

Study

Skills and jobs for an inclusive green economy

Policies, practices and recommendations
for employment support going green

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Acknowledgements

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Easy to Read Summary

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

The European Platform for Rehabilitation is a group of organisations that provide services to persons with disabilities and other vulnerable people. For short we call it EPR.

This document explains what is meant with green economy and green jobs, and what are the skills needed to find work. Described there are also services offered by EPR member organisations that help people with a disability to get training and support for a green job. The idea of this document, which we are calling a study, is to understand what makes skills and jobs green.

In this document, we use the words “service user”. A service user is someone who uses a service that helps or supports them. In this study, the service user is the person being supported to get a job.

This study is useful for service providers and people who make laws or work with people making laws. In the document, there are questions that can help them to think about whether a law or programme on employment could work for their country or organisation, and how it could work in the best way.

WHO WROTE THE DOCUMENT AND WHO HELPED TO WRITE IT?

This study was written by people working for EPR. Descriptions of good practices from EPR member organisations are included in the text. Staff from these organisations approved the descriptions.

WHAT DOES THE STUDY SAY?

Sustainability has gained more interest in recent years given the threats posed by climate change and high levels of pollutions and waste. Communities that depend on traditional industries are concerned about the impact for them with the shift to a green economy. They worry about the availability of jobs and the effects on their economic situation.

The green economy promises to create new jobs for many people. Professionals who provide employment support, career counselling, and job coaching services need to know about upcoming job opportunities to advise their clients on the right education and training. EPR member organisations are dedicated to helping people with disabilities, chronic diseases or severe injuries, and they want to help their clients take advantage of the opportunities presented by the green transition.

The green transition is expected to bring big changes to the labour market, creating new jobs and impacting traditional industries. However, certain industries are already facing a shortage of qualified workers. To address this, training and education programs need to be revised for apprentices, students, and adult workers who require different skills and new skills. This presents an opportunity to improve the inclusion of people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in the workforce.

Access to good quality, inclusive education and training, as well as to different types of services is important to make sure people can get the skills needed for work in the green economy and be included in their communities.

Green skills and green competences will be key for getting jobs in the future. The goal of this study goal is to inspire job coaches and career counsellors who assist people with disabilities in finding employment opportunities in the green economy. This paper is also intended for people making laws at local, national and European level.

About the European Platform for Rehabilitation

EPR is a community of service providers working with people with disabilities committed to high-quality service delivery and creating a society where every person can co-create quality services leading to equal opportunities, social inclusion and quality of life. Our mission is to build the capacity of our members to provide sustainable, high-quality services in a competitive environment through mutual learning and training.

About the publication

This paper builds on a series of activities and events by the European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR), in the context of vocational rehabilitation, pathways to employment and the transition towards a green economy. EPR member organisations follow with great interest the developments regarding the green transition because of the impact it has on businesses and people in communities throughout the European Union (EU). Special attention is paid to the changes that the green transition brings for the delivery of social services to people with disabilities.

One area of interest is the conditions for an organisation, whether public, private commercial or non-commercial, and its daily operations in an economic environment being more conscious and efficient in the use of resources, more cautious in preventing waste and pollution, and more creative in using new technologies that help an organisation to grow and its activities to be more sustainable.

Another area of interest are the professional opportunities for people with disabilities that the transition to a green economy offers. What does it entail to support people with disabilities who choose a career in the green economy? What training is recommended for acquiring the skills in demand in the green economy? How can social service providers make sure that possibilities to learn, to work and to make a living in a green economy are accessible for people with disabilities?

This paper aims to provide orientation for service providers in education, training and employment for people with disabilities who are interested in employment support, job coaching or career counselling for the green economy.

The Big Picture: policies and industries going green

High hopes for saving humanity

In recent years, the green economy has gained a lot of attention and raised expectations on delivering solutions for the global challenges that humanity is facing. Policy debates and actions had been going on for a decade already, but gained momentum since communities across Europe experienced, first-hand, the effects of man-made devastation and pollution of the environment, resulting in a change of weather patterns, the rise of sea levels, more frequent and more violent landslides and floods. Climate change has become one of the most debated topics in everyday life, not least where the cause and effect of manmade destruction are there for everyone to see. Climate experts are urging governments, businesses and people to limit global warming, which will otherwise make Planet Earth increasingly uninhabitable.

