

Jean Guichard

Emeritus Prof. at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (INETOP-CNAM), Paris
ORCID: 0000-0002-3959-1149

Support for the Design of Active Life at a Turning Point

Today, most interventions supporting the construction of active lives have as their sole final purpose helping people enter the job market and manage their employability and careers. The seriousness of the multidimensional crisis that has been growing for several decades now urges redirecting these interventions to a different purpose: that of contributing to the achievement of the objectives and goals defined by the major international organisations (and the experts in these matters) in order to cope with this crisis. Developing these new interventions is premised on grounding them in a transformed conceptual framework, where the concepts of the 'form of life' (Spranger, Agamben) and 'active life' (Arendt) hold the central place and are articulated with the notion of 'capability' (Sen). The ultimate purpose of this new support for the construction of active life is to enable individuals, groups and communities to develop and mobilise the necessary capabilities for designing and implementing the forms of active life that are both economically and ecologically sustainable and humanely fair.

Keywords: active life, capability, decent work, form of life, social justice, support for the design of active life, sustainable development.

Introduction

When vocational guidance developed in industrialised countries at the turn of the 19th century, it gave rise to lively debates around its aims, both in some European countries (Huteau, 2002) and in the United States (United States Bureau of Education, 1914). In both cases, two antagonistic positions clashed. Their argument can be neatly encapsulated in two questions: Is the ultimate purpose of vocational guidance to optimise the functioning of the market economy and to maintain the related social organisation? Or, alternatively, is its aim to promote the development of every person's potential, to increase social justice and to develop a more inclusive society?

Over the 20th century, these debates fell into oblivion, and the former point of view took hold. This can be seen, for example, in the official definition of 'vocational guidance' as formulated by the political leaders of the European Union in 2008. The definition, whose core ideas are outlined in the first section of this article, conceives support for career construction in terms that have given rise to severe criticism in recent decades.

But, as recounted in the second section, for about half a century now, the world has experienced the aggravation of a multidimensional crisis that reached such magnitude that, in 2015, the United Nations unanimously adopted an extended action plan to cope with it. This agenda shows that the interventions supporting people's construction of active lives find themselves at a turning point. Such practices must question their role as an accessory to the rise of this crisis and find out how they can contribute to resolving it.

This path is explored in the last section of this text, which offers a conceptual framework for developing interventions aimed at coping with the crisis. Such interventions must help individuals, groups and communities find their answers to the question: How can we design our active lives so that, in 2050, approximately 10 billion human beings will be able to lead a truly human existence in a world of limited resources?

Current Practices of Vocational Guidance/Career Counselling and Their Criticisms

The dominant conception of support for the construction of active lives

On 21 November 2008, the European Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States of the European Union adopted a resolution that defined career guidance as:

A continuous process that enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which those capacities and competences are learned and/or used. Guidance covers a range of individual and collective activities relating to information-giving, counselling, competence assessment, support, and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills. (Council of the European Union, 2008)

It may seem odd that a political assembly publishes a legal definition of a profession. However, in the case of career counselling, this can be explained by the fact that any individual's act of pondering what direction to give to their active life necessarily draws on anticipations of a common future and is not without effective consequences for this future. Indeed, the 'considering' paragraphs of the

2008 resolution, which precede this definition, specify this common framework, to which everyone must refer when directing their active life:

The growing globalisation of trade and lengthening of the period of active employment are increasingly requiring individuals to adapt their skills, in order to remain ahead of foreseeable or necessary changes and to safeguard their career paths. (...) Guidance plays a decisive role in the major decisions that individuals have to take throughout their lives. In this respect, it can contribute to empowering individuals to manage their own career paths in a more secure way in the context of today's labour market. (Council of the European Union, 2008)

These paragraphs perfectly exemplify the currently dominant conception of support for the construction of active lives in the most developed liberal economies. The ultimate purpose assigned to this support is explicit: to help young people develop their employability and become skilled workers and to help the latter maintain it, with a view to integrating into and developing their careers in the primary segment of the job market (that of skilled jobs) (Edwards, Reich, & Gordon, eds. 1975).

