

Social Quality and Working Poverty in the European Union and Slovakia in Particular

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Abstract

This article discusses working poverty as a socioeconomic human condition that leads to reduced social quality of daily life circumstances. The analyses are based on the social quality theory (SQT) and approach (SQA). Social quality (as an existential human condition) and working poverty (as a result of a combination of aspects of the conditional factors of social quality) have not yet been investigated as two interconnected phenomena. We analyzed working poverty in the EU and Slovakia by assessing its relationships with these aspects of the conditional factors. On a societal level we also assessed influences of processes in the socioeconomic and financial, sociopolitical and legal, sociocultural and welfare, and socioenvironmental dimensions. Our research was based on Eurostat data, other available databases, and two social quality studies on societal processes in Ukraine. We conclude with specific proposals and recommendations to reduce and mitigate the impacts of working poverty.

Keywords: comprehensiveness, conditional factors, social quality, societal dimensions, working poverty

This article explores conditional factors in operation in the (re)production of working poverty. In particular we pay attention to the interrelationship between these factors, as conceived from the social quality perspective and as the outcome of societal patterns and processes. The reason for discussing working poverty in detail lies in the worrying increase of this phenomenon both in Slovakia and in the European Union and elsewhere in the world. At present, the war in Ukraine is leading to an increase in poverty due to the rising prices of basic services and goods, and especially energy. This is in addition to the continued destruction of infrastructures and the built environment in Ukraine since February 2022. For this reason, it is justified not only to refer to working poverty, but to discuss it in the same vein as energy poverty.

Our study is based on and structured according to (components of) the social quality theory (SQT) and approach (SQA). Therefore, in the third section we will present an overview of this theoretical perspective (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012;



Abbott et al. 2016; IASQ 2019). The goal is to analyze the phenomenon of working poverty as an outcome of specific interrelationships between its subject matter and aspects of the “conditional factors” of social quality. Following Zuzana Novakova (2017), we also investigate the influences on working poverty of processes in the so-called “societal dimensions.” We acknowledge that by this focus we do not include the entire scope of processes at stake, for instance the interrelations of “conditional factors” with the “constitutional” and “normative” factors. In our conclusions the epistemological significance of this omission will be discussed.

In the first section we will further conceptualize working poverty and explore some specific characteristics of this phenomenon, taking into account the work of Peter Townsend. In the second section, the social quality perspective and its deployment in this article is explained. We consider working poverty to be a phenomenon whose emergence and possible reduction is related to all conditional factors of social quality. In the third section the findings of our study are presented in line with the structure of the social quality analytical framework. Through the latter, we arrived at a comprehensive view of working poverty and deduced the influence of individual conditional factors. In the fourth section our findings regarding the influences of the four societal dimensions are presented. These dimensions allowed us to perceive working poverty procedurally and to deduce methods for eliminating its undesirable manifestations. In the final section we discuss our conclusions and recommendations, based on the findings.

Explorations into the Nature of Working Poverty

Conceptualizations

One of the first studies dealing with the relationship between low wage income and poverty was published in 2002 (Strengmann-Kuhn 2002). A big step forward was the implementation of the EU survey on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) a year later, in 2003, which was mainly aimed at monitoring changing living conditions in Europe and providing reliable information on various aspects of poverty and social exclusion.

Unfortunately, other studies point to a significantly increasing poverty rate in Europe. They focus on measuring the risk of poverty among employed persons (Bardone and Guio 2005), the sociodemographic profile of the working poor (Eurostat 2010; Ponthieux 2010), or the impact of low wages on poverty itself (Cooke and Lawton 2008a: 35). In these studies, approaches to working poverty are described and an explanation is offered of how individual characteristics and factors related to households lead to the phenomenon (Eurostat 2010; Lohmann 2008). According to Strengmann-Kuhn (2002), there are two reasons that even working people can become poor. The first reason is that the worker has a low wage. The second is that,

although the worker has sufficient income, they may fall below the poverty line for other reasons, such as a change in family circumstances. In this case, the occurrence of poverty can be explained by the structure of households.

