Conceptualising decent work: an explorative study of decent work in England's Midlands region

Abstract

Despite an increased focus on the quality as well as quantity of work, conceptualisation of decent work remains underdeveloped. There is no single agreed definition of decent work. The ILO (1999) provides an overarching definition of decent work as 'productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity'. This article contributes to conceptual advancement of decent work by compiling a new holistic framework comprising dimensions of decent work, distributive and contributive justice, hard and soft policy regulation, and levels of decent work. Its main aim is to evaluate the suitability of this new conceptual framework for exploring the prognosis on decent work – mainly as a means for informing policy interventions. This is done by applying the framework empirically through analysing evidence collected in the context of the UK's Midlands region using qualitative research methods, including interviews capturing perspectives from various stakeholders. Limited sub-national devolved policy levers are identified, exacerbated by limited hard regulations nationally supporting decent work/workers' rights.

Key words

Contributive justice; Decent work; Dignity; Distributive justice; Hard and soft regulation; Job quality; Policy

Introduction

Since the International Labour Organisation (ILO) launched its decent work agenda in 1999, decent work has been part of the quality of work and sustainable development agenda

worldwide (Burchell et al., 2014; Cao, 2022; Green, 2021; Kalleberg, 2012; Piasna et al., 2020). There is no single agreed definition of decent work. The ILO (1999) provides an overarching definition of decent work as 'productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity'. ILO (2023) research concludes that progress is still 'well off track' on Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) on Decent Work for All.

Moreover, progress is further complicated because approaches to decent work differ across countries, regions and institutional contexts, such as between liberal market economies (LMEs) and coordinated market economies (CMEs) (Hall & Soskice, 2001). CMEs are more likely to have collaborative social pacts between governments, employers and trade unions, and coordinate policy interventions relating to decent work. For example, Bosch & Weinkopf (2016) outline state interventions regulating improvements in job quality in Sweden, France, and Germany. In contrast, LMEs, like the UK and US have privileged market forces and the individual choices of actors and traditionally have placed less emphasis on issues like job quality (Berry, 2014; Kalleberg, 2012).

The UK's liberal labour market model produces significant quantities of jobs. But concerns have grown about the quality of jobs and income inequalities (Adamson & Roper, 2019; Bailey & De Ruyter, 2015; Berry, 2014; Dobbins, 2022; Findlay et al., 2017; Green, 2021). There is now significant agreement about the need to address job quality, but less consensus on how to go about this. Greater attention to job quality is partially related to labour market experiences of job insecurity for many lower-paid employees; especially in light of the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic (Cominetti et al., 2023; Felstead et al., 2020; Warhurst & Knox, 2022; Williams et al., 2020).

In the UK context, achieving decent work has been a key component of political commitments to reforming the labour market and improving job quality (UK Government,

2018). In recent years, the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (Taylor Review, 2017) and the UK Government's subsequent Good Work Plan response (UK Government, 2018) framed 'good work' as a policy aim by emphasising both the quality and quantity of work. Nonetheless, most of the Taylor Good Work policy agenda has not been implemented, and a proposed Employment Bill has been shelved (Dobbins, 2022). The Taylor Review has been criticised, notably for it downplaying the role of hard regulation and trade unions in providing countervailing power at work and facilitating better jobs (Bales et al., 2018). Therefore, there is limited evidence of policy implementation regarding decent work at national and sub-national levels; albeit devolved parliaments in Scotland and Wales are implementing various fair work policies that are absent in England (Dobbins, 2022; Findlay et al., 2017; Irvine, 2020).

Ambiguous and limited conceptualisation has also stunted the effectiveness of decent work policy (Piasna et al., 2020), making measuring and implementing decent work challenging (Burchell et al., 2014; Dodd et al., 2019). Under-theorisation of decent work opens up scope for a new framework to provide greater conceptual understanding, which is the main contribution of this article.

Our new decent work conceptual framework is illustrated by an explorative empirical study of decent work policy challenges at the regional level, specifically in England's Midlands region. The empirical data is explored through the lens of the disruptive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which exacerbated pre-existing challenges regarding lack of access to decent work opportunities in the Midlands, hence highlighting the importance of debates on decent work. A high-profile example which attracted media attention is the poor working conditions and exploitation of workers in the fast fashion industry in Leicester/the East Midlands (e.g., the Boohoo scandal) (Hammer and Plugor, 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic added to the urgency of addressing decent work policy challenges, and the framework is a response to

such challenges. The Midlands covers 11 million people, is the country's traditional manufacturing heartland and contributes £246 billion annually to the UK economy (https://midlandsengine.org). However, regional development prospects have been negatively affected by job losses in manufacturing (Bailey & De Ruyter, 2015). The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing skills deficits, low productivity, poor job quality and low income (Green et al., 2021), as have the ongoing implications of Brexit (Billing et al., 2021). Evidently, too many people in the Midlands have been economically forgotten, causing extensive in-work poverty and loss of self-esteem (IPPR, 2021). To ensure a sustainable regional future, there is an urgent need for more holistically coordinated policy measures enhancing meaningful decent work and an inclusive economy in regions like the Midlands (Sissons et al., 2019).

This article advances conceptual understanding about "How 'good jobs', that allow a decent wage and living conditions, can be developed sub-nationally and/or in a multilevel governance framework". Its main aim is to evaluate the suitability of a new conceptual framework used to assess the prognosis for decent work – mainly as a framework for informing policy interventions - by analysing empirical evidence collected in the Midlands. It addresses three sub questions. First, to what extent does decent work policy practice in the Midlands substantiate the new decent work framework presented here comprising dimensions of decent work, distributive and contributive justice, hard and soft policy regulation, and multiple levels of decent work (i.e. workplace, sector, region, national, international)? Second, can the new framework offer conceptual clarity and inform theory and policy development? Such conceptual clarity could consolidate the decent work policy discourse, raise its profile, and facilitate more effective accountability for implementation, which is at the heart of the current policy deficit. Third, is it possible to use policy levers advancing decent work at a regional level vis-à-vis other geographical levels?

