

Public support for worktime reductions in Switzerland in the context of a transition to a post-growth society

Work time reductions (WTRs) may contribute to a transition to a post-growth society. We analysed Swiss stakeholders' perceptions of the effects of WTRs and their support for measures to implement them. It is assumed that public support will play a significant role in putting WTRs into practice.

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Abstract

There is some scientific evidence that work time reductions (WTRs) have beneficial ecological, social, and economic effects that could contribute to a transition to a post-growth society. However, little research has been conducted on whether the occurrence of such desired effects is acknowledged: Do they form part of the public debate and is there any public support for WTRs? We conducted a two-round survey among Swiss stakeholder groups (N = 51/28) to identify what effects they believe WTRs have, and what measures to implement WTRs they would be most likely to support. Stakeholders perceived WTRs to have several beneficial social and economic effects, including effects that are relevant for a transition to a post-growth society. However, they did not assume that ecological effects occur. Measures voluntarily implemented on an organisational level by businesses were more popular than those implemented on a national policy or social partnership level. Certain incremental measures and/or those that are merely conducive to WTRs were uncontested. Other more direct and extensive measures were predominantly supported, but not uncontested.

Keywords

policy measures, post-growth, stakeholder survey, work time reduction

Reducing work time as part of a transition to a post-growth society

So far, it seems that no sustained, absolute, decoupling between resource use and economic growth has taken place (Haberl et al. 2020, Hickel and Kallis 2020, Wiedenhofer et al. 2020). The demand for a transition towards a post-growth society is therefore becoming increasingly urgent (e.g., Wiedmann et al. 2020). Policy papers are even recognising a need to depart from the growth paradigm (e.g., OECD 2020). Work time reductions (WTRs) may contribute to a decrease in the dependence of affluent Western countries on economic growth in many ways (Hickel et al. 2022, Fitzpatrick et al. 2022, Seidl and Zahrnt 2022). Some of these ways are backed by sufficient and clear evidence, while others have insufficient and/or mixed evidence.

One way WTRs may support a transition to a post-growth society is, from an *ecological* point of view, by converting productivity gains (e.g., gains from technological progress) into WTRs instead of higher levels of production and possibly wages, which are drivers of economic growth (Seidl and Zahrnt 2022). In turn, this may reduce the environmental impact (Bader et al. 2020). Several studies have examined the ecological benefits of WTRs¹ and found that under specific conditions, and to a limited extent, WTRs have the capacity to reduce environmental impacts. First, studies focussing on the macroeconomic level – both cross-sectional and longitudinal – identify a proportional effect of working hours (usually in the form of average annual working hours per capita) on various forms of environmental impact (Fitzgerald 2022, Fitzgerald et al. 2018, Hayden and Shandra 2009, Knight

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et al. 2013, Schor 2005, Simionescu et al. 2021). However, the relationship between working hours and environmental impact seems to be affected by the stage of development a country finds itself in (Shao and Rodríguez-Labajos 2016, Shao and Shen 2017, Shao 2015). Second, studies on a microeconomic level also find positive ecological effects of WTRs. However, according to most studies these effects mainly derive from income losses, as opposed to shifts in time use (Nässén and Larsson 2015, Nässén et al. 2009, Neubert et al. 2022, Persson et al. 2022, Buhl and Acosta 2016). Moreover, the positive ecological effects found in studies on a microeconomic level only apply to areas of individual time use with comparatively low environmental impact (Neubert et al. 2022). However, as these positive ecological effects of WTRs occur only under specific conditions and to a limited extent, more evidence, particularly of a longitudinal nature, is required to make reliable assertions of this kind (Antal et al. 2021, Hanbury et al. 2023).