Our conceptualization of working poverty is based on the European approach. This is founded on the concept of poverty and is defined on the basis of comparison with the existing standard of a specific society. In the literature, the definition of “relative poverty”¹ according to Peter Townsend (1979: 20–22) is most often cited:

Individuals, families and groups of people are considered poor if they lack the resources to secure food, participate in activities, and have living conditions that are common, or the attainment of which is at least generally supported and approved in the society to which these people belong. Their resources are so far below the level of resources available to average individuals and families in this society that it excludes them from the living standards, customs and activities of this society.

Eurostat defines working poverty as a measure of the risk of poverty, determined by the share of working persons at risk of poverty compared to the total working population. According to Eurostat’s definition, accepted in the EU, the working poor are employed persons or self-employed persons who are at risk of poverty, that is, with disposable income below the risk-poverty threshold, which is set at 60 percent of the national median equivalized disposable income after welfare transfers (Eurostat 2023). In connection with working poverty, the term “precariat” is often used, which is derived from the term “precarization.” According to Guy Standing, the precariat is a group of people without social and financial stability; its social status and life chances are limited by the uncertain nature of the work performed. In his words:

The precariat is additionally defined by distinctive relations to the state: they are losing rights taken for granted by full citizens. Instead, they are denizens who inhabit a locale without civil, cultural, political, social and economic rights, *de facto* and *de jure*. They are supplicants, reduced to pleading for benefits and access to public services, dependent on the discretionary decisions of local bureaucrats who are often inclined to moralistic judgments about whose behavior or attitude is deserving. (Standing 2015: 4)

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Individual conditions are generally related to the specific situations of individuals, determined by low wages (Cooke and Lawton 2008b; Grimshaw 2011; Nolan et al. 2012). This fact has caused many researchers to focus on uncovering the mechanisms creating low-income zones (Bardone and Guio 2005; Levitan and Belous 1979; Peña-Casas and Latta 2004). Their research has confirmed that low earnings are significantly related to low qualifications; the lower a person’s qualifications, the more the risk of poverty increases (Cooke and Lawton 2008a). Thus, a low level of education increases the risk of low wages. Working poverty also varies by age and gender. Women have a

weaker position in the labor market (Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2011). Other groups at risk of poverty are working migrants and ethnic minorities (Álvarez and Navarro 2011). Short-term work and fixed-term employment contracts are more widespread among migrants and ethnic minorities. The intensity of work and the type of work contract are important factors influencing the emergence of working poverty (Marx and Nolan 2012; Horemans 2016). Part-time work, a fixed-term contract, or self-employment are forms of work that increase the risk of working poverty. Part-time workers face a higher risk of poverty than full-time workers (Horemans and Marx 2013). Part-time or fixed-term workers may also face additional difficulties as they are excluded from many welfare benefits. Another important fact is that the higher the share of full-time employees with permanent contracts, the lower the risk of work poverty (Nolan et al. 2012; Nollmann 2009).

Household Characteristics

A comprehensive view of the working poor must include both aspects concerning the individual and also characteristics of their household. It makes a difference whether a person is considered working poor despite the potential resources of their household, or whether it is taken into account that a worker may be poor precisely because of the conditions in their household. In our view, measuring working poverty at the household level has some merit in that it provides a deeper understanding of the personal, interpersonal, and societal problems arising from poverty.

The standard of living of a household depends on the resources shared by all its members (Bardone and Guio 2005). It is proven that the number of household members determines working poverty (EC 2011). Single-parent households with dependent children face a higher risk of poverty than households with more than one adult member without dependent children (Frazer et al. 2011). Dependent persons increase the needs of the household, and thus do not contribute to the household's income. A higher number of people who need special care, such as young children, can lead to a limitation on full-time employment or having a second job. The ratio between the number of working adults and the number of dependents in the household affects the degree of risk of working poverty. Policymakers in individual countries often do not take into account the significant impact of the household on the level of in-work poverty. This fact can explain why the governments in most EU member countries do not focus on fighting working poverty and rather focus on employment policy, which they generally consider to be the main tool for reducing poverty.