In addressing these research questions, and extending knowledge about decent work, the article provides new theoretical, empirical, methodological and policy contributions. First, it develops a new holistic conceptual framework for analysing decent work, providing much-needed theoretical underpinnings and contributing to relevant literature. Second, it empirically considers the perspectives of regional stakeholders on decent work policy challenges, offering empirical contributions to apply to the conceptual clarification of decent work. Third, the study makes a methodological contribution regarding stakeholder participation in decent work research. As regional stakeholders were actively involved in the research process through interviews and participation in policy forums with academic researchers, their engagement in knowledge exchange activities contributes to research evidence. Fourth, it informs policy debates about mismatches and disconnections between geographical places and levels.

The next section provides a review of literature to develop a new conceptual framework for decent work which informs the empirical findings. The following sections present a methodological overview, findings, and a discussion and conclusion.

Decent work conceptual framework

Responding to gaps in conceptualising decent work, a holistic decent work conceptual framework has been developed, which can be tested and applied in other country and regional contexts internationally. This new framework comprises dimensions of decent work, distributive and contributive justice at work, hard and soft policy measures, and multiple levels of decent work policies.

What is decent work?

The concept of decent work has evolved historically and is a complex multidisciplinary issue (Green, 2021). Despite significant consensus about the need to focus on decent work, there is still no single agreed definition of decent work or set of dimensions and metrics for measuring it. Moreover, 'quality of employment', 'decent work', 'fair work', 'meaningful work' and 'good work' overlap considerably and are often used interchangeably, adding to definitional complexity (refer to Blustein et al., 2023; Brill, 2021; Burchell et al., 2014; Dodd et al., 2019; Green, 2021; Irvine et al., 2018 for more detail on definitions and the evolution of decent work from different disciplinary perspectives). The ILO (1999) defines decent work as 'productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity'. The ILO definition incorporates four strategic pillars: full and productive employment, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue. Perhaps the most comprehensive attempt to date to measure decent work in the UK was conducted by a Measuring Job Quality Working Group (Irvine et al., 2018), which has provided a measurement framework for tracking progress towards good work, proposing 18 measures of good work categorised under seven topics: terms of employment; pay and benefits; job design and nature of work; social support and cohesion; health, safety and well-being; work-life balance; voice and representation (Table 1).

TABLE 1 – Dimensions of job quality/good work

Topic	Measure
Terms of employment	1. job security 2. minimum guaranteed hours 3. underemployment
Pay and benefits	4. pay 5. satisfaction with pay
Job design and nature of work	6. use of skills 7. control (of the way a worker can do their job) 8. opportunities for progression 9. sense of purpose
Social support and cohesion	10. peer support 11. line manager relationship
Health, safety and psychosocial wellbeing	12. physical injury

	13. mental health
Work-life balance	14. over-employment 15. overtime (paid and unpaid)
Voice and representation	16. trade union membership 17. employee information 18. employee involvement

Source: Irvine et al. (2018)

Consequently, the above dimensions are incorporated into our conceptual framework based on the justification that the seven dimensions are aligned with specific measures of decent work, unlike other typologies that are usually vague. The dimensions also inform the key element of our construction of decent work, i.e., the distinction between distributive and contributive justice below.

A focus on decent work/ good work also raises the question of what constitutes bad work? The answer is employment where many dimensions of good work/job quality are absent or weak (Findlay et al., 2017; Rubery et al., 2018; Warhurst & Knox, 2022). Bad work often relates to low-paid employment in insecure jobs, defined as having a zero-hours contract, involuntary working on a temporary contract, or working low hours and wanting more (Cominetti et al., 2023).

Distributive and contributive justice

Our conceptual framework distinguishes between distributive and contributive justice at work. Justice in decent work comprises both distributive (economic, material, extrinsic) and contributive (meaningful work, dignity at work, intrinsic) justice in a more inclusive moral economy (Sandel, 2020; Sayer, 2009). The pay and benefit dimension in Table 1 is the main element of distributive justice. But other dimensions in Table 1 are elements of contributive justice. There is also procedural justice (Cohen, 1985) regarding fair procedural application of policies to all employees, requiring provision of strong employee voice, participation and democratic procedures at work. However, we focus on distributive and contributive justice.

Pay and benefit policies like a real living wage are central components of (re)distributive justice, serving as policy levers for addressing low pay and rising living costs (Adams, 2020). Distributive justice concerns the share of material economic resources (income and wealth) available to different people, in a wider context of economic (in)justice and (in)equalities (Rawls, 1999).

But decent work extends beyond economic (re)distribution of income and wealth. It affects meaningful contributions and capabilities at work – or contributive justice. Distributive justice issues like a real living wage are interconnected with a quality of working-life element of contributive justice encompassing subjective dimensions of voice, perceived equity, job security, job satisfaction and overall meaningful work and dignity (Carr et al., 2016; Cruddas, 2021; Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Sandel, 2020; Sayer, 2009). This signifies the importance of exploring the wider development of meaningful work contributions of social value and opportunities for quality of work as a springboard for harnessing human capabilities (Yao, et al., 2017). This human-centred position originates in Sen's (1999) Capability Approach. It focuses on the moral significance of individuals' capability of living a good life, including availability of decent work.

Addressing inequalities in the availability of meaningful work is vital for improving the quality of employment (Nayyar, 2014), contributing to the creation of more ethical and inclusive work environments and societies. It has been argued that the current scarcity of good quality jobs in various UK regions can be remedied through a broader holistic decent work/quality of working life policy programme (Findlay et al., 2017; Warhurst & Knox, 2022). A broader decent work agenda can also facilitate wider contributive justice and inclusion for citizens in society and enhance self-esteem, recognition, respect, dignity, and well-being through the social contributions people can make in good quality jobs to advance the broader common good (Cruddas, 2021; Sandel, 2020). There is considerable potential

here to increase the quality of existing and new jobs in the everyday foundational economy, and through alternative approaches to local economic development like community wealth building (Calafati et al, 2023; Crisp et al, 2023) and creating green jobs in the context of just transition to climate crisis (van der Ree, 2019).