A second way WTRs may contribute to a transition to a post-growth society is, from an *economic* point of view, by distributing paid labour more evenly amongst the workforce in the case that such a transition entails a reduction of paid labour (Bader et al. 2020, Scherhorn 2005). This is of particular relevance, given the current dependence of social security systems (and public finances in general) on paid labour in most affluent Western countries. The relevance of such an effect is augmented by the increase of underemployment in these countries (International Labour Organisation 2022); a phenomenon that may well be due to the current economic growth-oriented drive to reduce labour costs through automation and rationalisation. It is unclear though, whether WTRs actually have the capacity to improve employment rates. While some studies find that WTRs decrease unemployment rates (Raposo and van Ours 2010, Du et al. 2013), others find they increase them (Crepon and Kramarz 2002) or have negligible effects (Estevão and Sá 2008, Chemin and Wasmer 2009).

A third way in which WTRs may contribute to a transition to a post-growth society is that, from a *social* point of view, they can improve individual well-being independently of material affluence.² If a transition to a post-growth society is accompanied by a reduction of material affluence, such an effect may be particularly important. The effects of WTRs on well-being are arguably the most evidence supported WTR effects. Findings suggest that WTRs improve individual well-being and have beneficial health effects (for the former, see Kameråde et al. 2019, Méda 2013, Weber and Zimmert 2018, p. 296; for the latter, see Akerstedt et al. 2001, p. 197, Barck-Holst et al. 2019, p. 94). Furthermore, certain forms of WTRs may reduce work-family conflicts (Fagnani and Letablier 2004, Anttila et al. 2005, Akerstedt et al. 2001, Gronlund and Oun 2018, Craig and Churchill 2019).

Which effects (beneficial or adverse) are derived, and their extent depends on how WTRs are conceptualised. Indeed, effects

may differ by *implementation level* (national/regional policy, social partnership, organisational, or individual level), by *form* (e.g., reducing daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, or biographical working hours), by *extent* (e.g., 35-hour week vs. 20-hour week), by accompanying measures (e.g., degree of wage compensation), or by *degree to which they are binding* (De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017). The different effects that various conceptualisations of WTRs have are due to the fact that they operate within a field of synergies and trade-offs between ecological, social, and economic effects that should be taken into consideration when designing them.

Public support for work time reductions

The chances of WTRs being implemented rest upon how much support WTRs receive and from whom. Simultaneously, the support they receive is determined by many overlapping factors. First and foremost, support depends on whether the effects that are associated with WTRs are positive or negative, which in turn may vary according to how WTRs are conceptualised. In addition, different effects are associated with different WTR conceptualisations and therefore, ultimately, the support they receive will differ according to the stakeholder group. However, although such differentiations are relevant to the implementation of WTRs, to date little scientific attention has been devoted to understanding public support for WTRs in general, as well as according to these distinctions. With the present article, we address this gap and attempt to improve the understanding of the support that WTRs receive from various stakeholder groups. To this end – and working with the premise that WTRs may be conducive to a transition to a post-growth society – the aim of this study is to explore what ecological, social, and economic effects various stakeholder groups believe WTRs have, and how the stakeholder groups view different measures to implement or promote various conceptualisations of WTRs.

Methods

To identify what effects stakeholders believe WTRs have, and whether they support concrete measures to implement or promote WTRs, we surveyed a range of different stakeholder groups in Switzerland. This mainly consisted of a two-round stakeholder survey and was complemented by qualitative expert interviews with individual stakeholders (figure 1, p. 306). The stakeholder survey consisted of two online surveys (survey 1 and survey 2) conducted between September 2019 and April 2020. We searched for stakeholders using web and media analysis to identify those who:

- had already taken a public position on the issue of WTRs; or,
- had been directly affected by WTRs or issues related to WTRs; or,
- disposed of a sizeable influence on the discourse and/or implementation of WTRs.