Social Quality and Working Poverty

The social quality theory (SQT) and approach (SQA) may be understood as a humanist vision on the (re)production of a fairer society that sustains the social

quality of its citizens' daily living circumstances. The founders of this theory argue that one-sided economic growth alone does not necessarily lead to a higher quality of daily circumstances. The state should not allow its citizens—in the socioeconomic sphere—to be one-sidedly considered and approached as “homo economicus” or consumers (Phillips 2011). The state should equally stimulate and facilitate people to evolve and participate in the sociocultural and welfare and the sociopolitical and legal dimensions of life. Seen through the lens of the social quality perspective, people are “social beings” who, in immanent interaction with their daily (societal and physical) circumstances, actively seek to determine and satisfy their needs. Since the 1990s, social quality experts have worked on a meaningful and heuristic conceptualization of “the social” (Beck et al. 1997: 1–10; Beck et al. 2001). “The social” is seen as a basic and ubiquitous phenomenon of human existence. It refers to “The result of the dialectic between the processes of people’s self-realization and the processes leading to the formation of collective identities” (Beck et al. 2012: 47). The outcomes are the results of mutual (material and immaterial) processes between people and their constantly changing circumstances. It is the dialectically oriented conceptualization that forms the essence of its ontological basis. This is referred to as the “conceptual framework.” A first tentative application of the social quality perspective to aspects of working poverty concerned flexibility and security in employment in the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, Finland, Hungary, The Netherlands, and Portugal (Nectoux et al. 2005). Extensions of this work can be found in other publications on social quality theory, published on the website of the International Association on Social Quality.

The founders of the social quality perspective conceive social quality as “the extent to which people are able to participate in societal relationships under conditions which enhance their well-being capacity and individual potential” (Beck et al. 2012: 68). We consider the word “extent” to be a very important part of the definition, which expresses the narrow or broad participation of the population in public affairs and, of course, the ability of the people themselves to take part in the economic and cultural life of the communities in which they carry out their daily life activities. Three frameworks are distinguished within the whole of the configuration of frameworks: the “conceptual,” the “analytical,” and the “procedural” (IASQ 2019). The configuration within the SQT was applied for the first time in the double themed issue of this journal on the societal impact of COVID-19 (Nijhuis and Van der Maesen 2021).

- The *conceptual framework*—as pointed out above—refers to the conceptualization of the nature of “the social.”
- The *analytical framework* refers to three sets of distinct factors, namely the conditional, the constitutional, and the normative factors. The conditional factors are socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, social empowerment, and eco-reality. These factors are seen to be in immanent interaction with the constitutional factors: personal security, social recognition, social responsiveness, personal capacity, and eco-conscience. The outcomes of

the linking of both sets of factors are judged by applying the five normative factors: social justice, solidarity, equal value, human dignity, and ecological balance (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012; Abbott et al. 2016; IASQ 2019).

- The *procedural framework* represents the four societal dimensions—namely the sociopolitical and legal, the socioeconomic and financial, the sociocultural and welfare-based, and the socioenvironmental and ecological dimensions. The whole of societal, interpersonal, and personal processes leads to a particular degree of social quality of daily circumstances, as understood through these three interrelated frameworks. A recent example of this was tentatively applied in a study on the postwar recovery of Ukraine with support of the social quality theory and approach (Heyets et al. 2022).