Solutions are urgently needed, and many believe the green economy or, more precisely, greening the economy has to be a key element in the fight against climate change. This has to do with the observation that most of the current economic models put profit before people and the environment. For decades, industries in developed countries produced goods and provided services that promise short-term profits while ignoring the toxic and destructive long-term impact on people, nature and the planet. These industries also provide jobs for millions of workers and career prospects for generations of apprentices and students. The common understanding is that traditional industries, including carbon-based and energy-intensive industries, provide wealth and jobs for many, while working on anything green has the image of low-profit or non-profit for a few. The green economy is about to change these perspectives dramatically.

The new green context

Not long ago, 'Environment' gained attention in the context of education, training and employment. Safeguarding endangered species and nature reserves, reducing pollution and managing waste, saving energy and limiting the use of fossil fuel come to mind. 'Ecology' may be used interchangeably or for similar activities, even though it emphasizes the relationship between living things and their environment, especially how human activity affects animal and plant life and entire ecosystems. A more recent and groundbreaking term is "Sustainability", likewise used interchangeably but presenting an important new meaning. Sustainable development builds on an understanding that the economy, the society and the environment are connected, and it aims to bring benefit not to one but all three.

Sustainable development

Many countries have committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹, a global framework of policies and actions introduced by the United Nations (UN) in 2015, designed to address a wide range of global challenges and to guide global efforts to achieve a more sustainable and equitable future for all. The SDGs are part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with the

¹ For more information consult <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

overarching aim of leaving no one behind and improving the well-being of people and the planet. The SDGs provide a framework for global action to address the world's most pressing challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, and environmental degradation. The SDGs are interconnected and interdependent. Achieving one goal may contribute to progress in others while failing to address one can hinder the achievement of others.

The green economy represents a relatively new approach to achieving sustainable development, aimed at economic growth, environmental sustainability and social inclusion. Expectations have grown further, with the green economy seen to address a broad range of societal issues including social justice, poverty eradication, decent work, social equity, and human wellbeing. Accessibility and affordability of energy, goods and services are a central theme for the high expectations, likewise new business opportunities and the promise of millions of new jobs.

But many initiatives to promote the green transition, such as the European Green Deal, are also met with fierce resistance by businesses, people and governments claiming that green policies and actions cause loss of wealth, of jobs and the end of entire industries.

Going green with the twenty-seven

In 2019, the European Union laid out ambitious plans for a roadmap to making the EU climate-neutral by 2050. The European Green Deal² includes a variety of objectives and instruments to achieve climate neutrality (reducing net emissions to zero), biodiversity and ecosystem restoration (protect and restore forests, wetlands, and other natural habitats to address biodiversity loss and enhance resilience to environmental challenges), Farm to Fork Strategy (reduce the environmental footprint of food production, promote healthy diets, improve the efficiency of food supply chains), sustainable mobility (promote electric vehicles, expand public transport, encourage cycling and walking), or the Renovation Wave (retrofit existing buildings to be more energy-efficient, reduce emissions).

The European Green Deal recognizes the importance of jobs and employment in the transition to a climate-neutral economy. It emphasizes the need for a "just transition" to ensure the shift towards environmental sustainability does not leave communities and workers behind. Certain regions and industries may face economic and social challenges. A just transition shall ensure that job losses are mitigated and new job opportunities are created in a fair and equitable way. This includes providing support for workers transitioning into green industries, including education and training for apprentices and students, as well as reskilling and upskilling of adult workers to equip them with the skills needed for the jobs of the future.

New job opportunities are expected to arise in many sectors e.g. in the installation, maintenance, and operation of renewable energy systems, making existing and new buildings more energy-efficient, which may create jobs in construction and insulation installation. The Farm to Fork Strategy aims to promote sustainable and environmentally friendly agricultural practices, which can lead to employment opportunities in the agricultural sector. Promoting the Circular Economy promises a big push for recycling, repair, remanufacturing, and the refurbishment of consumer products.