Criticisms of the presuppositions of this support for the construction of active lives

In recent decades, this conception of career development has invited strong criticism from various academics, notably from David Blustein and Marie Sue Richardson. In 2006, Blustein observed: 'The notion of career (reflecting a hierarchical and planned series of jobs that are thoughtfully selected) is deeply embedded in a sociocultural framework that is relevant to only a minority of individuals around the globe' (Blustein, 2006, p. 3). For her part, Richardson stressed in 2012:

The discourse of vocational choice and the technology of matching persons and occupations, based on interests and abilities that was the foundation of vocational guidance, did not acknowledge that many people had to take whatever jobs they could get with no opportunity to engage in an idealized matching process. Thus, the paradigm and discourse of vocational choice masked the ways in which 'choice' was, in fact, very limited or even nonexistent for some. (Richardson, 2012, p. 195)

Another criticism of the reduction of vocational guidance to inclusion into today's work systems came in 2008 from a team of researchers that adopted the label of the International Life Design Research Group. Based on the insight that '[c]areer problems are only a piece of much broader concerns about how to live a life in a postmodern world' (Savickas & al., 2009, p. 241), these researchers concluded that what was called either vocational guidance or career counselling should become support for the design of life. More precisely and supplementing this conclusion with Hannah Arendt's thorough analyses (1958, 1960), what is at stake here is support for the design of 'active life,' which encompasses, as outlined by Arendt, labour, work and action (see Guichard, 2022). Instead of being limited to the issues of employability, occupational inclusion and professional transitions, such support

should have the objective of helping people give a direction—a meaning—to their active lives in their various dimensions.

Still, the grave crisis in which the world has been sinking for several decades now and the resolution meant to deal with it, voted unanimously by the Member States of the United Nations in 2015, indicate that we must in fact go beyond this conclusion as well.

The Anthropo-Capitalocene Crises and International Resolutions

A multidimensional crisis

As broadly acknowledged, this crisis is manifest in major ecological problems (such as the depletion of natural resources, accumulation of waste, global warming, planetary pollution, rising oceans, etc.), which cause famines and massive migrations, and, at the same time, in a serious degradation of work and employment, which involves the relocation of jobs to countries with low labour costs, a worldwide weakening of labour laws, the development of the precariat, the dissemination of very flexible forms of employment and similar effects (see Supiot, 2022). For example, the International Labour Organisation's report of September 2022 pointed out that, in 2021, fifty million human beings were reduced to slavery conditions. That was ten million more than five years before.

This global crisis has its origin in the conjunction of the galloping global demography (the world population will have multiplied tenfold within two centuries, going from one billion human beings in 1850 to approximately ten billion in a couple of decades) and an extraordinary growth in wealth and consumption inequalities between the rich and the poor. The NGO Global Footprint Network corroborates this observation by calculating the 'Global Overshoot Day' every year. The Global Overshoot Day is the date on which humanity has consumed all the resources that the planet is capable of producing in one year to regenerate consumption and absorb the waste produced. In 1990, this day was 7 December, thirty years later, it was as early as 22 August. However, this average hides considerable differences: in 2022, if the whole of humanity had lived like an 'average Qatari,' the day of the overshoot would have been 10 February, whereas it would have been as late as 20 December, if all humans had lived like an 'average Jamaican' (the corresponding date for an 'average US citizen' was 13 March).