In our article we mainly address the interrelationships between the conditional factors and working poverty (as an outcome measure). *Socioeconomic security* in the light of working poverty is considered the crucial conditional factor. It signifies the guarantee of all basic needs, which means that it represents existential security, which can be perceived in the form of income, welfare provisions, and healthcare (Beck et al. 2001: 116; Gordon 2012). *Social cohesion* refers to the cohesion of different communities (Berger-Schmitt 2000). In modern societies, it is perceived as the degree to which people feel integrated into institutions, organizations, and social systems. It represents relationships with friends as members of free networks. It is an essential element of societal development, but also of individual self-realization (Gasper 2008; Berman and Phillips 2021). People should feel *social inclusion*, and social exclusion only at a minimal level; the latter can be perceived on a general level as a denial or ignoring of social rights (Berman and Phillips 2000). Society provides the opportunity to participate in economic, political, social, and cultural institutions, or in other organizations, and in this way supports social inclusion (Walker and Walker 2012). In this conditional factor, emphasis can be placed on the idea of proactivity, which has also been underlined by Biagi (2000a, 2000b). *Social empowerment* refers to processes leading to people's abilities—their qualifications, attitudes, ideas, and wishes, but also the needs that motivate us in activities and self-realization. In these processes people must be competent to participate in the interplay between the factors to achieve satisfaction of their needs, in other words to achieve “social quality” (Beck et al. 1997). Being fully prepared to face rapid and serious socioeconomic changes demonstrates social empowerment. It allows us to be in control of our own lives and to know how to respond to challenges, opportunities, and possibilities (Herrmann 2005; Abbot et al. 2016). *Eco-reality* represents the last conditional factor that is significant for sustaining an acceptable degree of social quality. It reflects direct influences from the physical environment (e.g., housing, energy provision, climate, pollution) on the processes leading to social quality. This factor will be discussed implicitly in regard to the socioenvironmental and ecological dimension. It reveals that in particular, energy poverty implies serious impacts for the circumstances of daily life (Herrmann 2012b).

Conditional Factors and Working Poverty: Facts and Discussion

We consider working poverty to be a phenomenon of social quality and view it in such a way that its formation and eventual reduction are mutually related to all five conditional factors. For this reason, if we want to explore it comprehensively, in all its vastness, we must respect its complex, multidimensional nature. Our findings are based on extensive literature reviews on working poverty in the EU, in particular Slovakia. They concern facts and discussions related to the first four conditional factors: socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment—as well as their indicators—presented by eight authors on social quality theory (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012: 44–224). Eco-reality is discussed later as part of the fifth section, regarding influences from the socioenvironmental and ecological dimension. The findings constitute different aspects of the complexity of working poverty, creating a multifactorial space for its formation. By solving one of the aspects of working poverty, a synergistic effect will be induced, influencing other aspects of the phenomenon relating to other conditional factors.

Socioeconomic Security

“Socioeconomic security is the extent to which individuals have resources over time” (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012: 61). According to Dave Gordon, in the social quality perspective, it involves not only income security (employment, security systems), but also access to services (transportation, education, health, housing) and the fulfillment of economic, welfare, and cultural rights (a safe working environment). Income is essential to it (Gordon 2012: 116). We perceive the working poor as a group of people who show a certain degree of material deprivation and associated social exclusion, as they have limited access to material resources. This fact is also confirmed by Eric Crettaz (2013), who claims that the poverty of workers is related to the level of wages, the restoration of work potential, and the needs of the household. Direct measures to support the working poor are commonly considered to be: (1) a minimum wage, (2) taxes, (3) social contributions, (4) family allowance, (5) social assistance, and (6) employee benefits.

Indirect measures can also be considered important tools for eliminating working poverty, even if they receive relatively little attention. Ive Marx and Brian Nolan (2014) identified five categories of indirect measures that can be effective in combating working poverty:

- (1) Providing affordable childcare;
- (2) Flexible working time adjustments or other measures that facilitate the combination of family and work life (for example, measures to work from home);
- (3) Support of people’s careers and improvement of their skills;

- (4) Measures that will help improve the living standards of low-income persons;
- (5) Measures that create an inclusive work environment;
- (6) Improving the opportunities of migrants, people with disabilities, or other disadvantaged groups.

Flexible working time significantly affects working poverty. It helps increase the intensity of work and harmonize work and private life. Housing support is also proving to be a very effective measure. Rising housing costs are a serious financial burden for many European households. Eurostat data shows that Europeans spend more than a quarter of their total disposable income on housing (Eurostat 2023).