² For more information visit <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/green-deal/>

Just transitioning

The proposal for a European Green Deal was welcomed by the 27 EU Member States, but equally criticised for putting at risk the regions, industries and workers which rely on fossil fuels, emit high levels of emissions or produce masses of waste and pollution. National governments are therefore encouraged to use EU funds to support the transition to cleaner and more sustainable industries fuelled with renewable energy and leaving less human footprint on the environment. Since 2019, green skills and green jobs have become a prominent topic in national reform programs and country-specific recommendations³, outlined every year within the process of the European Semester, the framework for economic policy coordination among EU Member States. Therein, a lot of attention goes to the Just Transition Fund⁴, a new financial instrument with which Member States can provide targeted financial support to regions and industries particularly affected by the green transition.

Social partners and civil society pointed out fundamental weaknesses in the European Green Deal, among others the limited participation of workers and communities in decisions on how the green transition shall be accomplished. There are questions about the economic and social implications for communities relying on “traditional” industries and worries about the scope and scale of jobs becoming available with the green transition. Critics also argue achieving the Green Deal's objectives would require substantial investments and ultimately lead to an increased cost of living. The European Green Deal should do more to address the potential negative consequences for vulnerable or disadvantaged groups in society. They express concerns that the transition may disproportionately affect low-income households.

Opportunities and challenges

There is probably truth in the expectations as well as the concerns. The green transition is a monumental project, and it is difficult to predict the impact of current proposals in the long term, though likely that certain developments, many already set in motion, will bring change to the world of work. Here, change is a very frequent occurrence. People at work have seen many changes in past decades when new technologies are introduced, when markets adjust to new trends, and when consumers adapt their attitudes to new products and services. These changes tend to happen quickly, and even quicker with new technologies achieving a high and fast take-up rate; entire professions can appear and disappear within one generation. And because the green transition is expected to be largely a technological transition, its impact on job opportunities and career choices is inevitable.

For this reason, anyone working in the area of employment support, career counselling and job coaching is interested in insights and foresight regarding education, training and employment for going green. Good career choices and career planning are long-term projects, they require knowledge about upcoming opportunities, and the ability to recommend education and training today that will be suitable and in high demand for jobs tomorrow. EPR member organisations are very interested in the

³ The country specific recommendations are part of the European Semester, a mechanism to facilitate the coordination of national policies of the 27 EU countries. Therein, every year every national government receives country specific recommendations for improving economic, fiscal, employment and social policies. For more information visit [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-semester/`](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-semester/)

⁴ For more information consult the Just Transition Platform: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/just-transition-fund/just-transition-platform_en

opportunities emerging with the green transition, and how to make them accessible for their service users, which are people with disabilities, chronic diseases or severe injuries. It is important to provide each client with good orientation and options for their education and training, their career planning and taking up paid work.

In its analytical paper “Moving towards a green economy and services for people with disability” published in 2021⁵, EPR found the green economy “expected to radically reform the labour market”. Traditional industries would be heavily impacted and see the creation of many new jobs. Certain industries which play a crucial role in the green transition are already struggling with a shortage of workers. There are enough workers but not enough are qualified for green jobs. It appears the green transition relies on large numbers of workers moving to new occupations. This requires a revised approach to education and training, as well as to upskilling and reskilling for adult workers. It also offers a new opportunity to advance the inclusion of people with disabilities. The 2021 EPR paper pointed out four challenges that need to be addressed to get there:

Education and training: For offering pathways to employment in the green economy for people with disabilities, education and training systems must be accessible for people with disabilities. Some may choose training offers tailored to specific needs and capabilities, others prefer mainstream education and training adapted to their needs. Both should be available. Both variants should integrate green topics, knowledge and traits in their curricula, offering to obtain the green skills likely to be in demand for future jobs.