1 Including WTRs that do not depend on productivity gains.

2 Given that a certain level of affluence is assured.

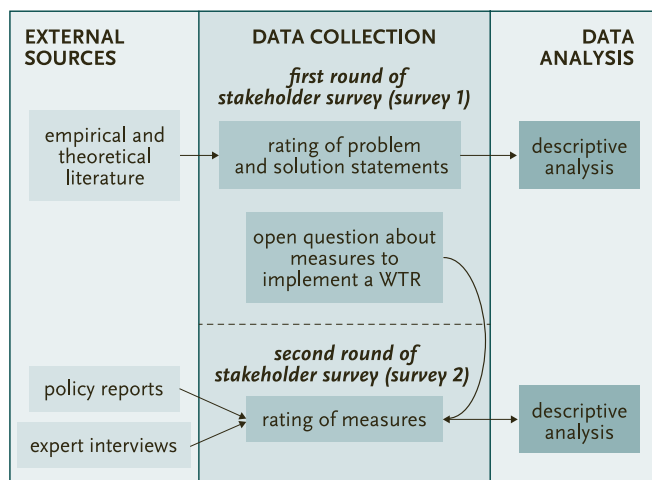


FIGURE 1: Overview of the research design.

Moreover, we strove to include representatives of the following four stakeholder groups in our sample: 1. employers (including their advocacy groups), 2. employees (including their advocacy groups), 3. politicians and civil servants, and 4. civil society organisations. Our invitations resulted in 51 out of 128 stakeholders participating in survey 1, and 28 of the 51 taking part in survey 2. The distribution of the stakeholder groups over the course of both surveys was, as intended, fairly balanced (table 1). The samples of both surveys were also balanced in terms of gender, with 25 (49%) participants identifying as female in survey 1 and 14 (50%) in survey 2.

Figure 1 shows the research design of the survey process. In survey 1, the invited stakeholders rated statements about potential problems (*problem statements*) and the capacity of WTRs to address them (*solution statements*) on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (“I completely disagree”) to 6 (“I completely agree”). The statements were developed based on the effects that current empirical and theoretical literature suggest WTRs have in ecological, social, and economic contexts. It must be noted that the sole function of the *problem statements* was to ensure the relevance of the *solution statements*, as stakeholders’ opinions whether WTRs can contribute to solving a certain problem do not possess significant informative value if stakeholders do not view the respective issue as a problem in the first place. The precise wording of the *problem* and *solution statements* can be viewed in the supplementary material³ and figure 2 (p. 308).

Additionally, in an open question, the stakeholders were offered the option to suggest possible ways of implementing WTRs. The selection of solution statements also included the following statements that specifically referred to the ways in which the effects of WTRs could support a transition to a post-growth society:

- If more people worked part-time, the economy would not have to grow as much (and would thus burden the environment less).
- Paid work would be spread more evenly amongst people willing to work if more people worked part-time.

- If more people worked part-time, a lot of people would be happier, because they would have more time for the things that are really important to them.

Survey 2 aimed at gauging the extent to which different measures to implement or promote WTRs are supported on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (“I support this measure”) to 4 (“I do not support this measure”⁴; the precise wording of the different measures is in figure 3, p. 309). The selection of measures included some participants’ suggestions from survey 1 and was supplemented with measures derived from multiple policy reports on WTRs (Skidelsky 2019, Sozialdemokratische Partei Schweiz 2018, De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017, Stronge and Harper 2019), as well as interviews with six experts in the field of WTR (conducted between the two surveys). Some measures were presented to the stakeholders in two different variations that were rated separately: one version in which the respective measure was implemented on a national, political level or by social partnerships, and one in which they were implemented by businesses on a voluntary basis.

For data analysis, missing values of all analysed variables were imputed per regression. Next, descriptive analyses were employed that examined the distributions, means (*m*), and standard deviations (*sd*) of responses about the *problem statements*, *solution statements*, and measures.

