Sands and Policy Failures* (Edward Elgar, 2008)

Unlike conventional job creation policies primarily designed to stimulate aggregate demand, an employment guarantee prioritises the provision of socially and ecologically useful work, including territorially anchored activities that may not generate immediate economic returns but are essential for long-term social and environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, employment guarantee beneficiaries are likely to be concentrated in poorer communities, thereby directing demand stimulus toward these areas and generating spatially redistributive effects.

Ultimately, the employment guarantee rejects the notion that unemployment, economic insecurity, and environmental degradation are inevitable by-products of market economies⁶. It addresses the coexistence of unmet needs and underutilised labour, while advancing the realisation of “full and productive employment,” as recognised in international human rights frameworks, as an obligation of result⁷.

2. POLICY FORMULATION

An Employment Guarantee is designed as a permanent public programme that provides access to paid, meaningful, and decent work for all individuals who seek it. It operates through a standing commitment by the State, acting as employer of last resort, to offer employment on demand at a fixed living wage set above the poverty line and aligned with minimum standards of decent work. This wage acts as a nominal anchor in the labour market, helping to define a floor for earnings and working conditions.^{8,9,10}

The programme creates jobs in areas of public interest that are not sufficiently supplied by the market, particularly in sectors linked to social services, infrastructure development, and the ecological transition.^{11,12,13} Typical activities include care, education, public services, construction and maintenance of infrastructure, sustainable transport, environmental protection, climate mitigation and adaptation, and ecosystem restoration. In addition, the programme can support the development of activities aligned with circular economy principles, such as repair, reuse, recycling, and resource efficiency, alongside other labour-intensive services that contribute to more sustainable production and consumption systems. The selection and design of activities prioritise social usefulness, environmental

⁶ Tcherneva, P. R. (2020)

⁷ Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, *The employment guarantee as a tool in the fight against poverty*, A/HRC/53/33

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Tcherneva, P. R. (2020)

¹⁰ Kallis, G., et al., *Post-growth: the science of wellbeing within planetary boundaries* (The Lancet Planetary Health, 9(1), e62-e78; 2025)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Fromberg, C., and Lund, J. F., *Tracing the contours of the ecosocial project: A review of policy proposals* (Journal of Cleaner Production, 142804; 2024)

¹³ International Labour Organization, *100 Years of Public Works in the ILO* (2021)

sustainability, and complementarity with existing public and private employment, avoiding displacement effects.¹⁴

The employment guarantee is typically funded at the national level and implemented locally, enabling responsiveness to diverse territorial contexts. Local authorities, communities, and relevant stakeholders play a central role in identifying needs and shaping projects, supported by participatory governance mechanisms to ensure that interventions reflect local priorities and conditions. This decentralised implementation is essential to account for differing socio-demographic and ecological challenges across territories. Where immediate job placement is not feasible, temporary income support aligned with the guarantee ensures continuity in the realisation of the right to work.¹⁵

The design of the programme can explicitly integrate cross-cutting priorities, including gender equality and environmental sustainability. Women represent approximately 40 percent of the global labour force¹⁶ while continuing to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care work.¹⁷ An employment guarantee can help expand access to decent, fairly remunerated employment opportunities that accommodate diverse needs and constraints. Importantly, this should not reinforce occupational segregation but rather broaden access to a wide range of roles and support women's economic autonomy.

The conceptual foundations of the employment guarantee draw on economic theories emphasising the role of public employment in ensuring access to decent work for all and stabilising labour markets, notably in the work of Hyman Minsky¹⁸ and John Maynard Keynes.¹⁹ More recent contributions, including those of Pavlina Tcherneva, have further elaborated its design as a structured, scalable policy instrument.²⁰

3. EXPECTED BENEFITS

The implementation of an Employment Guarantee generates interrelated benefits at macroeconomic, social, gender, territorial, and ecological levels.

First, an employment guarantee supports full employment while enhancing macroeconomic stability. By functioning as an automatic stabiliser, public employment expands during economic downturns and contracts during upturns. This counter-cyclical mechanism helps stabilise aggregate demand and reduce the volatility of economic cycles. In addition, the establishment of a fixed living wage contributes to stronger wage-setting dynamics and

¹⁴ Tcherneva, P. R., *The Job Guarantee: Design, Jobs, and Implementation* (Levy Economics Institute, 2018)

¹⁵ Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, *The employment guarantee as a tool in the fight against poverty*, A/HRC/53/33, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/53/33>

¹⁶ World Bank database 2025 (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS>)

¹⁷ International Labour Organization, *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work* (2018)

¹⁸ Minsky, H.P., *Ending Poverty: Jobs, Not Welfare* (Levy Economics Institute, 2013)

¹⁹ Tcherneva, P. R., *On-the-spot Employment: Keynes's Approach to Full Employment and Economic Transformation* (Review of Social Economy, 70 (1): 57-80; 2012)

²⁰ Tcherneva, P. R. (2020)

improved labour standards across the economy^{21,22}, while helping to offset some of the fiscal and economic costs associated with unemployment.