'Hard' and 'soft' policies for decent work

A distinction can be made between hard and soft policies for enhancing good work (Gibb & Ishaq, 2020; Warhurst & Knox, 2022). Hard policies comprise legislation by the state to set rules for 'harder' regulatory standards for decent work, which are compulsory. Examples include sectoral collective bargaining (CB) regulations and extension mechanisms, national minimum wages, and public procurement and social licensing rules. Regarding the latter, to date, state policy initiatives on decent work in the foundational economy and public procurement are particularly apparent in Wales in a UK context. In 2023, the Welsh Government published a Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act (2023), including measures to formally/legally establish social partnership in Wales by creating a social partnership council, strengthening socially responsible public procurement standards, and delivering fair work outcomes such as paying a real living wage and providing adequate training and employee voice.

In contrast, soft policies are voluntarist. Current examples include employment charters in English city-regions (Dickinson, 2022; McKay & Moore, 2023), and voluntary real living wage accreditation with the Living Wage Foundation (Smith Institute, 2018). Indeed, the Living Wage Foundation promotes place-based approaches to living wage accreditation, primarily at the local authority or city-region scale, but also in Living Wage Zones where the real living wage is embedded into regeneration developments (Living Wage Foundation, 2023). There are various city-region/place-based good employment/fair work charters in

selected devolved English city-regions such as Manchester (Johnson et al., 2022). These voluntarist charters generally outline the main elements of decent work, like a real living wage, job design, skills development, and support local employers to establish them through encouraging best practice. Local place-based regulatory levers, such as procurement involving local authorities are increasingly being incorporated into such charters (IGN, 2020). Despite advances in the adoption of voluntary employment charters recently (Dickinson, 2022; McKay & Moore, 2023), austerity and the relative lack of standard setting measures and limited focus on quality of the large bulk of low-paid employment at sub-national scale is problematic (Yates et al., 2021).

Choice of hard and/or soft policies relates to debates about the robustness of enforcement of rules for decent work, and who is responsible for enforcement (the state, employers, other stakeholders) (Judge & Slaughter, 2023). There is emerging agreement in the literature that a combination of hard and soft policy measures is required to improve the quality of existing jobs and create new good quality jobs. What matters most to employees is typically hard policies (Gibb & Ishaq, 2020), and employers typically prefer/are more amenable to softer voluntarist policies (Johnson et al., 2022), while advocates of decent work usually recommend a combination, given that progress on addressing work quality problems requires mutual engagement by multiple stakeholders:

> Problem areas of work quality, and problem employers, can be influenced by strategies shaping "hard" factors, including legislation. This needs to be complemented and integrated with strategies on "soft" factors, including identifying positive role models on themes of well-being, work–life balance and precarious forms of employment, as well as pay (Gibb & Ishaq, 2020: 845).

Warhurst and Knox (2022) present a manifesto for a new Quality of Working Life, proposing (hard) minimum standards rather than just (soft) voluntary actions by employers. They

conclude that although substantial scope exists for employers to voluntarily improve working lives through HRM practices, the most vulnerable workers need statutory protection from those employers whose business models are intentionally premised on poor quality jobs. To this end, they believe that the state needs to create a floor of hard minimum standards of job quality through statutory regulation to ensure employee well-being.

Multiple levels of decent work

Policies for decent work may be enacted at multiple levels: sector, workplace, building, zone, local, city-regional, regional, national, and transnational. There is increasing consensus that the decent work agenda for regions like the Midlands cannot be left to uncoordinated market forces (Sissons et al., 2019; Green et al., 2021). Rather, coordinated multi-level whole-system interventions are required by the state, nationally, regionally and locally. However, traditionally policy interactions between different levels and scales in the UK have been limited and fragmented. As noted above, to date, there is little sign of the UK Government implementing decent work policies at national level, let alone having sustained impact on regions. Yet jurisdiction over employment rights is largely reserved for UK government level regulation.

In the current national decent work policy context of limited workers' rights, stakeholders in local/combined authorities/city-regions/regions are developing their own policy ideas, including good work and employment charters – within the constraints of asymmetric devolution powers and the highly centralised UK state (Sissons et al., 2019; Dickinson, 2022; McKay & Moore, 2023). Arguably, progress in England is greatest in Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) (i.e., legal bodies with an elected mayor) set up using national legislation that enables a group of two or more councils to take collective decisions across local council boundaries, where the primary focus is on utilising soft measures, albeit not all MCAs have

employment charters. This may partly reflect the fact that building relationships and developing capacity takes time in a context of limited powers to engage directly with improving employment standards (McKay & Moore, 2023). The Midlands recently launched a new Good Work Charter (GWC), but faces significant regional challenges, including coordination and fragmentation of institutional architecture and activities between local actors and shortcomings in capacity to implement policy (Green et al. 2021). However, at Midlands level pan-regional partnerships between multiple stakeholders can play an advocacy role in compiling and promoting analyses of how decent work can positively impact on productivity, investment, sustainability, well-being and regional and local communities.

These various aspects of a holistic conceptual framework for decent work are summarised in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1 HERE

Research methods

Qualitative methods were used in this explorative study to examine decent work policy development in the English Midlands region in relation to the new conceptual framework in Figure 1. Explorative research is aimed at revealing what has happened, looking for new insights, and assessing phenomena from a new angle (Saunders et al., 2016). This approach is suitable for theory building through exploratory, semi-structured interviews (Makri & Neely, 2021). We adopted a case study approach to explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on decent work in the Midlands. Data was collected between December 2020 and July 2021, using interviews, documents, and participatory observations of a knowledge exchange

workshop and public policy discussion forum. Since case studies can show the richness of the research phenomenon and real-life context (Yin, 2009), analysing the Midlands case provides useful insights into how regional decent work policies connect with the concerns of different stakeholders.