Inclusion in the labour market: People with disabilities are at a higher risk of marginalisation in the labour market. Many employers hesitate to integrate people with disabilities into their workforce. Some are not aware of support options e.g. financial incentives for adapting workplaces or financing part of the salary. Others are not willing or prepared to hire people with disabilities, especially people with intellectual disabilities, in a mainstream work environment. Social service providers can make a real difference, also in the green economy, with high-quality support to recruiting, preparing and accompanying employees with disabilities inside a company or organisation.

Social inclusion: Employment for people with disabilities in the green economy will help resolve major obstacles that currently prevent many from having the same rights, getting adequate support for their needs, and taking up decent work. People with disabilities are often considered a burden for society and a drain on public budgets. An inclusive green economy, that offers jobs, salaries and financial independence, can help change attitudes towards people with disabilities to be full members of society and valuable contributors to wealth and growth.

Staff training and funding: Social service providers are facing challenges in providing adequate support to people with disabilities where social services are considered an expense rather than an investment. Severe cuts in public budgets and constant pressure to do more service for less funding leave social workers with limited skills and knowledge about green job opportunities. Career counselling and job coaching towards a green economy require training and support, too; the employment support sector ought to be integrated with policy initiatives and programmes aimed at preparing workers for the green transition.

⁵ Download the publication: <https://www.epr.eu/publications/moving-towards-a-green-economy-services-for-people-with-a-disability/>

Pathways to employment in the green economy

What makes a job green?

EPR observes that many professionals in employment support, job coaching and career counselling are currently advancing their knowledge and their services to clients on jobs in the green economy. A wealth of information is available, not only policies like the European Green Deal or advice for green businesses, but also many ideas for green professions and a wide variety of descriptions for green jobs.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) stipulated in 2016: “Green jobs are decent jobs that contribute to preserve or restore the environment, be they in traditional sectors such as manufacturing and construction, or in new, emerging green sectors such as renewable energy and energy efficiency.”⁶. ILO also built up a variety of measures to support governments in advancing their knowledge and their capacity for establishing policy frameworks for a green economy and creating green jobs e.g. the Green Jobs Programme including training on green jobs, guidelines on just transition, green jobs assessments, or pilot projects in selected countries and sectors.

CEPS noted in a recent paper “Jobs for the green transition”⁷ many descriptions for green jobs pursuing different directions. Existing literature could be grouped, roughly, into output approaches, process approaches and systemic approaches. The output approach is presented as the most commonly used, describing green jobs as linked to the production of goods or services which are beneficial for protecting the environment or conserving natural resources. This includes jobs in agriculture, manufacturing, construction, installation, and maintenance, but also science and technology, administration or services, if they aim at improving energy and material efficiency, limiting greenhouse gas emissions, minimising waste generation and pollution, restoring ecosystems or adapting to climate change.

This approach, however, misses out on green jobs in other sectors like education or healthcare, and may not take into account the production processes e.g. the environmental impact of assembling solar panels or electric cars. Whereas process approaches address the production itself as being more environmentally sustainable and using fewer natural resources. Those include green jobs even in traditional industries when they are concerned with making processes cleaner and less resource-intensive. Some of the process approaches go further and explore green occupations, green tasks and green skills in categories like engineering and technical, science, operation management, or monitoring.

Both groups of approaches stay close to traditional economic thinking, whereas systemic approaches tend to question profit-oriented systems of production as such. They suspect paid work is a cause of ecological harm and societal unsustainability, bring attention also to unpaid activities that are socially relevant, and propose sustainable lifestyles that look beyond economics, production and work.