Second, an employment guarantee contributes to poverty reduction and inequality mitigation. As a structural policy instrument, it addresses one of the root causes of poverty: exclusion from decent, stable and adequately remunerated employment. By providing access to secure income through work, it reduces income insecurity and limits reliance on precarious employment.²³ At the same time, income support measures such as basic income guarantees provide a complementary foundation for livelihoods, particularly for those unable to engage in paid work. For many working-age adults, however, participation in employment offers additional benefits beyond income, combining financial security with social inclusion, skills development, and a sense of purpose. In this way, an employment guarantee and income support measures can operate as complementary instruments, fostering more inclusive labour market integration while ensuring that participation in work remains a choice.^{24,25}

Third, an employment guarantee enhances human dignity and social cohesion. Involuntary unemployment is associated with adverse effects on mental and physical health, social isolation, and loss of purpose. Ensuring access to meaningful work can strengthen individual agency, reinforce social ties, and support greater civic participation, thereby contributing to more cohesive and resilient communities, while preventing the long-term social and economic scarring effects of unemployment on individuals and their families.^{26,27,28}

Fourth, an employment guarantee can contribute to advancing gender equality when designed with a gender-transformative approach. By expanding opportunities in sectors such as care, education, and social services, it supports the recognition and redistribution of unpaid care work and facilitates women's access to decent employment.²⁹ At the same time, an employment guarantee can promote more equitable access to traditionally male-dominated sectors, such as construction, infrastructure, and transport, thereby helping to reduce occupational segregation. This, in turn, can strengthen financial autonomy and more equitable participation in the labour market, provided that programme design both values care work and actively broadens opportunities across sectors.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, *The employment guarantee as a tool in the fight against poverty*, A/HRC/53/33, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/53/33>

²³ Antonopoulos, R., and Kim, K., *Public job-creation programs: The economic benefits of investing in social care? Case studies in South Africa and the United States* (Levy Economics Institute, 2011)

²⁴ Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) Annual Report 2022–23* (2023)

²⁵ Antonopoulos, R., and Kim, K. (2011)

²⁶ Philip, K., *Public Employment Programmes in South Africa's Changing Social Protection Landscape* (AFD research papers, n°336, 2025)

²⁷ World Health Organization, *Social determinants of mental health* (2014)

²⁸ Fryers, T., et al., *The distribution of the common mental disorders: social inequalities in Europe* (Clin Pract Epidemiol Ment Health 1, 14; 2005)

²⁹ Antonopoulos, R., and Kim, K. (2011)

Fifth, an employment guarantee can play a central role in advancing a just social-ecological transition. By mobilising labour toward activities such as environmental restoration, climate mitigation and adaptation, sustainable infrastructure, and natural resource management, it aligns employment creation with long-term sustainability objectives. This includes support for circular economy activities, such as repair, reuse, and recycling systems, which contribute to more resource-efficient production and production patterns.

Finally, an employment guarantee can strengthen territorial cooperation and foster new forms of partnership across economic sectors. Its local implementation encourages collaboration between public institutions, private actors, and organisations rooted in communities. In this context, the social and solidarity economy plays a particularly important role. Many of the entities involved in the design and delivery of employment guarantee activities, such as cooperatives, associations, and community-based organisations, operate according to principles of social purpose, participatory governance, and reinvestment in local development. As such, they are well positioned to support the economic, social, and territorial transformation enabled by an EG, while reinforcing locally embedded and inclusive development dynamics.³⁰

4. EVIDENCE, EXAMPLES & BEST PRACTICES

Empirical evidence from diverse institutional and economic contexts demonstrates that Employment Guarantee-type programmes can deliver measurable impacts across employment, income security, and social and environmental outcomes when supported by adequate design, funding, and institutional capacity. These experiences also highlight the importance of legal entrenchment, predictable financing, and strong local implementation systems.