Results

Stakeholder perceptions of the ecological, social, and economic effects of WTRs

In survey 1, the stakeholders agreed ($m > 3.5$) with eight of the 11 problem statements, with an average agreement of 4.06 (on a scale from 1 to 6; $sd = 1.46$) over all eleven problem statements. One can therefore reasonably assume that the stakeholders generally viewed the issues presented in the problem statements as indeed problematic. This in turn enhances the informative value of the stakeholders’ ratings of the solution statements. The overall agreement regarding the solution statements, shown in figure 2 (p. 308), is fairly balanced (m over all 11 solution statements = 3.57, on a scale from 1 to 6; $sd = 1.26$). Moreover, the results show a clear distinction in agreement between ecological, social, and economic solution statements. The stakeholders moderately agreed with most social and economic solution statements, and their level of agreement approximately mirrored that of the equivalent problem statements³. By contrast, stakeholders’ agreement with the ecological solution statements displayed a divergent pattern, appearing inverted in relation to their agreement with the respective problem statements. Concretely,

3 For further details, see the online supplementary material: <https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.32.3.7.suppl>.

4 The scaling and direction of relation of the Likert scale of survey 2 differs from that of survey 1 because of its relation to Likert scales in other survey 2 questions.

TABLE 1: Distribution of stakeholders included in both survey rounds, by stakeholder group.

	EMPLOYERS (INCL. ADVOCACY GROUPS)	EMPLOYEES (INCL. ADVOCACY GROUPS)	POLITICIANS AND CIVIL SERVANTS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION	CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS
survey 1 (N = 51)	13	13	12	13
survey 2 (N = 28)	5	7	8	8

despite high overall stakeholder agreement with the ecological problem statements, the stakeholders disagreed with all three presented ecological solution statements ($m < 3.5$).

Support for measures to implement WTRs

Next, we examined stakeholder support for an array of measures that either directly implement WTRs (direct WTRs) or create an environment that enables the implementation of WTRs (indirect WTRs). A look at their overall average support in figure 3 (p. 309) reveals that the measures presented in survey 2 generally received a high level of support (overall $m = 3.16$, on a scale from 1 to 4; $sd = 0.91$). Six of the presented measures were, on average, fully supported ($m \geq 3.5$); twelve of the measures were rather supported ($m \geq 2.5$); one measure was neither supported nor rejected and only one proposed measure was opposed ($m < 2.5$), namely that of introducing a 35-hour workweek without wage compensation.

Measures implemented voluntarily at the business/organisational level are more popular ($m = 3.5$) than those issued at a national policy or social partnership level ($m = 2.84$). Similarly, measures constituting indirect WTRs⁵ ($m = 3.5$) are more popular than those leading to direct WTRs ($m = 2.85$). The difference in support within these two dichotomies becomes even more visible when combined (table 2, p. 308), with the most popular combination being indirect WTRs implemented by businesses ($m = 3.52$), and the least popular combination being that of direct WTRs implemented on a national policy or social partnership level ($m = 2.57$).

Discussion

The present article sought to shed light on the ecological, social, and economic benefits that Swiss stakeholders assume WTRs have, and which WTR measures they believe should be implemented. If we reflect on our stakeholder surveys in the context of a transition to a post-growth society, the findings on the solution statements (N = 51) are of particular interest. According to the stakeholders, WTRs only have some of the proposed effects that may be relevant for a transition to a post-growth society. From an *ecological* perspective, the assumption that WTRs lead to a reduction in environmental impacts (Bader et al. 2020) is not shared by the stakeholders, as they do not agree with any of the three solution statements that posit this. This also includes the solution statement that explicitly suggests that WTRs would re-

duce the need for the economy to always grow. However, from an *economic* perspective, and in the context of the capacity of WTRs to compensate for job losses that may occur over the course of a transition to a post-growth society (Bader et al. 2020, Scherhorn 2005), the stakeholders agreed with the statement that paid work would be spread more evenly amongst people willing to work if more people worked part-time. From a *social* perspective, the stakeholders agreed with the statement that WTRs lead to a lot of people being happier because they would have more time for the things that are really important to them. Such strategies to improve people's well-being in a non-material way are particularly important if a transition to a post-growth society entails a reduction of material affluence.