The problems caused by the ecological footprint of the human species have been given a global moniker of 'the crisis of the Anthropocene.' However, insofar that they fundamentally result from the ways of living of the most affluent humans (and therefore from the economic system on which they are based), they have been more aptly renamed as 'the Capitalocene crisis' (Malm, 2015; Moore, 2017). Two passages from the 2022 Global Inequality Report convey the two central characteristics of this crisis:

The wealth of richest individuals on earth has grown at 6 to 9% per year since 1995, whereas average wealth has grown at 3.2% per year. Since 1995, the share of global wealth possessed by billionaires has risen from 1% to over 3%. This increase was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, 2020 marked the steepest increase in global billionaires' share of wealth on record. (...) Global income and wealth inequalities are tightly connected to ecological inequalities and to inequalities in contributions to climate change. The world level: the top 10% of emitters [of CO₂] are responsible for close to 50% of all emissions, while the bottom 50% produce 12% of the total. (Chancel, & al., 2022, pp. 10–12)

An agenda that remained a dead letter

To cope with this crisis, the UN unanimously voted in 2015 for a resolution entitled *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. This action plan very accurately defined 17 objectives and 169 targets to be achieved by 2030 (i.e. over the next 8 years!) in order to build a world with a sustainable and equitable economy (UN, 2015). In his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* (2015), Pope Francis responded to these developments with an appeal that gist of which is rendered in two quotation from §§ 202 and 53:

It is we human beings above all who need to change (§202). The problem is that we still lack the culture needed to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice towards coming generations. The establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems has become indispensable, otherwise the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice (§53). (Francis, 2015)

However, despite the UN resolution, the Pope's appeal and the pledges of the Member States, reiterated at each Conference of Parties (COP), almost no targets have been achieved. Annually, at the UN General Assembly, Secretary General António Guterres deplores this failure in increasingly vivid terms. On 20 September 2022, he said:

There is another battle we must end—our suicidal war against nature. The climate crisis is the defining issue of our time. It must be the first priority of every government and multilateral organization. And yet climate action is being put on the back burner—despite overwhelming public support around the world. (...) Our world is addicted to fossil fuels. It's time for an intervention. We need to hold fossil fuel companies and their enablers to account. That includes the banks, private equity, asset managers and other financial institutions that continue to invest and underwrite carbon pollution. And it includes the massive public relations machine raking in billions to shield the fossil fuel industry from scrutiny. Just as they did for the tobacco industry decades before, lobbyists and spin doctors

have spewed harmful misinformation. Fossil fuel interests need to spend less time averting a PR disaster—and more time averting a planetary one. (Guterres, 2022)

Given this inertia of public policies, the results of a survey published in *The Lancet (Planet Health)* on 7 September 2021 are not surprising (Marks et al. 2021). Ten thousand young people (16–25 years old) from ten countries (Australia, Brazil, France, Finland, India, Nigeria, the Philippines, Portugal, the UK and the US) completed a questionnaire on an Internet platform. Their responses included the following:

- ◆ 83% agreed that ‘People have failed to care for the planet’;
- ◆ 77% endorsed the proposal that ‘The future is frightening’;
- ◆ 60% answered they felt ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ worried about climate change;
- ◆ 39% said they were ‘hesitant to have children’;
- ◆ 31% considered that ‘their government was doing enough to avoid catastrophe.’

Devise Interventions that Contribute to Coping with Current Crises

This situation has important consequences for professionals who intend to help people design their active lives. They have no other choice but to offer people interventions encouraging them to think about their future in line with the imperative of coping with this mega crisis. This entails helping people focus their thinking on the following question: How can I design my active life so that that, in 2050, approximately ten billion human beings will be able to lead a truly human existence in a world of limited resources?

Giving a direction to one’s active life in accordance with the imperatives of sustainable, equitable and inclusive development

Helping people think in this way involves devising interventions geared to achieving such a goal. This inevitably means to modifying the current interventions.

To do so, it is necessary to start from an essential observation that all the support interventions for the construction of active lives—those currently existing (career counselling or education) or those that we must now devise—are grounded in the same fundamental logic. They ask people to analyse their past, present, and/or anticipated future life experiences (in particular, their activities and the way they consider them) in the light of what they imagine to be the future of society, of the economy, and of the organisation of production in the collectives where they will live. In the course of such interventions, individuals perform an intellectual operation called triangulation. Specifically, they link certain personal experiences (past, present and/or anticipated) to a certain expected common future and, by this linking, elicit (construct) interests, values, skills, and the like. These interests, values,

skills, and the like are in a sense ‘interpretants’ (to use Charles Sanders Peirce’s terminology; see Vogel, 2014, pp. 79–89) produced by the person when they establish a relation between their several experiences by considering them from a certain (implicit or explicit) future perspective and thus endows these experiences with a certain meaning.