The most comprehensive and legally grounded example remains the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India. The Act guaranteed 100 days of employment per rural household annually, extended to 150 days in drought-affected areas and up to 200 days in certain states.³¹ It operationalised the right to work in law and has generated over 44 billion person-days of employment as of October 2024, at an average expenditure of approximately USD 2.70 per person per day. A substantial body of evidence links MGNREGA to poverty reduction^{32,33,34}, rural development³⁵, increased women's labour

³⁰ International Labour Organization, *Social and Solidarity Economy and the Future of Work* (2017)

³¹ Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India (2023)

³² Mukherjee, D., and Sinha, U.B., *Understanding NREGA: a simple theory and some facts*. In *Human capital and development: The Indian experience* (Springer India, 2012)

³³ Kareemulla, K., et al., *Impact of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India on rural poverty and food security* (Current Agriculture Research Journal, 1(1), p.13; 2013)

³⁴ Azam, M., *The impact of Indian job guarantee scheme on labor market outcomes: Evidence from a natural experiment* (IZA Discussion Papers n° 6548; 2012)

³⁵ Drèze, J., and Sen, A., *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions* (Princeton University Press, 2013)

force participation³⁶, and crisis mitigation, notably during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁷ The programme has also generated positive wage spillovers, raising agricultural wages despite most work being outside agriculture, and strengthening local labour standards beyond direct beneficiaries. Self-selection mechanisms have ensured that beneficiaries predominantly come from marginalised and deprived rural communities.^{38,39}

MGNREGA further illustrates how design features shape outcomes. Provisions such as the reservation of one-third of jobs for women, equal wages, access to childcare facilities, and financial inclusion measures have contributed to more equal gender and caste representation and enhanced women's financial autonomy.⁴⁰ Environmentally, the programme prioritised natural resource management, including watershed development, groundwater recharge, irrigation renovation, and afforestation, with documented improvements in water availability, soil conservation, and tree cover.⁴¹ At the same time, implementation challenges faced by the programme such as unmet demand for work, payment delays, and fluctuating budget allocations (around 0.2% of GDP in recent budgets) underscore the importance of sustained fiscal commitment and administrative capacity. Macro-modelling suggested that a gendered and green expansion could generate 36 million jobs (6% of India's workforce), including 11.6 million jobs for women, illustrating the transformative scale possible under an expanded framework.

Evidence from high-income countries reinforces the feasibility of EG-type approaches. The Universal Job Guarantee pilot in Marienthal, Austria, designed by Oxford University economists and implemented by the Austrian Public Employment Service, offered a properly paid job to residents unemployed for more than twelve months⁴². Participation was voluntary and included preparatory training and social support. Evaluations show significant improvements in employment outcomes, income security, social recognition, and collective purpose, alongside a near-elimination of long-term unemployment at the municipal level. Importantly, no negative spillovers on short-term unemployment were detected. The project proved economically viable: the per-participant cost (€29,841) was comparable to the estimated annual fiscal cost of unemployment (€30,000), demonstrating that active employment guarantees do not need to entail higher public expenditure than passive income support⁴³. These findings highlight the stabilising and dignity-enhancing effects of guaranteed employment when designed without sanctions or coercion.

³⁶ Dasgupta, S., and Sudarshan, R., *Issues in labour market inequality and women's participation in India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme* (ILO working papers, 2011)

³⁷ Drèze, J., and Khera, R., *Recent Social Security Initiatives in India* (World Development, 2017)

³⁸ Drèze, J., and Khera, R., *The battle for employment guarantee* (Frontline, 26(1), pp.3-16; 2009)

³⁹ Godfrey-Wood, R., and Flower, B.C.R., *Does Guaranteed employment promote resilience to climate change? The case of India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act* (Development Policy Review 36: 586–604; 2018)

⁴⁰ Afridi, F., Mukhopadhyay, A., and Sahoo, S., *Female labor force participation and child education in India: evidence from the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme* (IZA Journal of Labor & Development, 2016)

⁴¹ Sunitha, S., and Sudha, S., *Ecological & Economic development through MGNREGA* (UGC Care Journal, 2020)

⁴² Oxford University, *World's first universal jobs guarantee experiment starts in Austria* (2020)

⁴³ Kasy, M., and Lehner, L., *Employing the Unemployed of Marienthal: Evaluation of a Guaranteed Job Program* (Institute of Labor Economics - IZA, 2023)