⁶ See also https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/green-jobs/news/WCMS_220248/lang--en/index.htm

⁷ Download the paper here: <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/jobs-for-the-green-transition/>

Knowledge, skills and attitudes

In the EU policy context, the institutions and agencies seem to favour neither of those approaches, instead focusing on green skills. This may have to do with the widely spread assumption that the green transition will create job growth in many industries. CEDEFOP expects “the greening of jobs will cut across occupations and sectors, bringing about radical changes in skill needs. These, in turn, must be reflected in education and training provision at all qualification levels. VET will be crucial to providing skill sets that evolve flexibly and reflect the dynamic nature of the new green paradigm.” and defines “skills for the green economy as the knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live, work and act in economies and societies seeking to reduce the impact of human activity on the environment.” Reference examples include greening apprenticeships for chemical operators, occupational profiles in the construction sector and integrating apprenticeships “irrespective of their specific role and business unit” in the corporate sustainability strategy of a multinational technology company.⁸

Green skills, too, are not limited to environmental activity. They include environmental awareness, sustainability knowledge, proficiency in green technologies, and skills for conserving resources and reducing waste. Green skills extend to understanding environmental rules and regulations and also encompass the ability to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Green skills allow us to identify and mitigate environmental risks, to recognize the social and ethical dimensions of environmental issues and their impact on communities and society. Given this broad spectrum, the green transition requires changing the ways of obtaining skills, and the ways of learning in preparation for and during a working life.

The recent European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience was closely linked to the European Green Deal and followed by proposals to revise education and training systems to better prepare and support people in their professional development. Interesting ideas were presented in a proposal for a Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability, where learners of all ages and from all backgrounds shall get access to high-quality and inclusive education and training on climate change, biodiversity and sustainability, establish learning for environmental sustainability as a priority area in education and training, and provide lifelong learning opportunities in different settings from early childhood to adult learning. The proposal emphasizes the importance of aligned education strategies and plans, investing in green and sustainable equipment, resources and infrastructure, awareness raising, participation of pupils and students, comprehensive curricula frameworks, cooperation and networking, and scaling up of good practices on learning for environmental sustainability.⁹

These courageous proposals may also be a subtle reminder for how important knowledge, skills and attitudes are in the context of green transition. The promise of the green economy to create millions of new jobs seems very appealing in global context, whereas in European context it poses questions if there will be enough workers for the many new tasks in the new industries and occupations. Given the dire demographic trends on this continent, with the baby boomer generation leaving the workforce and not enough young workers following suit, fewer workers may be available in the future labour

⁸ See also CEDEFOP briefing note “An ally in the green transition”, March 2022
<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/9166>

⁹ See Proposal for a Council Recommendation on learning for environmental Sustainability, May 2022
<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9242-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

market. Education and training systems in Europe must be ready to qualify for future work and also help activate more future workers.

Green competences

In 2022, the European Commission presented another important measure set out in the European Green Deal, the European sustainability competence framework. GreenComp “identifies a set of sustainability competences to feed into education programmes to help learners develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that promote ways to think, plan and act with empathy, responsibility, and care for our planet and public health.”¹⁰ and describes four interrelated competence areas, each presenting three competences which are interlinked and equally important. The purpose is to serve as “shared competence framework on sustainability at European level as a common basis to guide both educators and learners.”

Twelve sustainability competences in four areas

Embodying sustainability values

- valuing sustainability
- supporting fairness
- promoting nature

Embracing complexity in sustainability

- systems thinking
- critical thinking
- problem framing

Envisioning sustainable futures

- futures literacy
- adaptability
- exploratory thinking

Acting for sustainability

- political agency
- collective action
- individual initiative

GreenComp explores each area and each competence in detail, including descriptions and examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes, for example “critical thinking” is described as a process of absorbing information and arguments, distinguishing between assumptions and facts, and challenging the status quo i.e. exposing sustainability claims without evidence as greenwashing. “Collective action” presents another green competence, here described as “to act for change in collaboration with others” and outlining the close connection between inclusion and sustainability, the importance of transparency, inclusion and community, and the willingness to engage with others to accomplish change. The authors insist that GreenComp is non-prescriptive and more a conceptual reference model made to support educators and learners in their personal and professional development, in lifelong learning for sustainability, in adapting to an economy and a society in transition.