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is typical of a society that takes into account the relationships between individuals, groups, associations, and territorial units (McCracken 1998). It is also necessary to mention the strength of these societal relationships, as well as shared values, feelings of common identity, and a sense of belonging to the same community (Woolley 1998; Jenson 1998). Regina Schmitt concludes that “the concept of social cohesion mainly includes two dimensions of social goals that can be analytically distinguished”: (1) the reduction of differences, inequalities, and social exclusion, and (2) the strengthening of social relations, interactions, and ties. This dimension includes all aspects that are also generally considered the social capital. (Berger-Schmitt 2000: 4). The importance of societal inequalities is also emphasized by Anna Rita Manca (2014: 6027), who considers social cohesion “a process that aims to consolidate the plurality of citizenship by reducing inequalities and socio-economic differences and negative manifestations in society. It reflects people’s needs for personal development and a sense of belonging and combines individual freedom and social justice, economic efficiency and fair distribution of resources, as well as plurality and common rules for the resolution of all conflicts.” According to the social quality perspective, social cohesion is “the extent to which social relationships based on identities, values, and norms are shared” (Beck et al. 2012: 61). An adequate level of social cohesion is one that allows citizens to “exist as real human subjects, as social beings” (Beck et al. 1997: 284). Yitzhak Berman and David Phillips give the theoretical justification for the centrality of social cohesion to social quality. It can be understood metaphorically “as the glue that binds society together or as societal solidarity or, more prosaically, as being to do with societal relationships, norms, values and identities—central to ‘the social’ because interactive social beings, collective identities and the ‘social world’ itself are impossible without social cohesion” (Berman and Phillips 2012: 149). In relation to working poverty, we consider the consolidation of the plurality of citizenship by reducing inequalities and socioeconomic differences, or socio-pathological manifestations in society, to be a basic attribute of social cohesion.

The perception of social injustice associated with people's unfulfilled expectations and limited access to resources and consumption erodes trust, weakens the legitimacy of democracy, and deepens conflicts (Ottone and Sojo 2007).

Social Inclusion

According to Alan Walker and Andrea Wigfield (2004: 13), social inclusion has a special position within the concept of social quality because it represents a fundamental condition for the implementation of other components of social quality. This statement means that without reaching the required level of social inclusion, one cannot talk about even the lowest level of social progress. It represents a strong mutual conditionality and connection with socioeconomic security, social cohesion, and social empowerment. Alan Walker and Carol Walker (2012: 176) later argued that

from a social quality perspective, social inclusion is not simply the obverse of exclusion but, rather, a fundamentally different conception, involving both individual and collective action (self-realization and collective identities) and, therefore, necessitating a policy program that, rather than establishing a set of minimum rights, combines both rights and enabling support so that people are empowered to negotiate dynamic and complex forms of inclusion which preserve individual and collective identities.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions concept of social inclusion is related to this: in our terms, it refers to the process of providing citizens with the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, political, cultural, and environmental aspects of society and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered standard in the society in which they live. It also includes equal access to facilities, services, and benefits. This concept is central to the European policy agenda (Eurofound n.d.).

From our point of view, the term "social inclusion" has a broader relevance than poverty and applies in addition to low income, insufficient satisfaction of needs, and people's inability to participate effectively in economic, political, cultural, and environmental aspects of society. The level of social inclusion achieved also relates to the level of working poverty. Henning Lohmann (2010) emphasizes that households that have lower resources, higher needs, or more restrictions in access to the labor market are more exposed to working poverty. The decisive resources are those that enable successful participation in the labor market, such as education, qualifications, labor market experience, and occupation. Examples of "low" resources are a weak position on the labor market or precarious forms of employment, such as some types of part-time work, temporary employment, and self-employment. Migrants, members of an ethnic minority, and disabled people can be at risk, and their increased risk of poverty may be related to discrimination in the labor market (Frazer et al. 2010). In addition to needs and resources, there are restrictions preventing participation in the

labor market, such as the obligation to take care of children, elderly people, or other dependent members of the household (Nolan and Marx 1999).

Social Empowerment

Social empowerment, not only represents new characteristics, features of human capital, but above all, changes in its behavior, which should lead to personal satisfaction, but also to achievement of the goals of the imminent or wider community in which humans live. Peter Herrmann regards it as a process relating to the development of the individual or group, and, at the same time, the environment in which the individual and group are located. He understands it as “the extent to which people are capable of activating through social relationships” (Herrmann 2005: 6; 2012a). He has designed four models in which humans are able to activate: personal competence, individual competence, social competence, and societal competence (Herrmann 2005, 2009).