Argentina's *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados* programme provides an important example from a middle-income context. Introduced in the early 2000s in response to severe economic crisis, the programme offered employment to heads of households in community-based projects and public works. At its peak, it reached approximately two million participants and played a significant role in stabilising the economy and reducing extreme poverty. Evidence highlights strong gender impacts, with women representing nearly three-quarters of participants, as well as positive effects on local development through the creation of community assets and services. The programme also demonstrated that participants valued access to meaningful work alongside income security, reinforcing the importance of employment-based approaches. This experience illustrates the potential of large-scale public employment programmes to support macroeconomic stabilisation, social inclusion, and gender equality in crisis contexts.^{44,45}

In Greece, the Kinofelis programme provides evidence from a middle-income European context affected by severe economic crisis. Co-funded by the European Social Fund and supported technically by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), it offered eight months of municipal employment at minimum wage to long-term unemployed individuals. Between 2015 and 2018, it reached 200,000 participants. While not a permanent guarantee, evaluations report substantial improvements in work discipline, professional self-worth, perceived health, and social relations, as well as reductions in substance abuse and violence. While it did not significantly alter long-term employment trajectories, it improved “work-readiness” and was perceived as more effective than training-only interventions⁴⁶. Its temporary nature, however, highlights the importance of continuity and institutionalisation for sustained impact.

In France, the *Territoires Zéro Chômeur de Longue Durée* (TZCLD) initiative, launched in 2016 from a civil society movement, adopts a bottom-up approach centred on the needs and skills of long-term unemployed individuals⁴⁷. Financed primarily by the French State, *Départements*, and local authorities, it is based on strong territorial cooperation driven by Local Committees for Employment. The initiative demonstrates the importance of mobilising all employment stakeholders, including the individuals concerned, local economic actors, and public authorities, to develop transversal and multidimensional responses to employment challenges at the territorial level. Where no suitable opportunities exist within the local economy, the programme establishes dedicated Companies for Employment Purposes, which provide adapted jobs, permanent contracts, and flexible working arrangements. Since its inception, the initiative has enabled nearly 8,000 people to exit long-term unemployment, either through integration into local labour markets or through employment in the 90+ project-based enterprises created across urban and rural areas. The

⁴⁴ Tcherneva, P. R., and Wray, L. R., *Public Employment and Women: The Impact of Argentina's Jefes Program on Female Heads of Poor Households* (The Levy Economics Institute, working paper n°519, 2007)

⁴⁵ Kostzer, D., Argentina: A Case Study on the *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados*, or the Employment Road to Economic Recovery (The Levy Economics Institute, working paper n°534, 2008)

⁴⁶ International Labour Organization, *Getting back to work: A study of the social impacts of Kinofelis* (2018)

⁴⁷ Charles, J., and Ferreras, I., *Démocratiser, démarchandiser, dépolluer : la contribution des « Territoires Zéro Chômeur de Longue Durée »* (RECMA 2023/4 n°370-371 ; 2023)

adaptation of employment to individual profiles has proven particularly effective, allowing the programme to reach a wide range of vulnerable groups, including long-term unemployed individuals, women, and migrants⁴⁸. Its governance model underscores the importance of local authority involvement, personalised job design, and sustained funding, demonstrating that EG-type approaches can function as instruments of social innovation and local economic democracy.

Finally, in South Africa, amongst a range of implementation modalities for public employment, the Social Employment Fund (SEF) illustrates a hybrid model combining public employment with community-driven development and strong engagement of the social and solidarity economy. Supported by the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition and managed by the Industrial Development Corporation, the SEF provides 100 days of work per year structured as ongoing part-time employment (16 hours per week at the national minimum wage) through a partnership model involving 42 strategic partners and over 4,000 community-based organisations⁴⁹. Its distinctive “scaffolding” design combines income support with opportunities for skills development and complementary livelihood activities. In fiscal year 2025 alone, from amongst 50,000 participants, 12,691 participants engaged in complementary livelihoods, 5,835 micro-enterprises were established, 6,162 existing micro-enterprises were supported, and 1,651 participants transitioned to full-time self-employment⁵⁰. The SEF’s digital reporting system tracks 640 indicators across seven thematic areas, demonstrating measurable social value creation. This model highlights the potential of employment programmes to strengthen the social economy, foster local agency, and contribute to multiple Sustainable Development Goals simultaneously.^{51,52}

Overall, these experiences demonstrate that while design and context matter, core principles, such as rights-based access, adequate financing, local adaptation, and integration with broader development strategies, are critical to the effectiveness and scalability of employment guarantee programmes.⁵³

5. OBJECTIONS, POTENTIAL BARRIERS & COUNTERARGUMENTS

The implementation of an employment guarantee faces significant political, economic, and institutional constraints.