Data was collected from multiple regional stakeholders, drawing evidence from employers/managers with a deep understanding about decent work policy issues, workers and trade union representatives with experience of the impact of Covid-19, local government officials with a remit for regional labour market development, and academics whose research into decent work provides insight for policy communities. Based on a purposive sampling method (Saunders et al., 2016), 19 interviewees were selected, including three officials from government and local authorities, three trade union officials, seven employers and managers, four employees, and two university academics specialising in decent work (Table 2). These interviews provide rich insight into decent work, the impact of Covid-19 and other externalities like Brexit, and policy issues in the Midlands.

TABLE 2 HERE

Additionally, to directly involve stakeholders in the research and build knowledge exchange, we held a two-day decent work public policy forum which attracted 21 people from the Midlands, including officials from local authorities, representatives from employer organisations (including Chambers of Commerce), trade union officials, and academics, to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on the region's job quality and employment. We also held a knowledge exchange workshop which saw speakers from government and local authorities, unions and universities outlining their perspectives on decent work policy and practice. All activities were conducted through online platforms given Covid-19 social distancing restrictions.

Thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the implications of decent work policy development in the Midlands for the new conceptual framework. This method is suitable for identifying patterns in exploratory research (Makri & Neely, 2021). Four themes were used, corresponding to our decent work conceptual framework: decent work dimensions, justice, hard and soft policies, and levels. Findings are presented under these themes.

Findings

Dimensions of decent work

Findings are outlined with reference to the dimensions of decent work identified by Irvine et al. (2018).

Terms of employment

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed many problems in the Midlands labour market, demonstrating the importance of decent terms of employment in protecting workers in a major crisis. There has been a rising awareness about job security, (in)sufficient protection, and working hours, with particular concerns about the types of employment contracts and the specific details of terms and conditions. A key issue emerging from interviews was the controversial use of zero hours contracts (no minimum guaranteed hours), coupled with a "very high" youth unemployment rate in the Midlands (Academic, Interview 1). An employee indicated:

> "I think the kind of growing influence of zero-hour contracts and temporary contingent forms of work have kind of blurred the edges or … the domains around work and non-work. So, I think some predictability in terms of when people work and some control over when they work is … key in contributing what constitutes decent work." (Employee, Interview 12)

The expansion of zero-hour contracts in the UK labour market has caused widespread criticism. The government's Good Work Plan acknowledged the problem and recommended 'act[ing] to create a right to request a contract that guarantees hours for those on zero hour contracts who have been in post for 12 months which better reflects the hours worked' (UK Government, 2018). The entrenchment of precarious employment in the region is alarming: there are about "2 or 3 million (workers) who are in insecure work where they don't know from one week to the next how much they will earn and how many hours they're going to work, (especially) a million on zero hours contracts" (Midlands union official, Interview 11). As demonstrated in "some good research" (Academic, Interview 2), nonstandard employment such as contingent jobs has a negative impact on individuals' physical and mental health.

Pay and benefits

The degree of material reward is closely related to employees' economic subsistence and increased compensation can potentially also impact better quality of working life (Seubert et al., 2021). Moreover, there are many different constructions of pay and wages illustrating why it is important beyond mere minimum 'subsistence' wages, including a real living wage, and collective bargaining (Adams, 2020). In our research, it was local politicians, rather than those in central government, who it was felt could do more to improve the poor wages and working conditions in the Midlands' low pay service industries (Employee, Interview 13). Meanwhile, the Covid-19 pandemic has reiterated the essentiality of sufficient compensation, which was recognised by nearly all interviewees due to the significantly negative impact of Covid-19 on many workers' income and benefits. As a NHS nurse (Interview 5) pointed out, "…a person needs to feel like they are being compensated well for what they are doing and that their work is valued". Similarly, another respondent stated:

> "Adequate compensation is just generally important in making workers feel like they've got a sense of belonging to the organisation." (Employee, Interview 13)

During the pandemic, frontline health workers in a local hospital experienced high intensity of work yet felt they were not properly compensated:

> "Even before the pandemic I feel that we were underpaid, massively underpaid and massively undervalued for what we do. Since the pandemic has come on, workers on the frontline like myself, who were constantly portrayed in the news and the newspapers locally and things like that. I don't feel like we're being adequately compensated at all. … we're in an environment where you can't be safe, and a 1% pay increase offer … makes me sad, it makes me angry." (Nurse, Interview 5)

Job design and nature of work

To achieve decent work, job design and quality are particular important factors. As an employee from a Midlands town pointed out:

> "… the more important structural issues are the amount of warehouse work and distribution work that's been allowed to come into a low skilled economy like Stoke-on-Trent, [usually] with poor terms and conditions." (Employee, Interview 12)

How jobs are organised is related to regional factors, including sectoral specialisation. In the Midlands there are agglomerations of warehouses and manufacturers. Such a "sectoral composition element" contributed to the nature of work during Covid-19, including "some of the highest local infection rates" (Academic, Interview 1). These factors are also linked with job insecurity and lack of proper career progression, regionally:

> "There's a lot of short-term contract work, but not a lot of career track work. …the sort of casualisation and short-term stuff kind of undermines work/life balance or the chance of a long-term future (career) and then people don't have a long-term vision. Employers like insecurity because they think it makes people more productive, well no it doesn't; it makes them paralysed". (Manager, Interview 3)

The Covid-19 pandemic has magnified the importance of capacity for meaningful work contributions, which were perceived as fundamentally part of decent work: "work is often misconceived as something that you have to do to live. And I disagree with that, I think work should be something that you do because you want to do it, and not because you have to." (Nurse, Interview 5). She further emphasised the sense of purpose in her job:

> "it's important to not forget that people don't just come to work to make a living, but come to work because they want to be there [a local NHS hospital]. I feel that the influences that come from the other external factors from the environment, that you're just basically in, can affect that so much." (Nurse, Interview 5)

Social support and cohesion

Peer support and line manager relationships are the main components of the social support and cohesion dimension of decent work. As a manager said:

> "I think an organisation that values those social networks that are created within work and helps people develop those social relationships is important to me. I think that's an essential part of making work decent is that you're working with others towards a common good." (Interview 4)

The rising trend of homeworking, a consequence of the pandemic, means that employees more than ever need effective, positive support from their colleagues and immediate managers or supervisors. As stated by an official from the state dispute resolution agency ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service), the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted that "what makes good work is which bunch of colleagues you end up with.…" (ACAS official, Interview 12).

Interviewees also mentioned the extension of social support and cohesion to family and education domains. It was recognised that "Family affects [decent work] and is affected by all aspects of decent work. Education – I think there's a very important role for educating

people around expectations and norms…around what decent work is and what you can expect." (Manager, Interview 14).

Health, safety and well-being

The Covid-19 pandemic enhanced people's appreciation of health and safety at work during a major global health crisis. A union official commented:

> "We're going to see now as a result of Covid itself potential mental health issues arising from isolation. Home working, too much screen work, so safe conditions are essential" (Union official, Interview 17).

For frontline workers in the Midlands, the pandemic raised their awareness of health and safety environments. A local NHS nurse believed that "providing a safe environment meets the definition of decent work", which should include controlling working time, having some input in monitoring safety measures, and having a safe environment (Nurse, Interview 5). This was echoed by a government official who said that: "Safe work…would be an essential underpin (of decent work)." (Government Official, Interview 12).

Work-life balance

While the pandemic and increased home working have further blurred the boundaries between work and life, more and more people in the region realised the essence of health and wellbeing through a better work-life balance. The pandemic has further accentuated the divides between work and family commitments, and between different job roles. A manager said:

> "Covid has…given some people who are at the upper end of the labour market a lot of freedom and control…, and it has trapped other people who are in less salubrious circumstances in really unpleasant situations". (Manager, Interview 3)

To achieve such balance is not always easy, though employees in the region were aware of the benefit of homeworking: "given people's positive experience of being able to work productively from home…flexible working might be something which is more commonplace in terms of benefit on people or the economy" (Employee, Interview 9).

Voice and representation

A critical part of decent work are trade union membership, information and consultation mechanisms, and employee involvement in decision-making (Irvine et al., 2018), because voice and representation will enable employees "to exercise a voice so they feel they have some kind of control over what they're doing or some input" (Academic, Interview 2). Worker representation has a strong business case because with that "you get more for your dollar and the companies tend to be more productive, workers are better paid, and satisfaction rates are better" (ACAS Official, Interview 11). This was echoed by a manager in the Midlands who said that "by their very nature of what they are there for to represent the voice of the worker, trade unions are clearly very important" (Manager, Interview 14).

Representation, voice and involvement can give employees better opportunities to protect themselves and also improve the prospect of good work. However, despite the apparent consensus, much of the private sector in the Midlands has low union density and a lack of real participation, therefore "unions have got to really rethink about what they're going to do in a period when people come off furlough and …also how they can use perhaps some of the goodwill they've gained [during the pandemic]" (Union official, Interview 17).

Notwithstanding these challenges, growing union presence in some sectors in the region during the Covid-19 pandemic was noted:

> "Ironically the pandemic has shown that when the world of work does look a little bit vulnerable for people who didn't think it should look vulnerable for them, they come and join unions. So,

> it's showing that people do know that unions are there. … a bit of good news is where unions exist, where they do have a footprint, people are more likely to join." (Union official, Interview 11)

Distributive and contributive justice

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the above dimensions demonstrates the need to delineate decent work goals through achieving both distributive and contributive justice. Distributive justice requires fair and equal distribution of material rewards or income for all, which is critical to the Midlands for inclusive growth. As an interviewee pointed out:

> "As soon as the minimum wage comes in, we then have to look at all our other grades to make sure that we've got not only adequate compensation but fair compensation for the different skillsets throughout the organisation." (Manager, Interview 6)

Distributive justice could help address the problem of economic injustice due to unequal pay and work benefits for many employees. This is because, as a manager stated, "some employers [in the region] offering very, very poor terms and working conditions…is not a safety net so much as something that sets poor people up for just rounds and rounds of super exploitation and indebtedness" (Manager, Interview 3).

Although the equal distribution of income is critical for decent work, meaningful work contributions (contributive justice) are equally important (Sayer, 2009). "Dignity and respect, the right to be treated in a dignified way, and the right to be respected will be the kind of key measures in that sense for me" (Government official, Interview 12). This view was shared by a manager:

> "Because without dignity, we may argue that Amazon delivery drivers … have to urinate into plastic bottles [inside delivery van]… may actually be a safe working practice in that they're not putting themselves in danger or putting the public in danger." (Manager, Interview 3)

However, meaningful work contributions and dignity at work are probably something easier said than done, and there is a gap between rhetoric and reality. An employee was doubtful here: "There's a difference between employers actually meaningfully carrying out the values and meaningfully living by their values for want of a better phrase, and just using them as rhetoric and window dressing" (Employee, Interview 13).

Hard and soft decent work policies

To ensure distributive and contributive justice, effective decent work policies need to combine both hard and soft policies. Hard policies are those regulations with legislative status and enforcement power, thus ensuring a higher degree of compliance, wider coverage and better implementation. Examples include sectoral collective bargaining agreements, national minimum wage regulations and public procurement policies that have compulsory power in regions. As a councillor observed:

> "Really important here is using the power of procurement and commissioning across large anchor organisations…to ensure that what they're procuring through the supply chain is driving up the quality and decency of work. So, they (anchor organisations) are working with organisations that are paying a real living wage…aren't tolerating poor employment practices, and respect labour rights." (Councillor, Interview 7).