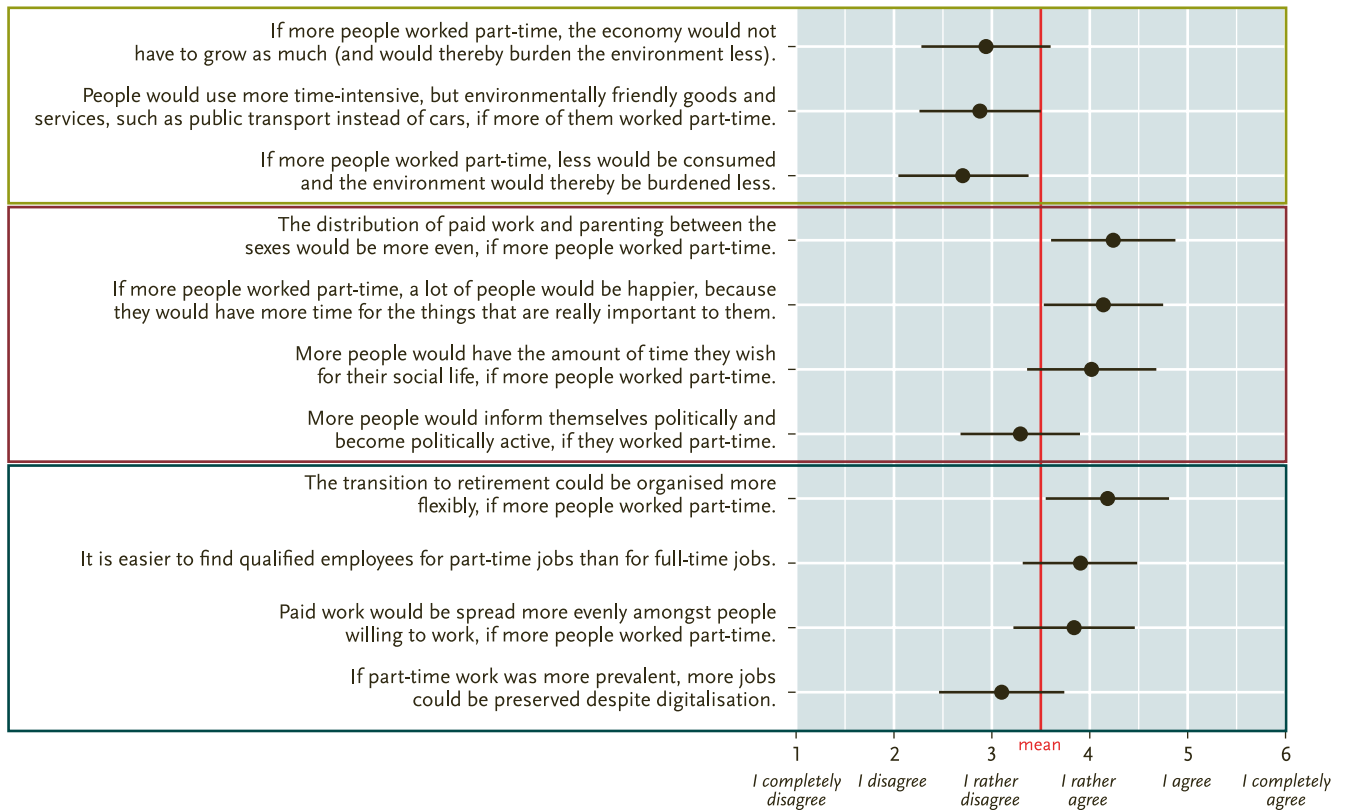
The distribution of the stakeholders' opinions regarding *ecological*, *social*, and *economic* effects of WTRs shown in their choice of solution statements corresponds, at least partially, with the current scientific assessment of what effects WTRs actually have, as illustrated by a systematic review by Hanbury et al. 2023, and other studies. The solution statements on the *social* effects of WTRs are both the ones that our stakeholders agree with the most, and the ones that are backed up by the most scientific evidence (Akerstedt et al. 2001, Barck-Holst et al. 2019, Kameråde et al. 2019, Weber and Zimmert 2018). In terms of the solution statements on the *economic* effects of WTRs, overall our stakeholders agree with them, however previous scientific assessments of whether WTRs can increase employment is mixed (Crepon and Kramarz 2002, Raposo and van Ours 2010, Du et al. 2013, Estevão and Sá 2008, Chemin and Wasmer 2009). Regarding the *ecological* effects of WTRs, our stakeholders' lack of agreement with the ecological solution statements suggests that these effects are far from obvious. This is further reflected in the un-