⁴⁸ Breda, T., et al., *L’expérimentation « Territoires zéro chômeur de longue durée » : analyse quantitative des entreprises à but d’emploi et de leurs salariés* (Institut des politiques publiques, 2025)

⁴⁹ The Presidential Employment Stimulus, *Building a Society that Works: 2,5 million jobs, opportunities and more* (2026)

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Philip, K. (2025)

⁵² Essa, Z., *Public employment and livelihood trajectories in South Africa's constrained labour market* (Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town, n°311, 2025)

⁵³ International Labour Organization, *Public employment programmes at the intersection of employment and social protection policies* (2024)

Politically, vested interests may favour the preservation of existing economic arrangements⁵⁴, while fiscal restraint norms, price-stability priorities and growth-oriented policy paradigms continue to shape policy choices across the political spectrum⁵⁵. In many contexts, financialized economic systems—characterised by the growing influence of capital markets, sovereign debt pressures, and credit rating assessments—further constrain public investment decisions and reinforce caution toward large-scale employment programmes⁵⁶. These structural factors can limit governments’ willingness to adopt transformative labour policies. At the same time, an employment guarantee has the potential to build broad-based social support by directly addressing unemployment, poverty, and ecological challenges. By delivering visible and tangible benefits, particularly at local level and during periods of economic crisis, it can gradually shift political incentives and expand coalitions in favour of structural reform.

Specific legal and fiscal frameworks may also restrict policy space. In high-income regions, fiscal rules, such as balanced-budget requirements or the European Union’s Stability and Growth Pact, can limit sustained public employment expansion. In low- and middle-income countries, conditional lending arrangements with international financing institutions may impose fiscal consolidation measures that constrain social spending and restrict public sector employment.⁵⁷ These constraints highlight the importance of aligning macroeconomic frameworks with employment and social objectives.

Financial concerns are among the most frequently cited barriers. Governments often invoke limited fiscal space to justify underinvestment in public services. Structural features of the international tax system, persistent tax competition, sovereign debt burdens, and fiscal consolidation policies can all restrict available resources. While employment guarantee programmes may entail significant upfront costs, they also function as automatic stabilisers: public spending increases during downturns and declines during economic upturns, moderating overall fiscal impact.^{58,59} This counter-cyclical dynamic reduces indirect costs associated with unemployment, including social protection expenditures, healthcare-related costs, and social instability.⁶⁰ Evidence from the Marienthal employment guarantee pilot suggests that the fiscal cost of unemployment can be comparable to, or exceed, the cost of EG.⁶¹ In addition, fiscal space depends on the monetary system in question. Monetarily sovereign nations like the USA, Canada or the UK have ample space to implement the programs. But in nations like those in the Eurozone, fiscal space can be expanded through progressive taxation on income, wealth, natural resources, and financial transactions, which

⁵⁴ Kalecki, M., *Political Aspects of Full Employment* (Political Quarterly 14, no. 4: 322–331; 1943)

⁵⁵ Bueno, N., ter Haar, B., and Zekic, N., *Labour Law Utopias: Post-Growth & Post-Productive Work Approaches* (Oxford University Press, 2024)

⁵⁶ Tcherneva, P. R. (2020)

⁵⁷ Chletsos, M., and Sintos, A., *The effects of IMF conditional programs on the unemployment rate* (European Journal of Political Economy, 76, 102272; 2023)

⁵⁸ Tcherneva, P. R. (2020)

⁵⁹ Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, *The employment guarantee as a tool in the fight against poverty*, A/HRC/53/33, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/53/33>

⁶⁰ Wray, L. R., *Understanding Modern Money: The Key to Full Employment and Price Stability* (Edward Elgar, 1998)

⁶¹ Kasy, M., and Lehner, L. (2023)

can both mobilise resources and reduce inequality.⁶² The nature of fiscal constraints varies across contexts, with high-income countries often constrained by self-imposed rules, middle-income countries by external financial pressures, and low-income countries by limited tax capacity and reliance on concessional financing.