In most interventions today, the common future to which the individual refers when thinking about their own future remains implicit. People tend to imagine their common future as a simple continuation of today’s world. Consequently, they view this future in terms of inclusion and occupational careers in today’s work organisations, within the system of economic exchanges in which they are embedded. To put it even more simply, people ask themselves the following question: In which occupational functions can I best invest what I believe to be my skills, my interests, my values, etc., when I examine my experience in the light of the current world of work?

It is exactly this future perspective from which people examine their life experiences that is called into question by the Capitalocene crisis. From now on, individuals must only carry out the analysis of their life experiences on the basis of a preliminary reflection on the world that is to come and on the world that we should develop together. This implies placing at the centre of reflection the conclusions of action plans such as the agenda adopted by the UN in 2015 or others drawn up by experts in these issues, epitomised by the Shift Project in France (Shift Project, 2022). This means that the new interventions must help individuals, groups and communities answer the following question: By what kind of active life/lives can I/ can we together contribute to sustainable, fair and inclusive development?

The ‘form of life’: The core concept of the new support

Devising such support in the construction of active lives for fair and sustainable development involves developing the conceptual field in which to ground such practices (Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, eds., 2018; Plant, 2020). Indeed, current career development interventions are based on a set of concepts and terms imported from the inventory of human resources management (skills, employability, work values, adaptability, etc.) in the current work systems (Supiot, 2019). As a result, like it or not, these interventions make these current work systems the ultimate horizon of reflection.

As opposed to that, the core concept on which to found new interventions should be that of the ‘form of life.’ Indeed, this concept held a prominent place in the beginnings of career guidance and was particularly promoted by the studies of Eduard Spranger (1914, 1921). His 1921 book *Lebensformen. Geisteswissenschaftliche Psychologie und Ethik der Persönlichkeit* (literally: Forms of life. Hermeneutical psychology and personality ethics) was reprinted several times in the 1920s and 1930s. Unfortunately, it was translated into English as *Types of Men: The Psychology and Ethics of Personality* and published under this title in 1928. Subsequently, from

an interpretation to another, the six forms of life explored by Spranger became—notably, via the re-workings by Gordon Allport and Philipp Vernon (1931)—the six types distinguished by John Holland (1959), a reductionist psychology ignoring its foundations, namely the concept of the ‘form of life’.

The concept itself underwent significant development in the 20th century, with major contributions coming from, among other thinkers, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault and, in recent decades, Giorgio Agamben. In 2015, Estelle Ferrarese and Sandra Laugier coordinated a thematic issue of *Raisons Politiques*, the journal of the Institut des Sciences Politiques de Paris, which was devoted to the presentation and discussion of the form-of-life concept. Following the definition they proposed, we may start from the realisation that: ‘A form of life holds together social practices and institutions, a relationship to the world and ways of perceiving, attitudes and behavioral dispositions. It determines the framework of possible ideas of the good life’ (Ferrarese & Laugier, 2015, p. 5).

As pointed out by Spranger as early as in 1914, the ‘form of life’ is useful in that it promotes abandoning the vision of an individualised person characterised by certain traits that define them in an essential way and endow them with a certain identity. This means that what we usually regard as the capital of an individual’s properties (skills, personality traits, values, etc.)—anything that, in our eyes, forms their distinctive identity—is a function of the form of life, in which this singular being interacts, dialogues and constructs certain meanings in relation to the institutions specific to this form of life.

This essential point can be illustrated by a fictitious example. Let us imagine a man practicing traditional medicine in a Mapuche community in Chile. In his life form, his special talents (especially the knowledge of the properties of plants) are recognised and valued. In the wake of the industrialised exploitation of the forest, which upsets the living conditions of his community, the man decides to migrate to Europe. Obviously, he will not be recognised as a doctor there. Worse still, if he uses what in his original life form were his talents, he will be prosecuted and have the identity of a delinquent imposed on him, replacing that of a shaman in his previous form of life.