Individual models of human activation also represent the specific characteristics of societal potentialities. Personal competence is based on self-analysis and self-regulation, and individual competence on expressing abilities in the environment in which one moves. Interpersonal competence is based on an individual’s ability to move in an immediate community or work environment, and societal competency represents the possibility of applying personal influence in order to form the wider society. According to Herrmann (2012a: 203), to grasp empowerment according to the social quality approach, it is necessary to understand it

as a dialectical theory of action. It is not solely and even primarily concerned with transfer of knowledge, enabling the individual to cope with given structural situations. Rather empowerment is concerned with enabling the person individually and socially to adapt to a given situation: to cope with changes of situations; and to actively influence societal developments, that is to evoke and maintain changes.

The connection between social empowerment and working poverty can be seen in the answers to the following questions: What kind of knowledge and skills will people need in the process of implementing social quality and how will they be acquired? The answer to these questions are a redefinition of educational and work standards at the EU level, but also at national levels.

Influences of the Four Societal Dimensions on Working Poverty

This section discusses the influences of the four societal dimensions on the causation, persistence and expansion, of working poverty respectively. We use the four-dimensional analysis, which will allow us to perceive more deeply the phenomenon of working poverty in its societal contexts and connections. This approach has been

successfully used by Steven Corbett (2014), Ka Lin and Peter Herrmann (2015), Zuzana Novakova (2017), the IASQ (2019), Marco Ricceri (2019), and Valeriy Heyets et al. (2022). It concerns identifying societal processes within and between the socioeconomic and financial, the sociopolitical and legal, the sociocultural and welfare-based, and the socioenvironmental and ecological dimensions that influence the emergence of working poverty and forms of redistribution (Lohmann 2010), such as socioeconomic systems (Crettaz 2011; Lohmann and Marx 2008) or consequences of macroeconomic interventions and patterns (Brady et al. 2010). Ive Marx and Brian Nolan (2014) have pointed out that working poverty and household income can change due to legislative changes in the relevant country. The poverty line can also rise or fall as the national median income changes. In times of strong economic growth, the poverty line may shift upward. This would increase the number of the working poor in the statistical reports. Conversely, in an economic recession, the national median income may decrease and thereby lower the poverty line, creating a distorted impression that the working poor are decreasing (ibid.).

The Socioeconomic and Financial Dimension

Slovakia is already among the EU countries with a higher proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In 2021, a total of 12.3 percent of the population was at risk of income poverty. This means that their income was below the calculated national poverty line. Six hundred and sixty thousand people had to make do with an income below the poverty line, which was forty-five thousand more than in the previous year (SOSR 2023; SR 2023). It is interesting that the amount determining the poverty line decreased year-on-year, which confirms that the total income of the population decreased for the entire year 2020. In a household of one adult, it decreased by about EUR 11 to EUR 424 per month (EUR 5,088/year). For a complete family with two children (two adults and two children under fourteen), the limit was EUR 890 per month (EUR 24 less).

The first year of the pandemic did not increase the share of people at risk of poverty in those types of households that have the biggest problem with it in the long term. The situation improved slightly year-on-year in single-parent families with three or more dependent children, as well as in single-parent households with one or more children. However, in both of these types of households, more than a third of people are at risk of poverty. In multi-child complete families, there are 36.3 percent of people at risk, and in the case of single parents with a child or children the figure is up to 33.6 percent of people. In households without children, poverty is most common in the category of single seniors aged sixty-five and over, more than a quarter of whom (28.5 percent) live below the poverty line, and their share has increased slightly year-on-year. Their situation has worsened significantly over the past five years; in 2016 only 9 percent of seniors suffered from poverty. Approximately 4 percent of people in Slovakia work for the minimum wage. Its value for 2023 is EUR 700, monthly or

EUR 4.023 for one hour worked. In 2022, the minimum wage was EUR 646 and the minimum hourly wage was EUR 3.713 (MLSAaF SR, n. d.).