Structural and institutional issues also affect implementation. In many social security systems, access to social protection is conditional on employment status, which risk transforming an employment guarantee into a coercive “workfare” mechanism.⁶³ To avoid this, the employment guarantee must be designed as a legal entitlement distinct from conditional social assistance.⁶⁴ Social protection systems should remain independent, ensuring that participation in the employment guarantee is voluntary and that the right to work is realised as a genuine choice rather than a coercive necessity.^{65,66}

Concerns regarding inefficiency and labour market distortion are also frequently raised. Critics argue that public job creation may crowd out private employment or generate low-productive activities. However, these concerns often reflect the assumptions of an economic model primarily driven by short-term profitability and, in some cases, extractive dynamics, which tend to underprovide socially and ecologically necessary work. In this context, an employment guarantee proposes an alternative approach, aligning employment creation with the structural challenges of socio-demographic and ecological transitions⁶⁷.

By setting a fixed decent wage, the employment guarantee establishes a floor for labour standards without directly competing with private sector wages, leaving employers free to offer more attractive conditions. Furthermore, the work offered is not arbitrary: the programme reorients job creation toward activities defined by territorial needs and often neglected by profit-driven markets, requiring new forms of responsibility from economic actors and encouraging stronger linkages between economic development and local well-being.⁶⁸ This implies reinforced territorial cooperation and the development of concrete partnerships between the public sector, private enterprises, and the social and solidarity economy, within which many employment-oriented structures already operate in several countries.

Rather than generating inefficiencies, this approach can improve the allocation of labour by directing it toward areas of clear social and environmental value that are systematically underprovided by markets. Participatory governance and locally grounded project identification further enhance relevance, efficiency, and complementarity with existing economic activities.

⁶² Tcherneva, P. R. (2020)

⁶³ Bueno, N., ter Haar, B., and Zekic, N. (2024)

⁶⁴ Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, *The employment guarantee as a tool in the fight against poverty*, A/HRC/53/33, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/53/33>

⁶⁵ Bueno, N., ter Haar, B., and Zekic, N. (2024)

⁶⁶ Tcherneva, P. R. (2018)

⁶⁷ Zimmermann, L., *Why Guarantee Employment? Evidence from a Large Indian Public-Works Program* (Global Labor Organization, 2020)

⁶⁸ Bueno, N., ter Haar, B., and Zekic, N. (2024)

Inflationary pressures constitute another common concern. Critics suggest that guaranteeing employment at a fixed wage could spur wage-price spirals. In practice, the structure of the employment guarantee mitigates this risk.⁶⁹ The programme primarily absorbs underutilised labour rather than competing with existing employment, and the fixed wage acts as a nominal anchor rather than a source of upward pressure. By focusing on the provision of public goods and essential services, employment guarantee can support long-term economic stability without generating significant inflationary effects.^{70,71}

Finally, institutional capacity, administrative and financial decentralisation, and coordination constraints can pose challenges, particularly in contexts with limited public resources. Weak cross-sector coordination and fragmented governance systems may slow implementation, especially where subnational authorities lack fiscal or administrative autonomy. However, these challenges can be addressed through phased implementation, national funding combined with local delivery, and integration with existing public service systems. Rather than requiring fully developed institutional capacity from the outset, an employment guarantee can itself contribute to strengthening coordination mechanisms, deepening administrative and financial decentralisation where appropriate, and rebuilding state capacity over time.

6. IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

Implementation Across Time

Implementing employment guarantee requires a sequenced institutional build-up rather than a single policy launch. Drawing on phased proposals such as Stevenson's roadmap for public works in a post-growth transition⁷², implementation can proceed in three operational stages, often beginning with programme expansion and institutional experimentation before full legal entrenchment is achieved.

Phase I (0–3 years): Programme experimentation and expansion, institutional development, and initial legal anchoring. In many contexts, implementation begins with the expansion and adaptation of existing public employment programmes, or the introduction of new pilot initiatives, often at sub-national level. These programmes help demonstrate value, build administrative systems, and generate public and political support, particularly when targeted at areas with high levels of unemployment or deprivation.

During this phase, existing public employment schemes (where present) can be expanded, harmonised, and progressively aligned with employment guarantee principles. Administrative units, typically within ministries of labour or social protection, should establish national registries, job-matching platforms, and monitoring systems. Local

⁶⁹ Wray, L. R., et al., *Public Service Employment – A Path to Full Employment* (Levy Economics Institute, 2018)

⁷⁰ Wray, L. R. (1998)

⁷¹ Mitchell, W., and Muysken, J. (2008)

⁷² Stevenson, C., *Public works for a degrowth transformation: Jobs for all who want them* (Research & Degrowth International policy brief n.3; 2025)

governments play a central role in identifying labour-intensive projects in areas such as care, ecological restoration, housing retrofitting, circular economy activities, and community services.