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5 The justification for the inclusion of the measures *Introduction of individual taxation* and *Flexibilisation of external childcare* may not be obvious. The explanations for their inclusion are:

- *Introduction of individual taxation*: In Switzerland, the tax burden of married couples is based on their cumulative income and therefore higher than if it was based on their individual incomes, due to progressive tax rates. Thus, many couples opt to decrease their combined income by working less. This, in turn, leads many couples to divide their gainful employment unequally, often according to a gender-stereotypical division of labour.
- *Flexibilisation of external childcare*: This measure was suggested by multiple sources (i.e., participant suggestions in survey 1, expert interviews, and policy reports) and derived for survey 2. It is assumed that expanding childcare services would increase the likelihood that individuals who perform a lot of childcare themselves (e.g., due to gender-stereotypical ascriptions) would at least work part-time.

FIGURE 2: Stakeholder agreement with statements on the capacity of work time reductions (WTRs) to solve ecological (light green), social (red), and economic (dark green) issues (solution statements; means and standard deviations).



clear and limited state of research on this topic (Neubert et al. 2022, Antal et al. 2021; more studies on the ecological effects of WTRs are referred to in the introduction of this article).

Our findings on the stakeholders’ support of the selected measures to implement WTRs also provided some insights into which WTR implementations and, to a certain degree, which conceptual elements they prefer. Our initial assumption was that this support is significantly co-determined by the specific conceptual elements of WTRs. Indeed, regarding the *implementation level* of WTRs, the stakeholders show an interest in WTRs being implemented voluntarily on an organisational level by businesses, as opposed to a more binding degree on a national policy or social partnership level. With respect to the extent of WTRs, incremental WTRs or merely creating conditions conducive to WTRs, are preferred in comparison to more wide-ranging WTRs

or even direct proposals of reducing the definition of full-time work. In relation to wage compensation (the only manifestation of *accompanying measures* of WTRs rated in the survey) the stakeholders supported a gradual wage compensation, neither supported nor opposed a full wage compensation, and opposed implementing WTRs without any wage compensation. This is particularly relevant from the point of view of the current scientific debate on the ecological effects of WTRs. Based on the current evidence, the ecological effects of WTRs are mainly derived from the loss of income (Neubert et al. 2022, Antal et al. 2021). The stakeholders’ support of a WTR with a gradual wage compensation signals that WTR conceptualisations that guarantee an income effect may garner some support.