¹⁰ Joint Research Centre: GreenComp - The European sustainability competence framework, 2022 <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128040>

Beyond Green: good practices

In June 2023, representatives of member organisations assembled in Mulhouse, France, for the EPR Annual Conference “Beyond Green: Innovation and Inclusion”. The aim of the conference was exchange of good practice and mutual learning with service providers for vocational rehabilitation in their green transition, engaging in the green and circular economy for the purpose of supporting the employment and inclusion of people with disabilities in the new opportunities emerging from economies and labour markets going green. Conference attendees saw a broad variety of green insights and practices shared during sessions and workshops. Find following two practices presented by EPR members in Spain and Ireland.

Fundación INTRAS: Un Punto de Locura

In Valladolid (Spain), the INTRAS Foundation has unveiled an initiative that not only introduces a unique shopping experience but also makes a significant impact on the community's commitment to sustainability. The "Un Punto de Locura" (a touch of madness) initiative is more than just a store; it is a manifestation of the foundation's dedication to the green economy, promoting eco-friendly practices, and fostering green skills within the community.

FUNDACIÓN
INTRAS

INTRAS Foundation's stores are not just points of sale showcasing a diverse range of products sourced from their organic garden, "Torres Carrizal." This garden, dedicated to organic cultivation, serves as a testament to the foundation's commitment to sustainable and environmentally friendly practices, making the connection with the green economy evident in the emphasis placed on locally sourced, organic products. By promoting goods from their ecological garden, the foundation supports sustainable agriculture, reducing the carbon footprint associated with transportation and fostering a stronger connection between consumers and the source of their food.

Moreover, the initiative is a tool for green skills development. It goes beyond conventional retail jobs by incorporating training programs that equip individuals with skills relevant to sustainable practices. Employees not only manage the day-to-day operations of the store but also gain valuable insights into organic farming, sustainable supply chain management, and customer education on eco-friendly choices.

The commitment to green skills is further amplified by INTRAS Foundation's role in the broader community. Through collaborations with local educational institutions and vocational training centres, the initiative actively contributes to building a skilled workforce that is attuned to the principles of sustainability. This approach not only empowers individuals with marketable skills but also addresses the growing demand for professionals well-versed in green practices.

Rehab Recycle

In an era where environmental consciousness is paramount, initiatives like Rehab Recycle are leading the way towards a sustainable and eco-friendly future.

Situated at the intersection of social responsibility and environmental stewardship, Rehab Recycle is making significant strides in contributing to the green economy. At the heart of this initiative is a commitment to recycling and repurposing materials, fostering a circular economy that minimizes waste and reduces the environmental impact. By diverting materials from landfills, Rehab Recycle not only mitigates the harmful effects of waste disposal but also actively promotes resource conservation, aligning with the principles of a green economy.

One of the distinctive features of Rehab Recycle is its emphasis on green skills development. Recognizing the growing demand for environmentally conscious practices, the initiative prioritizes training individuals in skills that are essential for the green economy. This includes expertise in waste management, recycling processes, and sustainable practices. By providing training opportunities, Rehab Recycle not only equips individuals with valuable skills but also addresses the need for a workforce that can drive the transition towards a more sustainable future.

The training programs offered by Rehab Recycle go beyond mere environmental awareness, focusing on hands-on experiences and practical knowledge that empower participants to actively contribute to green initiatives. From sorting and processing recyclables to understanding the lifecycle of materials, individuals involved in the program gain a comprehensive understanding of the importance of their role in the larger context of environmental sustainability.

In addition to skill development, Rehab Recycle plays a crucial role in raising awareness about the green economy and the positive impact of sustainable practices. Through community engagement, educational initiatives, and outreach programs, the initiative fosters a sense of environmental responsibility, encouraging individuals and businesses alike to adopt greener practices in their daily lives and operations.

Rehab

Investing in People, Changing Perspectives

Mind the Gap: challenges and risks arising from the green transition

It should be reiterated at this point that policies and actions promoting the green transition are facing criticism and objection, sometimes aggressive rejection, by many who fear loss of wealth and income. Income that derives from making a living on the basis of a take-make-waste model for industrial production and consumption. A lot of the wealth that exists in the European Union depends on this economic model, and promoting a green transition for the EU means, in part, putting a large number of people at risk of losing out.