Where feasible, governments may begin to introduce elements of legal and policy frameworks, such as defining eligibility criteria, wage floors, and safeguards to ensure voluntariness and non-coercion, with a view to progressive consolidation. Budget allocations should be stabilised and integrated into public expenditure frameworks rather than treated solely as temporary stimulus. Strengthening social protection systems, expanding care leave, and supporting the formalisation of informal work should proceed in parallel to avoid substitution effects.

Phase II (3–7 years): Institutional scaling and progressive consolidation. Building on the systems, evidence, and public support developed during the initial phase, programme coverage can be progressively expanded and more systematically integrated into national labour market and development strategies. National authorities set wage standards, indexed where appropriate, and ensure portability of rights and benefits.

Sectoral ministries (e.g. care, environment, infrastructure) integrate employment guarantee labour into long-term public investment strategies, while public employment services coordinate training and skills development pathways to facilitate mobility between employment guarantee positions and other forms of employment. In this phase, precarious forms of public employment can be regularised under standardised contracts.

As programmes mature, legal and institutional frameworks can be further strengthened and formalised, moving progressively toward more universal and rights-based approaches. Financing mechanisms should be stabilised through progressive taxation and medium-term expenditure frameworks. Independent evaluation bodies should assess labour market impacts, including potential displacement effects and macroeconomic implications.

Phase III (7–10+ years): Rights consolidation and international coordination. The employment guarantee becomes a permanent labour market institution, embedded in national legal and fiscal frameworks. Access to work is progressively consolidated as an enforceable right through administrative procedures. At the international level, coordination mechanisms, including potential global or regional financing instruments, can support countries with limited fiscal space in sustaining counter-cyclical employment policies. Continuous investment in education, training and skills upgrading ensures adaptability to evolving economic, technological, and ecological transitions.

Implementation across Governance Levels

Local level: project identification and delivery. Municipal and regional authorities play a central role in identifying community needs and organising project delivery. Their proximity to local populations allows for the design of context-specific interventions aligned with territorial priorities, such as Bogotá's Care Blocks model⁷³. Local authorities should not bear

⁷³ OECD-OPSI, *Bogotá Care Blocks* (2022)

the financial burden of wages; instead, national governments provide earmarked transfers to ensure territorial equity. Civil society organisations, cooperatives, and other locally rooted actors may act as implementing partners under public oversight⁷⁴.

National level: legislation, financing, and standards. Central governments hold primary responsibility for establishing the legal framework, securing financing, and ensuring macroeconomic coordination. This includes defining wage levels, regulating working conditions, and guaranteeing compliance with decent work standards. Examples such as India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act demonstrate that national legislation is decisive for scale and durability^{75,76}. Ministries of finance integrate the programme within fiscal frameworks, ministries of labour oversee implementation and compliance, and sectoral ministries contribute to the development of project pipelines aligned with national priorities.

Role of the private sector and the social and solidarity economy. While the employment guarantee remains a publicly funded and rights-based programme, implementation can involve a diversity of actors. Social and solidarity economy organisations, including cooperatives, associations, and social enterprises, can play a central role not only in supervising activities but also in directly creating jobs and organising production in line with social and environmental objectives⁷⁷.

For-profit companies can also contribute as territorial partners. Beyond hiring participants, they can support the creation of economic activity by subcontracting certain tasks to entities implementing employment guarantee programmes and by helping to establish the conditions for generating non-offshorable, locally anchored employment. Such collaboration can strengthen local value chains and foster complementarities between different segments of the economy⁷⁸, provided that public authorities retain oversight of standards and objectives.

International level: standards and support. International organisations such as the ILO play an important role in supporting implementation through standard-setting, technical assistance, and coordination, particularly in low-income countries⁷⁹. Existing international labour standards and frameworks may need to be strengthened or adapted to ensure alignment with the right to work and the expansion of decent employment opportunities⁸⁰.

⁷⁴ OECD, *Job Creation and Local Economic Development* (2020)

⁷⁵ Mukherjee, D., and Sinha, U.B. (2012)

⁷⁶ Azam, M. (2012)

⁷⁷ International Labour Organization (2017)

⁷⁸ Tcherneva, P. R. (2018)

⁷⁹ International Labour Organization, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – in Pursuit of a Better Future* (2022)

⁸⁰ Bueno, N., ter Haar, B., and Zekic, N. (2024)

Differentiated Approach Across Low-, Middle, and High Income Countries

Implementation pathways must reflect differences in fiscal capacity, labour market structures, and development priorities^{81,82}.