Hard regulations should, in principle, help improve the quality of employment by providing (often incremental) change in workers' rights. As an employee suggested:

> "Going forward I would like to see an increased sort of access to workers' rights from day one for workers, so people on zero-hour contracts have the same rights as people who have been working in an organisation for however long that they've been." (Employee, Interview 12)

Unlike hard policies, soft decent work measures are mainly voluntary and have limited/no enforcement power. An increasingly influential example is the Real Living Wage campaign

in the region, as it sets wages at a higher level than the statutory National Minimum/Living Wage. The campaign has gained positive success in Birmingham where the Chamber of Commerce is one of the most prolific advocates in supporting "a progressive and enlightened approach amongst out business community around some of this [voluntary decent work policies]" (Councillor, Interview 7).

Decent work at different levels

It is crucial to recognise that countries and regions will require variable/additional indicators to meet their specific needs at different levels (Anker et al., 2003). The main arena where decent work happens is the workplace level of management-worker employment relationships, which can influence outcomes. From the perspective of trade unions, mutual collective agreements between management and labour are important for achieving mutual gains from decent work:

> "I think the best way to approach the world of work is through collective bargaining. But that doesn't stop an individual worker having a voice in a workplace to influence the way in which their work is done". (Union official, Interview 11).

There are examples of good practice advocating decent work, for instance the employer High Speed 2 (HS2)'s (HS2 is a new highspeed rail line with a footprint in the Midlands region) framework agreement with unions offered a "legacy for good employment" which had knock-on effects on supply chain companies, which was "excellent, fantastic" (Government official, Interview 12). There were also employers in the region who would regard individual workers' attitudes and behaviours as key to workplace success: "we've got a behaviours framework where we set out exactly what we expect from our employees in terms of living the values, and what the expected behaviours are" (Employer, Interview 6).

Regionally, findings reveal considerable interest from stakeholders in developing regional-level decent work policies. To date, however, there are regional challenges to progressing this, partly due to lack of coordination, including across local government authorities. One interviewee explained:

> "We've got the West Midlands Combined Authority but that's it. There's nothing at all in the East Midlands that we could regionally go to in relation to having a direct interface to have policy discussions and try and influence policy." (Union Official, Interview 11).

Despite these metagovernance barriers, there have been growing efforts to integrate measures and stakeholders to develop decent work policies at regional level, exemplified by a recently launched Midlands Good Work Charter (GWC) led by ACAS involving different regional actors. This initiative was endorsed by interviewees, with one acknowledging that the UK level policy movement seemed to be stalled but there had been momentum amongst devolved governments: "Local policies were beginning to move ahead even prior to Covid, …in the Midlands there's an initiative to develop a charter" (Academic, Interview 2). However, given experience elsewhere in England, it may be questioned whether the regional scale is the most appropriate scale for activity on good work beyond an advocacy function; strategy and delivery may be more appropriately exercised at other geographical levels. This relates to a broader debate regarding geographical scale and function (Green and Rossiter, 2019), a case of a local manifestation of a more general issue which also needs to be tackled strategically at higher level.

Nonetheless, despite the examples outlined above, decent work requires support by harder national measures such as legislation and government policies regulating the labour market and promoting quality jobs. This is a weak area in the UK because the country "hasn't really had a proper industrial strategy…and it's relied on markets" (Union official, Interview 17). This reflects the laissez-faire flexible (deregulatory) UK labour market model (Warhurst &

Knox, 2022). This affects the regional level because actions can be implemented more successfully when there are supportive national level decent work policies, because overall, "local government policies have to follow national policies" (Union official, Interview 17). When there is lack of national legislation on core elements of decent work, local policies have to be innovative and also pertinent to the specific region. To offset the lack of national policies, it is important to maintain regional levels of government commitment, advocacy and enforcement relating to decent work, since "if [a regional] government wants to do something, it will do it and it will do it regardless of the noise that it gets locally" (Councillor, Interview 7).

Discussion and conclusion

Influenced by the ILO (1999) decent work agenda, there is now significant consensus in the UK and internationally about the need to address job quality, not just job quantity – illustrated by our empirical evidence regarding lack of access to decent work opportunities in England's Midland's region. Evidently, there are formidable policy challenges to increasing decent work in the UK context; accentuated by external shocks like Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, and a longer-standing lack of hard regulations supporting decent work and workers' rights. Progress on implementation of a decent work agenda across neglected UK regions like the Midlands has been hamstrung by an intentional laissez-faire national approach to work and employment policy, in the context of a deregulated, uncoordinated flexible labour market regime during recent decades (Warhurst & Knox, 2022). From the Thatcher governments of the 1980s to the Conservative governments of recent years, 'New Right' industrial relations policies have deliberately intended to weaken and withdraw workers' rights, especially collective rights involving trade unions, ideologically viewed as

impediments to liberalized market forces and employer prerogative to manage. This is illustrated, for instance, by the hurdles to engaging in collective bargaining and trade union activity (where these institutions of pluralist collectivism still survive), and the inadequacies of employment status law to protect people from the turbulent dynamics of precarious hyper 'flexible work' and the gig economy (Author Ref). Insecure work in the UK now extends far beyond the gig economy, becoming entrenched and normalised (Rubery et al., 2018).

In this deregulatory national level policy context, and pushing the envelope of devolution, regional and local actors in England's devolved contexts are experimenting with place-based policies on decent work. However, there are limits to how far this can go given, for instance, that devolved administrations have little influence over industrial relations policy, which is decided nationally by the UK government. At the time of writing in 2024, a UK Labour Government has promised to implement a range of new workers' rights to underpin better jobs under its New Deal for Working People (2022); including sectoral collective bargaining/Fair Pay Agreements, new rights and protections for trade unions, banning zero hours contracts, creating a single status of worker/outlawing bogus self-employment. However, there are concerns that some commitments will be diluted to appease business lobbyists.