This example is about what, using the vocabulary of human resources management, we call skills (or competencies): skills that are seen as part of the career capital owned by any individual. In contrast, the form-of-life approach considers the talents of every individual to derive from the form of life in which their existence is embedded. Therefore, reflecting on the ‘forms of life’ indispensable for economically sustainable and equitable development presupposes identifying the talents that correspond to each of them. The concept of ‘capability’ as developed by Amartya Sen can be posited to be a good candidate for such an analysis. Indeed, Sen defines ‘capability’ as ‘[t]he opportunity to achieve valuable combinations of human functionings—what a person is able to do or be’ (Sen, 2005, p. 153).

For our purposes, Sen's definition can be combined with that of the 'form of life' and completed as follows: 'what a person can actually do or be in their form of life.' Returning to the 'Mapuche' example, this means that in the Mapuche's form of life, the way of relating to plants that would be called 'knowing of plants' in our culture (see Descola, 2014) is a capability to function as what would be called 'a doctor' in our culture. However, this mode of 'relating to' is not such a capability in the forms of life of today's Western societies.

One major factor in the concept of life form that must be mentioned is that human organisations are fundamentally different from those of animals. Human forms of life have hardly anything in common with the organisation of, say, a beehive. They have hardly anything in common with this type of organisation because a form of life always remains in a potential state, even if it appears realised, established and achieved. Giorgio Agamben's reflection focuses on this point as he observes that what sets humans apart from other species is that they wonder about happiness—about what could make their life happy. As a result, humans are always engaged in reflection on the form of life that would optimise everyone's happiness:

The single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power (*potenza*). Each behavior and each form of human living is never prescribed by a specific biological vocation, nor is it assigned by whatever necessity; instead, no matter how customary, repeated, and socially compulsory, it always retains the character of a possibility. That is why human beings—as beings of power who can do or not do, succeed or fail, lose themselves or find themselves—are the only beings for whom happiness is always at stake in their living, the only beings whose life is irremediably and painfully assigned to happiness. But this immediately constitutes the form-of-life as political life. (Agamben, 2000, p. 4)

Ferrarese and Laugier relate these characteristics of any 'form-of-life' to the scrutiny of the current and potential crises of our century and conclude:

The possibility of a radical transformation of our forms of life is indeed the policy horizon of our century, whether, for example, in adapting to new climatic or environmental conditions (...) It is 'we' who are the transformers of our forms of life. It remains to know who this 'we' is, and that is still the whole point of the critiques of the form of life. Anyway, it turns out that it is indeed through agency over/through the forms of life, and not through 'definitions' or criteria of the human, that we will be able to define the space and the expression of the human. (Ferrarese and Laugier, 2015, p. 10)

Such a conclusion prompts us to devise support interventions for the design of active life geared to coping with the challenges that currently threaten humankind. Such support in the determination of the forms of life should be based on double reflection. One of them, collective, should concern the systems of forms of life capable of affording everybody potentialities of happy life. The other, specific

to every human individual, should focus on their potential for a future personal form of active life as bound up with those of others and based on their interpretations—their readings—(possibly elicited in dialoguing with others) of their past, present and hoped-for life experiences. The ultimate purpose of this revised support can be briefly put as follows: ‘To enable individuals, groups and communities to develop and mobilise the capabilities required to design and implement active lives that constitute forms of life both economically and ecologically sustainable and humanely fair’ (see Guichard, 2021a & b).

Interventions for young people and adults

Within this conceptual framework, interventions can be devised for supporting both young people and adults. For young people, they would include ‘career’ education workshops (career being understood as the ‘course of one’s active life’), no longer referring to the existing professional functions, but rather prompting participants to reflect on the objectives and targets defined in the UN resolution of 2015 (or on those specified by analysts specialising in these issues). In such workshops for young people, the participants would ask themselves: To the achievement of which objective or target can I best contribute? What forms of active life does this endeavour require? Which one would suit me best? How do I prepare for it?