Job gains and losses

Thirteen years ago, the OECD already predicted a noticeable shift in employment dynamics, characterised by job losses in sectors directly impacted and gains in emerging industries. Sectors heavily reliant on carbon-intensive practices would experience a decline in employment opportunities, either due to slower growth rates or potential contraction of the demand. On the other side, novel prospects would arise in low-carbon sectors, which are often more labour-intensive compared to their conventional counterparts¹¹.

Eight years ago, the ILO already warned that the structural reconfiguration suggested by the green transition might, if not adeptly managed, result in workforce displacement and subsequent job losses. The repercussions of this displacement would extend to the financial stability of low-income households, exacerbated by the elevated costs of essential commodities and energy sources.¹²

Three years ago, it became clear that crucial components of the transition proposed with the European Green Deal would rely on technical expertise, skill development, and modernised infrastructure. Certain skills and qualifications are likely to be in high demand, while other talents and traits are expected to lose out. Similar is anticipated for businesses, observing a concentration of contemporary green energy projects on a few enterprises who provide high-level expertise beyond the means of many other, local companies. They would need cross-sectoral collaboration and expertise sharing to bridge the gap between technological demands and regional capacities.¹³

¹¹ OECD/Martinez-Fernandez, C, Hinojosa C, Miranda G., “Green jobs and skills: the local labour market implications of addressing climate change”, 8 February 2010, working document, CFE/LEED, OECD, www.oecd.org/dataoecd/54/43/44683169.pdf

¹² ILO, Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all, 2015. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@emp_ent/documents/publication/wcms_432859.pdf

¹³ Söderholm, P. The green economy transition: the challenges of technological change for sustainability. Sustain Earth 3, 6 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42055-020-00029-y>

Unequal opportunities

Looking at the economic and social developments in the different regions of the European Union, it seems unlikely that the green transition could deliver business opportunities and jobs in all corners of the EU at equal levels. It is at least plausible that certain regions, grappling with prolonged stagnation or even economic regression, may fall behind even more. Because the green transition, like the digital transition, relies on favourable demographic trends and well-established education and training systems. Certain regions are thus at risk of experiencing the green transition as accelerator for further loss of jobs and people, in particular young people and young families. The consequences of these transitions are not confined to monetary losses; their ripple effects extend to non-financial domains, too. People leaving the region translates into loss of cohesion in the community, social support networks, cultural traditions, emotional well-being, and physical health.

Furthermore, energy consumers, especially those from lower income brackets, could face further elevated energy costs due to subsidy removal and the implementation of carbon pricing mechanisms. This, in turn, has the potential to exacerbate societal inequalities and poverty.¹⁴ There are good reasons why experts warn that the green transition is likely to impose a particular burden on lower income households and underdeveloped regions. In recent years, energy poverty has already become a reality for millions of Europeans barely able to keep up with price jumps for petrol, gas and electricity. Many find themselves in their own homes, having to choose between putting on the heating or food on the table. Others live in towns where the authorities are too poor for investing in smart communal systems producing heat from burning waste or processing biomass. The transition needs measures in place to help communities and people through the transitional challenges. Policy makers must understand this has to go beyond compensations for carbon based industries and reskilling for coal miners.

Support necessities

Bridging the economic and social divide is not a new topic for the EU. On the contrary, for decades already, up to a third of EU financial support to its 27 Member States is allocated to regional cohesion schemes, usually in the form of investment support for infrastructure, industries and innovation. Another important ‘chunk’ of EU funding is reserved for investing in people, in particular through education, training and employment schemes. Access to regional and social policy funds has always been a tremendously powerful motivation for countries to join the EU, and it keeps improving the economic and employment situation in many places. But any improvements seem countered by major incidents with significant economic implications, such as the global economic crisis in 2008, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, and the Russian invasion of the Ukraine in 2022. Each event appears to reinforce the economic divide between more and less resilient regions, likewise affect the financial situation of higher and lower income households in drastically different ways.