What seems evident is that the UK low wage-low investment-low productivity model has created large numbers of low-quality insecure jobs under the auspices of labour market flexibility. This has been exacerbated by the failure to implement an industrial strategy that could underpin good jobs (Keep, 2023; Rodrik, 2022). Clearly, a new policy direction and associated new regulations are required based on the concept of imposing 'beneficial constraints' on employers to compel them to create good quality jobs (Streeck, 1997). Labour's New Deal for Working People (2022) could potentially contribute to this new direction - if it is not diluted.

Informed by such critical analysis of the UK's institutional and policy context, this article has provided an original contribution to conceptual advancement of knowledge about decent work. In so doing, it has outlined a new framework incorporating various interlinking themes - dimensions of decent work, distributive and contributive justice, hard and soft policies, multiple levels of decent work policies – which, in combination, shape decent work policies and associated outcomes. It has utility as a framework for informing policy interventions relating to the big picture policy context analysed above and earlier in the article. Responding to the call for addressing limited theorisation of decent work (Piasna et al., 2020), the new framework offers much needed conceptual advancement which can inform policy and practice reform and is a step forward from existing literature with limited or ambiguous conceptualisation (Dodd et al., 2019).

A second original contribution is that the framework has been empirically applied, using qualitative methods involving multiple stakeholders as active research participants, in the context of England's Midlands. Our empirical data from interviews and knowledge exchange with stakeholders in the Midlands confirm the importance of many of the dimensions and measures of decent work/job quality outlined by Irvine et al. (2018). Respondents identified problems with an increase in insecure non-standard employment, notably zero hours contracts, exacerbated by the pandemic that had a profound impact on people working in the region. This was seen as having a ripple-effect relating to other dimensions of bad/good work, including low pay, lack of career progression or meaningful/dignified work, exposure to health and safety hazards, poor work-life balance, absence of collective voice and representation. The findings correspond with existing research identifying the spread of bad jobs in Anglo-American varieties of capitalism (Adamson & Roper, 2019; Kalleberg, 2012). Our framework and empirical evidence serve to highlight that new regulatory policies are required to support these various dimensions of decent work in places like the Midlands.

These dimensions of decent work are linked to our conceptual distinction between distributive and contributive justice at work. Our research participants recognised the importance of distributive justice through fair pay, collective bargaining and living wages, but also dignity through meaningful work. Both are recognised as essential, but contributive justice (Cruddas, 2021; Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Sandel, 2020; Sayer, 2009) through facilitating voice, participation and meaningful work contributions can be easily ignored/overlooked/less quantifiable. Voice also relates to procedural justice (Cohen, 1987).

Our research advances understanding regarding which decent work dimensions could be impacted by soft and/or hard policies and related institutional contexts (Gibb & Ishaq, 2020). Pay and benefits, for example, are generally more likely to be impacted by hard regulations such as the NMW/sectoral collective bargaining, but dignity at work is perhaps also likely to stem from soft voluntarist measures such as good work charters and supportive workplace HRM policies and practices. This combination of hard and soft regulation was supported in comments by our research participants. Evidently, there is a need for more anchor employers/large organisations to implement softer voluntary policies in regions like the Midlands to support more meaningful employee contributions at work, for instance. Moreover, many research respondents were aware that the UK state currently has insufficient hard regulation and laws supporting diffusion of decent work (and reduction in bad work) across regions like the Midlands. Again, this applies to Anglo-American capitalism generally (Adamson & Roper, 2019; Kalleberg, 2012). In contrast, the state in many continental European countries plays a much more interventionist role in regulating for higher job quality (Bosch et al., 2016). Furthermore, hard regulation in European Union member states is reinforced by the EU's new European Pillar of Social Rights and the revival of Social Europe (Keune & Pochet, 2023).

Levels of decent work policy is another important aspect of conceptualising decent work. What are appropriate geographical scales for implementation: workplace, zone, local, city-region, sector, region, national, transnational? Britain's exit (Brexit) from the European Union (EU) limits its future regulatory exposure to transnational EU level regulations. There was a consensus of opinion among our respondents that (especially in the post-Brexit period) national-level policies (by UK governments) on decent work seem to have stalled but, within this void, local, city-regional, sector and regional policies are now attracting greater attention. The Midlands launched its first-ever Midlands Good Work Charter (GWC) in June 2022, for instance. That said, beyond a regional advocacy function, challenges are identified in policy implementation at regional level, such as relatively weaker regional coordination in the Midlands compared with other regions with more Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) governance arrangements, and limits to devolved decision-making powers, capacities and resources (e.g., funding, especially with austerity being imposed by central government). Taking the lead on the GWC shows how ACAS, an independent public body, is seeking to address the decent work regional policy deficit. One option for better coordination of regional policy issues like decent work as part of a regional industrial strategy could be the formation of regional social partnership institutions involving various stakeholders (employers, trade unions, local and regional authorities, and others); as recently introduced in Wales, for example (Welsh Government, 2023). There is also potential for regions to regulate public procurement rules, (including living wages, trade union recognition and collective bargaining) to enhance job quality in foundational economy sectors providing essential human necessities of life like social care (Calafati et al., 2023).

There is potential for the conceptual framework to be tested empirically, and theoretically refined, in research in other country/regional policy studies contexts internationally. For instance, this could potentially occur in European countries/regions with stronger policies,

institutions and regulations supporting decent work compared to the UK, or it could occur in countries in the Global South with fewer policy supports for decent work.