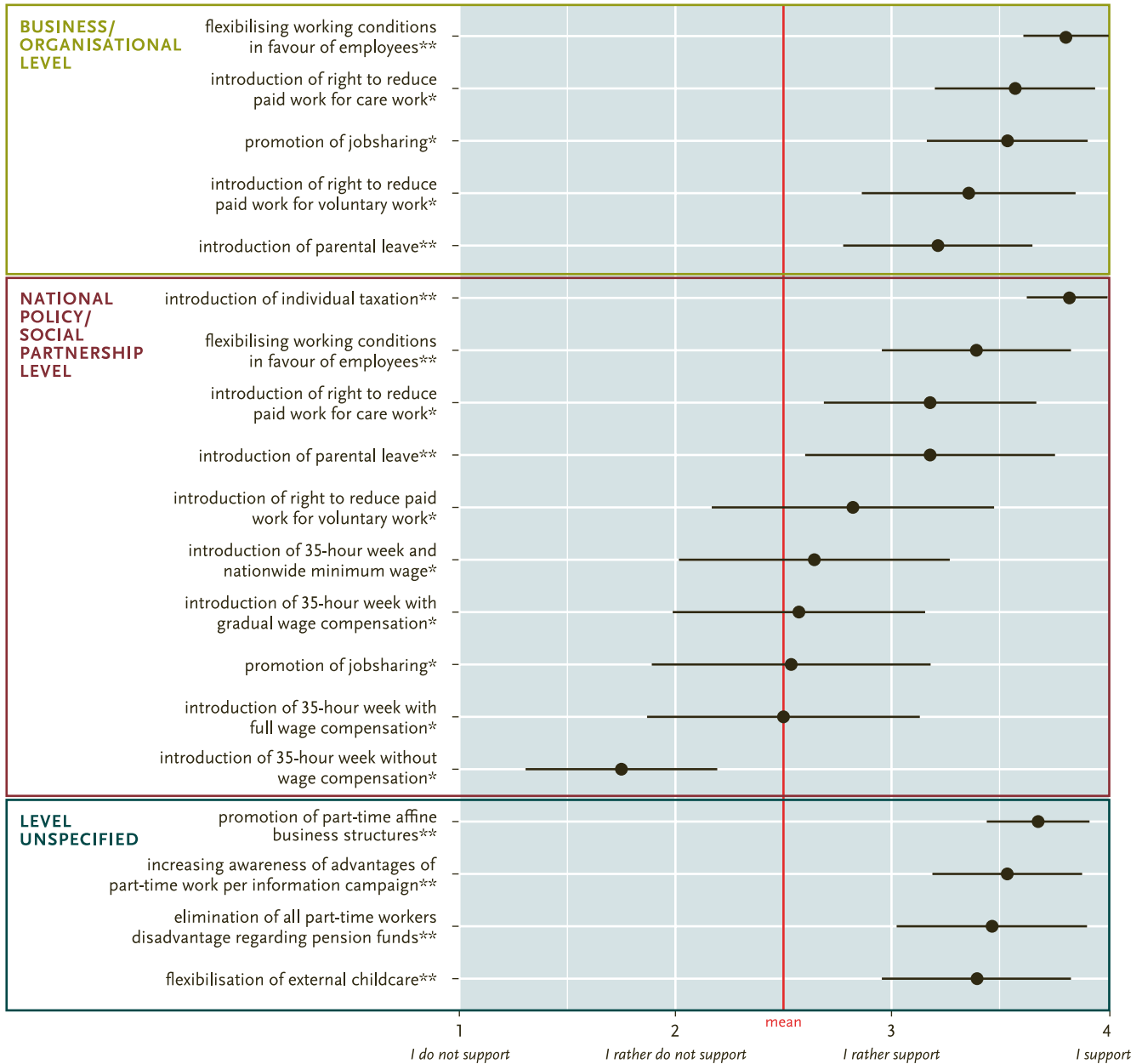
Limitations

The generalisability of our results is, of course, limited. The proposed measures and corresponding levels of stakeholder support may be very country-specific – in this case, specific to Switzerland. Nevertheless, as many affluent Western countries share institutional similarities, we assume our results can be useful for these countries as well. Another limitation is the rather low participation rate in survey 2, which may compromise the quality of the data. In particular, stakeholders exhibiting low agreement with the statements of survey 1 tended not to participate in survey 2. This might have skewed the results of survey 2 in a way

TABLE 2: Average support for work time reduction (WTR) measures by implementation level, and according to whether they are implemented (direct) or promoted (indirect; scale from 1 to 4, standard deviations in brackets).