For adults, similar workshops should raise awareness about the imperative of reforming the global systems that organise the production and exchange of goods and services (with a view to ‘re-territorialising’ certain productions and organising short circuits) (see Azam, 2007; Baschet, 2021). Interventions should also promote collective reflections on the possibilities of implementing local systems for the production and exchange of goods and services in a given area (Mandin, 2009).

For both young people and adults, one-on-one counselling dialogues can help individuals analyse their various life experiences (past, present and imagined in the future) by looking at them from the perspective of the forms of active life producing goods and services, which participate in an economy that is both ecologically sustainable and socially equitable, in order to determine the necessary capabilities in this way.

Conclusion: The Conditions for Action

The gravity of the multidimensional crisis of the Capitalocene leaves us no other choice in the field of support for the construction of active life than to abide by the resolutions adopted (often unanimously) by the major international organisations (the United Nations and its specialised agencies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] and the International Labour Organisation). This imperative implies a comprehensive, in-depth review of the purposes of this support and, consequently, of the interventions offered

to people, as well as of the conceptual field on which they are based. The fundamental challenge now is to help everyone develop the imagination of a future in which they could project themselves. This future can no longer be that of the current career development, which considers today's work systems to be the ultimate horizon of reflection. This imagined future can only be that of the forms of active life required to create a sustainable and equitable world economy.

Based on the concepts of 'active life' and the 'form of life,' in conjunction with that of 'capability,' new interventions can—and must—be developed to help individuals ask themselves: By what forms of active life can we/can I contribute to achieving the objectives of an economically sustainable and humanely equitable development? What capabilities are at work in these forms of life? What current forms of active life would enable me/us to develop such capabilities?

However, two major problems must be dealt with in order to offer this new support to the public. One is that of the development of research aimed at perfecting the new interventions by experimenting with them and at defining the new conceptual field on which they are based. The other problem is that of the development of structures offering such interventions to the public.

With the intention of developing such research, UNESCO has established a University Chair in Wroclaw (Poland) that carries out a UNITWIN programme entitled 'Life designing interventions (counselling, guidance, education) for decent work and sustainable development,' which brings together some twenty universities. This group has organised various conferences and written many publications, including 2 books (Guichard & al., eds. 2016; Cohen-Scali & al., eds., 2018). All this has happened without any specific funding. The activities of the UNESCO Chair and the UNITWIN programme are carried out on the fringes of ordinary work of the involved organisations. Research grant schemes in the field of support for the development of forms of active life aiming at sustainable and equitable development seem non-existent. The funding offered by the European Union complies with its definition of support for the construction of active lives, which reduces it to the development of occupational careers and the related training: it focuses on employability, the movement of workers on the labour markets and retaining the elderly and people with disability in employment.

Moreover, the question of how to deliver these new interventions to the public remains open. Some should be incorporated into school curricula, and this would require major reforms. Others are intended for people who are not at school. Over the past century, public offices for vocational guidance were set up in various European countries (and no doubt elsewhere). They might be developed by rechanneling their activities towards the new purposes. However, today's neo-liberal policies go in the direction of a gradual defeasance of any public services (Supiot, 2022). It is hard to imagine that the private organisations that replace public guidance facilities can deal with issues other than those of inclusion and career transitions in the current work systems. Will groups of citizens, protest movements, associations and

the like propel the foundation of services that might be called—extending the suggestions of Michel de Certeau (1972, p. 402)—‘laboratories for experimentation of equitable and sustainable development’?

Today, these questions remain unanswered. On 20 September 2022, the UN Secretary General renewed his appeal to political leaders around the world: “As we head to the COP 27 UN Climate Conference in Egypt, I appeal to all leaders to realize the goals of the Paris Agreement. Lift your climate ambition. Listen to your people’s calls for change. Invest in solutions that lead to sustainable economic growth” (Guterres, 2022).

Will António Guterres’ call finally be heard?

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