The Sociopolitical and Legal Dimension

In the Slovak Republic, the tasks of approximation of law were based on the process of the country's integration into the European Union (completed in 2004) on the basis of the European Association Agreement between the Slovak Republic and the European Communities and their member states (1995). The comprehensive program of approximation of the national legal systems of the countries associated with the European Union, including the Slovak Republic, contained the document the White Book. All associated countries of Central and Eastern Europe were expected to develop their own, national programs for the implementation of this document. The European Agreement on the Association of the Slovak Republic with the European Communities resulted in the requirement of approximation in the fields of Slovak customs law, company law, banking law, financial and tax law, intellectual property law, protection of human health and life, consumer protection, animal and plant protection, technical standards, and the right to protect and create the environment, including regulations on nuclear energy. The compatibility of draft legislation with European Union law was verified in the legislative process through so-called compatibility clauses (ÚV SR 2022).

The Sociocultural and Welfare Dimension

In 2023 the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic published information based on the EU SILC 2022 survey stating that nearly 890,000 people in Slovakia were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. These people represented 16.5 percent of the total population of the Slovak Republic (SO SR 2023). Problematic households in terms of the risk of poverty are mainly families with children—almost 46 percent of households with one parent and one child, and more than 40 percent of households with two parents and three or more children, are below the poverty line. What is alarming, however, is that since 2019, the share of working poverty has increased. Working poverty is a mistake in the system. From the point of view of social quality, if an employee works, their income should guarantee them and their family a dignified life and not poverty. A salary is not a social benefit. Last but not least, inflation is behind the increase in the share of workers below the poverty line. This affects broad sections of the population, but has the worst effect on the poorest. To change the situation described in Slovakia, we recommend:

- Changing the minimum wage calculation formula to at least 60 percent of the average wage as of two years ago;
- Increasing the minimum standard of living to a real value;
- Changing the setting of the tax bonus for children;
- Changing the balance of tax so that economic activity is taxed less and rent, property, and negative externalities are taxed more,
- Implementing a nationwide strategy to increase trade union organization and coverage by collective agreements, which is recommended by the European Commission in the directive on minimum wages;
- Beginning to gradually reduce the legal limits on working hours and overtime, in such a way as to expand as much as possible the option of working less, without reducing wages.

The Socioenvironmental and Ecological Dimension

The problems that fall into this dimension from the point of view of working poverty lie primarily in the areas of housing and the provision of energy (electricity and gas). Naturally, the influences of this dimension are strongly interconnected with the economic and financial dimension, since they are always related to the prices that have to be paid for energy. In Slovakia, the transition of households from the use of cheap solid fuels in outdated boilers, which significantly contribute to air pollution, to the use of more efficient combustion devices will be supported by Ministry of Environment in the Slovak Republic. Emission standards and the energy efficiency of boilers, including the fuel used, will also be controlled for small combustion devices. At the same time, legislative and support mechanisms will be created to replace older boilers with low energy efficiency that do not meet the latest emission standards. The production of electricity and heat from domestic coal will be phased out. (ME SR, n. d.)

Nuclear power plants in Jaslovské Bohunice and Mochovce produced more than 60 percent of all electricity produced in Slovakia last year. Water and gas power plants followed at a great distance. Hydroelectric plants produced almost 15 percent of all electricity in the country. Biomass-based electricity accounted for 4.14 percent and solar power plants for 2.57 percent (Energieportal). In the new situation caused by the war in Ukraine, Slovakia has secured pumping tankers with liquified natural gas (LNG) in four places: Croatia, Italy, Belgium, and England.

Six percent of households suffer from energy poverty, while the majority of the energy-poor are families with children (40 percent); 2.7 percent of households suffer from hidden energy poverty (energy saving), of whom the largest part are single-member households of pensioners and complete families with children (Dokupilová and Gerbery 2023: 25–26).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In the following we will bring to the fore various recommendations that may be considered justified by the findings of our study. We have divided them into two areas: conclusions and recommendations (a) regarding the origins of working poverty in the current EU context and (b) regarding the theory of social quality in relation to working poverty. It should be noted that the issues at stake and the recommendations go beyond a reductionist, one-sided orientation to labor and welfare policies, and include policies in each of the four societal dimensions.