In conclusion, this article has outlined an original holistic conceptual framework of decent work and explored this empirically through a place-based case study of the English Midlands in the UK, drawing on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. The framework and empirical data evidence the need for stronger hard and soft policies regulating the distributive and contributive justice dimensions of decent work. This would require better joined-up policy implementation, coordination and enforcement across multiple policy making levels and arenas (national, regional, city-region, local, workplace). Evidently, substantial challenges exist around improving access to decent work in the Midlands, with the efforts to level-up the quality of working life being constrained by a fragmented and broken deregulatory UK labour market model that restricts workers' rights and perpetuates a low productivity puzzle (Irvine, 2020). A combination of a highly centralized state with a weak floor of national employment rights, and limited industrial strategy, contributes to and coincides with limited devolved regulatory levers at sub-national-levels in places like the Midlands for embedding good jobs relative to bad jobs. Embedding decent work in the UK as part of a broader Quality of Working Life (QWL) agenda is further constrained by Brexit and regulatory decoupling from the transnational EU Social Agenda.

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FIGURE 1 - A conceptual framework for decent work

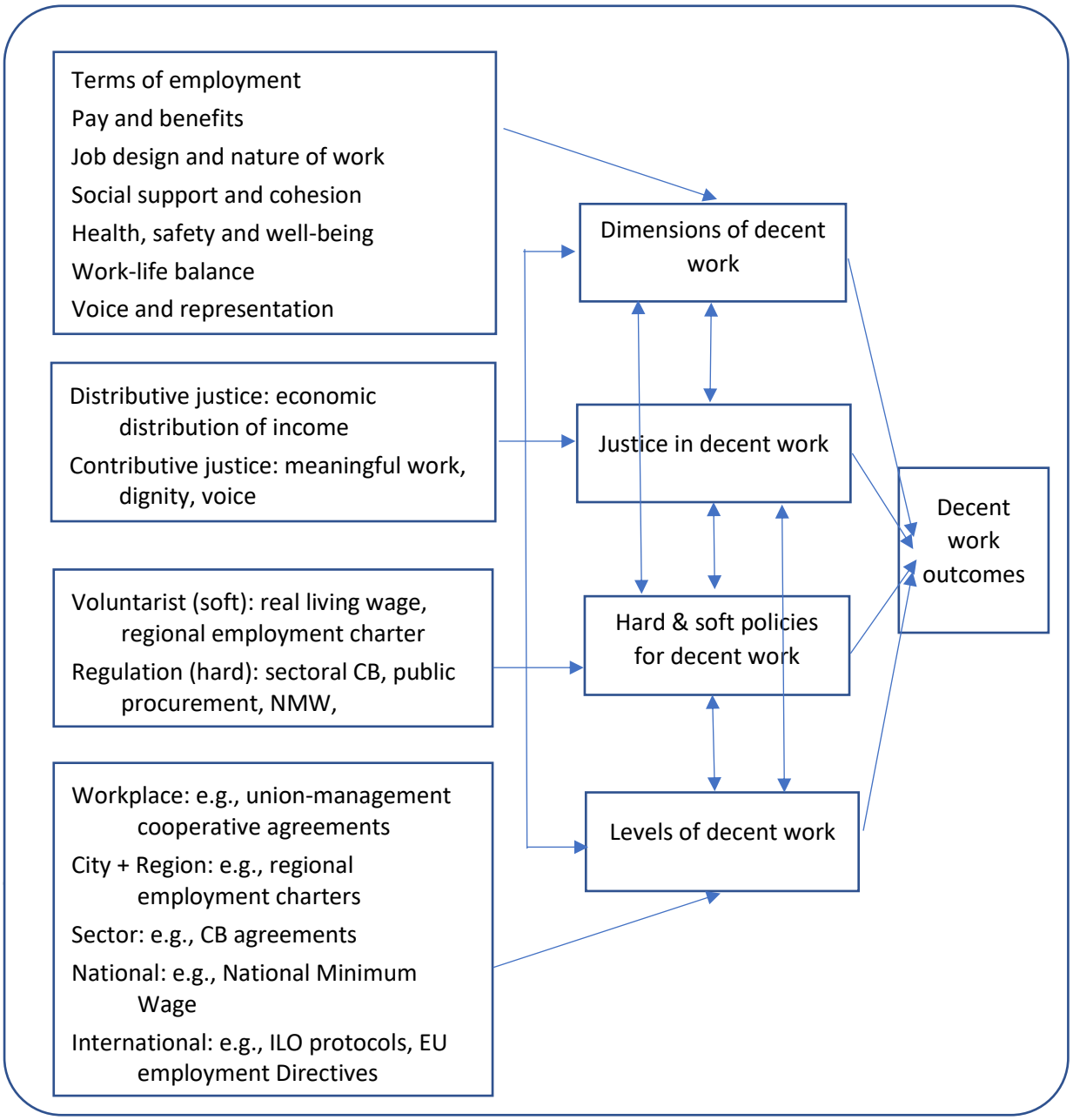

TABLE 2

Interview list

No.	Organisation and position	Role description	Date
1	A professor of regional studies in a university in the Midlands	A Professor	
2	A university academic specialising on labour market and employment based in the Midlands	An academic	
3	A university manager	A manager	
4	A university manager	A manager	
5	NHS North Midlands University Hospital, nurse	A nurse	
6	Deputy Chief Executive, a charity organisation	A manager	
7	A Councillor in a Midlands city	A Councillor	
8	Chief executive of a County Council in Midlands	A Lead of Council	
9	Social Entrepreneur and employer, Midlands	An employer	
10	A university manager	A manager	
11	A union official from TUC	A union official	
12	An official in Acas	A government or Acas official	
13	A university employee	An employee	
14	A university manager	A manager	
15	A union official from TUC	A union official	
16	A university employee	An employee	
17	A union official in Midlands	A union official	
18	NHS Medical Laboratory, Technician	An NHS employee	
19	CEO, charity organisation in Staffordshire	A charity CEO	