In **low-income countries**, employment guarantee programmes primarily address poverty, underemployment and vulnerability^{83,84}. Initial implementation may focus on rural infrastructure, climate adaptation, and access to basic services. In contexts where transitions to formal employment remain limited, employment guarantee schemes can function as one component of a broader portfolio of livelihood strategies, providing predictable income alongside other economic activities. Given the limited fiscal space, external concessional financing and international solidarity mechanisms may be required in early stages.

In **middle-income countries**, employment guarantee policies can support labour market stabilisation, facilitate the formalisation of informal employment, and scale up investment in social and ecological sectors. Experiences such as India's MGNREGA and Argentina's Plan Jefes illustrate the feasibility of large-scale programmes, while also highlighting the importance of institutional capacity and sustained financing⁸⁵.

In **high-income countries**, employment guarantee implementation is more closely linked to economic restructuring, ecological transition, and demographic change. It can serve as a tool for territorial revitalisation, particularly in rural areas experiencing depopulation and declining access to public services and economic activity. It can also contribute to strengthening social and economic cohesion in disadvantaged urban areas, including densely populated neighbourhoods with high levels of poverty, as illustrated by initiatives such as TZCLD, where a significant share of projects is located in urban priority areas.

More broadly, an employment guarantee can help address persistent structural unemployment among vulnerable groups, including low-skilled workers, older persons, isolated individuals, and persons with disabilities, by offering adapted employment opportunities. Evidence from local initiatives shows that such approaches can reach populations often excluded from standard labour market policies.

Across all contexts, while implementation modalities and financing mechanisms differ, the core principle remains the same: a publicly guaranteed right to work, adapted to institutional capacities and aligned with broader social, economic, and ecological objectives. The duration of employment provided under an employment guarantee may vary across contexts, ranging from time-bound or partial employment guarantees to more continuous forms of access, depending on fiscal space, labour market conditions, and policy priorities. Over time, however, the objective of an employment guarantee is to progressively ensure stable and

⁸¹ International Labour Organization (2024)

⁸² Philip, K. (2025)

⁸³ Atkinson, A. (2015)

⁸⁴ Tcherneva, P. R. (2018)

⁸⁵ International Labour Organization (2024)

continuous access to decent work for all those who seek it, as part of a fully realised right to employment.

7. INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

An employment guarantee is grounded in international human rights law. The right to work is recognised in Article 23 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and codified in Article 6 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which obliges States to take steps toward "full and productive employment." Article 6(2) explicitly requires the adoption of policies aimed at achieving full employment. As such, States must progressively realise this right using the maximum of available resources and ensure non-discrimination and equal access.

These obligations closely mirror those contained in the ILO Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122)⁸⁶, article 1, which requires States to pursue an active employment policy ensuring that work is available to all who seek it.

In its General Comment No. 18, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) confirms that the right to work cannot be realised through labour markets alone and require deliberate State action through employment policies and, where necessary, direct job-creation measures, particularly for disadvantaged and marginalised groups⁸⁷.

This interpretation is reinforced by SDG 8 aiming at full and productive employment and decent work for all reaffirmed by the Doha Political Declaration (paras. 4–6)⁸⁸. The Sevilla Commitment renews the global financing framework for the 2030 Agenda and commits States to mobilise the fiscal space necessary to realise social rights, including the right to work⁸⁹.

The Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights affirms that a well-designed employment guarantee can operationalise these obligations by providing voluntary, decent work at a living wage while strengthening social protection systems. It emphasises safeguards against coercion, alignment with labour standards, and particular attention to marginalised groups. Accordingly, an employment guarantee should be framed not only as economic policy but as a rights-based instrument for fulfilling States' existing international commitments.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ International Labour Organization, Employment Policy Convention, Recommendation, 1964, No. 122.

⁸⁷ CESCR, General Comment No. 18: The Right to Work, E/C.12/GC/18.

⁸⁸ United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Doha Political Declaration, A/RES/80/5 (2025).

⁸⁹ United Nations Conference on Financing for Development, Sevilla Commitment, UN Doc. A/CONF.227/2025/L.1 (2025).

⁹⁰ Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, The employment guarantee as a tool in the fight against poverty, A/HRC/53/33, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/53/33>

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