There are rules on the coordination of welfare within the EU, but these rules do not replace the national systems or introduce a single European system. Each state independently determines in its legislation the range of persons to whom welfare applies, as well as what benefits are paid and what conditions must be met. The result of the aforementioned rules is that individual EU states have different welfare policies that ensure different qualities of citizens' daily living circumstances. For this reason, uniform minimum welfare standards should be created. It will be necessary to partly change and speed up the process of approximation of law in individual EU countries, in the vein of the Nordic societal approach, implemented by Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland. This system has the lowest level of working poverty. These arguments were already made in 2017 in a comparative Hungarian study of four Nordic states and the so-called four Visegrád states (Bódi et al. 2017).

Welfare benefits must be universal and provide socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment for those who are most vulnerable to working poverty. Welfare transfers for unemployed household members also increase household income. Both of these factors reduce working poverty. Governments adhering to "social democratic" approaches support a high level of employment through high expenditures on an active labor market policy. Women face no barriers to entering the labor market, thanks to an affordable childcare system and generous career-break benefits. In addition to the single economic and labor market of the EU, specific policies (healthcare-related, sociocultural, educational, environmental, etc.) are required that would be oriented to the same welfare standards. From the social quality perspective, the free movement of goods, services, and money is important, but it is also necessary to develop a unified welfare system with the same minimum wage, minimum standard of living, minimum pension, and other societal standards. There would thus be no problem of unequal levels of the minimum standard of living, the minimum wage, or other institutionalized standards in individual countries. The same holds true for the associated calculation and recalculation of the number of the working poor and the level of poverty itself. Temporary regulation of electricity and gas prices will be necessary for households at risk of working poverty or energy poverty. It would be appropriate to compensate housing costs through a newly designed housing

allowance, and to create legislative and support mechanisms for the replacement of older boilers with low energy efficiency that do not meet the latest emission standards.

In our article, we set ourselves the goal of understanding and discussing working poverty from the social quality perspective. We have separately addressed and discussed its interrelationships with the conditional factors of socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment. The fifth conditional factor was implicitly discussed in terms of energy poverty under the socioenvironmental and ecological dimension. This approach has allowed us to start applying a systemic, comprehensive analysis in which we can take into account the workings of many aspects of the societal (objective and conditional) conditions related to manifestations of working poverty. We have not been able to weave into our analyses and discussions relevant aspects of the constitutional (subjective and personal) factors, which are of course also in operation. Nor did we extensively or explicitly analyze the specific roles and outcomes of the five normative factors that do (or do not) steer processes in the four societal dimensions. Bringing in these factors, like social justice, solidarity, equal value, human dignity, and eco-equilibrium, would require a multi-focused analysis. The shortcomings of our focus on conditional factors have been clearly articulated by Peter Herrmann in his critical appraisal of the one-sidedness of the authoritative 2009 report of the Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi commission on the “measurement of economic performance and social progress” (Stiglitz et al. 2009). Herrmann concludes:

In [the] SQA, indicators are often used as the instrument to reflect the conditional factors without reflecting their interdependencies with the constitutional and normative factors. But we should realize that this “one-sidedness” of indicator use could easily evolve into a replication of a mechanical understanding of the relationship between base and superstructure. Countering this by building on ontological relationality has two advantages. First, it allows developing the non-mechanical understanding of the complex structure of “the social” and as well its ambiguities. Moreover, it allows countering suggestions of mystifying “the social” by way of subjectivation of meaning. By now it should be clear that meaning evolves and is defined as part of the interactive process rather than being part of a transcendental normative setting. (Herrmann 2012b: 53)

We fully agree with this significant statement. Deeper and more comprehensive insights concerning working poverty in the Slovak Republic, as well as the European Union, are needed to develop thorough policies that respect (the interplay between) the reality of objective conditions, the subjective perceptions of those involved, and the workings of the normative criteria.

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Notes

1. A person living in relative poverty has limited opportunities and suffers from both material and nonmaterial lack. For example, they cannot afford to buy quality shoes or a ticket to the cinema. Since this is relative poverty, it is measured in comparison to other people in the country. The European Union defines a person as at risk of poverty when their income is lower than 60 percent of the median national equivalent disposable income.

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