	NATIONAL POLICY/ SOCIAL PARTNERSHIPS)	BUSINESSES
direct	2.57 (1.64)	3.49 (0.82)
indirect	3.46 (0.81)	3.52 (0.63)

FIGURE 3: Stakeholder support for measures to implement or promote work time reductions (WTRs) by implementation level (mean and standard deviation; *direct WTRs, ** indirect WTRs).⁴



that increases the overall support for the proposed measures. Due to the low participation rate of survey 2, and thus low statistical power, we did not apply statistical significance testing. The low participation rate of survey 2 might also be due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020, which occurred when survey 2 was circulated. Finally, while the statements and measures used in survey 1 and survey 2 are based on literature, stakeholder responses, and expert interviews, they were not tested for understandability and adequacy, which in turn has implications regarding their validity and reliability.

Conclusion and policy implications

The results of the stakeholder surveys allow various policy recommendations to be derived. Based on the stakeholders' views of the effects of WTRs, one implication is that emphasising the *social* and *economic* benefits of WTRs, rather than the *ecological* ones, may be a promising strategy to increase public acceptance for the time being. In terms of the support that various implementation measures received from the stakeholders, the most popular measures (i. e., those undertaken at the business/orga-



nisational level) represent a promising entry point for enacting WTRs. This is reflected in the public debate on WTRs, in so far as some of these measures even correspond with the public positions of particular Swiss employer advocacy groups (Schweizerischer Arbeitgeberverband 2019b)⁶ that have otherwise expressed criticism of WTRs (economiesuisse 2012, Schweizerischer Arbeitgeberverband 2019a, b, Schweizerischer Gewerbeverband 2017, 2018).

The measures that received the most support are by no means the only measures that have a chance of being implemented. Even several extensive national policy or social-partnership level measures, such as the introduction of an individual's right to reduce paid work in order to carry-out caretaker activities or voluntary work, are, on average, supported and could therefore be advanced by content-specific stakeholder alliances. One specific measure that received quite a high level of support and is noteworthy, is launching an information campaign on the benefits of WTRs. This illustrates the need for more information, as well as an awareness of the positive effects of WTRs, which are backed up by sufficient evidence (i. e., primarily social effects). This is significant, as it may provide the groundwork for the success of other measures.

Outlook

Finally, several areas can be identified in which more research on WTRs is necessary. First and foremost, more research is required on the public support for WTRs and the reasons for their support. This is crucial for implementing WTRs and very little research exists to date. This includes examining the public's support according to the different WTR conceptualisations to a more detailed degree than the present study has done. Due to its inductive study design, this study only included a selection of manifestations of three conceptual elements (implementation level, extent, and accompanying measures). Deriving measures deductively according to the typology of WTR conceptualisations outlined in the introduction would have been advantageous for the informative value of our stakeholder survey. Furthermore, conducting more research on the effects of WTRs in general would provide a more reliable assessment of which WTR effects do or do not occur, and in turn, would presumably increase the support for WTRs with beneficial effects.

All in all, more research on the effects of and support for WTRs according to their conceptualisations should allow a more precise analysis of which WTR conceptualisations would help foster the transition to a post-growth society most effectively. Not every WTR will suffice. Only those WTRs whose *ecological*, *social*, and *economic* effects have been sufficiently confirmed, are carefully attuned to one another, and garner enough support can make relevant contributions to such a transition. The insights of

the present study on which WTR benefits a sample of the Swiss public perceives, and which measures receive the most support, should contribute to future courses of action being accurately tailored in terms of which measures are selected and what arguments are used to justify them.

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Author contribution: CB, HH, PB, SM, SN: initial research design; CB, HH, PB, SM: data collection and analysis; CB, HH, PB, SM: manuscript drafting; HH, PB, SM: writing the final manuscript.

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6 I. e., the flexibilisation of working conditions (albeit not explicitly in favour of employees), expanding external childcare services, reducing tax disadvantages for part-time work, and the promotion of family-friendly jobs to attract qualified employees.

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