Persons with disabilities are, like other groups of vulnerable people, at very high risk of being affected in multiple ways. Employment rates are already lower and poverty rates higher than for other people. Access to education, training and services is essential to facilitate independent, decent and dignified living. Where these are put in question, by limited public budgets and/or underdeveloped community infrastructure, people with disabilities are likely to fall behind even further. High inflation rates, higher

¹⁴ Green, Fergus and Gambhir, Ajay. (2019). Transitional assistance policies for just, equitable and smooth low-carbon transitions: who, what and how? <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14693062.2019.1657379>

costs for energy, living, housing and transport, as they are expected with the green transition, also put pressure on service providers to deliver quality services against increasing cost pressure.

Leaving no-one behind

“Leaving no-one behind” is central to the thinking behind the SDGs, the Paris Agreement, and the European Green Deal, giving a clear direction for a fair and just transition in coming decades. Social and economic measures are put in place to help industries, workers and communities going through the transition. But do they also offer support for people with disabilities already struggling to find work? The ILO recalls that “persons with disabilities have historically faced serious challenges hampering their ability to contribute equally, which is not only a violation of their rights but a loss for our societies and economies. Many persons with disabilities continue to face discrimination with respect to opportunities, treatment and outcomes in the world of work.”¹⁵

Furthermore, people with disabilities are more likely to be faced with poor working conditions, poor promotion prospects, low pay and limited temporary or part-time job offers. If equal opportunities for people with disabilities shall become a feature of just transitioning, additional support for people with disabilities is needed. Proposed measures refer to skills development initiatives, adapted education and training, rights-based legal provisions, as well as inclusive social protection measures adding up to a market situation where people with disabilities are best positioned to find work in a regular labour market going green.

¹⁵ ILO policy brief: Persons with disabilities in a just transition to a low-carbon economy
https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_727084.pdf

Recommendations

Employment. A green transition that wants to be just, fair and inclusive, foresees additional efforts for making green jobs available and accessible for people with disabilities. It is therefore important to invest in adapted green skills development, centred around individual talents, capacities and choices. Policy makers should explore initiatives that create disability-inclusive green jobs, support qualified candidates before and on the job, and provide incentives for employers to hire them.

Education and training. It is important to prioritize equal access to high-quality education and training for young people with disabilities. Trade unions, public bodies and employers should also promote reskilling and upskilling for adult workers with disabilities. They can make a valuable contribution to the green transition and achieving carbon neutrality targets. These initiatives incorporate knowledge about sustainability, recycling, repair, reuse and energy efficiency.

Social protection. With the green transition to impact the job situation in traditional industries, it is crucial to provide adequate support for people with disabilities on pathways to a green economy. Expected job losses may disproportionately affect persons with disabilities, who often experience discrimination and precarious employment. Even if employed, many people with disabilities have to get by with sporadic or part time employment and low pay, and require financial support to cope with high costs of living including for energy.

Stakeholder involvement. A just and fair green transition in Europe requires a solid regulatory framework, that provides orientation for existing industries to become carbon-independent and sustainable, and new green industries to become good for environment, people and profit. People with disabilities want to have a say in the rules and regulations, and contribute to policies for making the green economy disability-inclusive. For the area of employment support, service users and service providers can provide good practice for inclusive green employment, and support the further adaptation of legislation for employment in the green economy.

Funding. Member states governments and EU institutions should invest in quality services for supporting the employment of people with disabilities in the green economy. This should include the piloting and rolling out of support schemes tailored for certain service user groups such as people with intellectual disabilities seeking employment in the green economy, tools and methods adapted for green economy companies who are recruiting people with disabilities, as well as startup funding for service providers who establish green social enterprises to create jobs for people with disabilities.

Upskilling the job coaches. Job coaches and career counsellors offering employment support for people with disabilities require regular training and support, and should be integrated in just transition schemes. They have a crucial role for the person to be hired as well as the employer willing to hire. Green economy organisations, like in any other sector, require guidance for the inclusion of employees with disabilities in the workforce, likewise to establish and foster an inclusive company culture.

Greening the social economy. Social service providers are public and private organisations, non-profit in nature, yet economic actors and contributors to the green transition. They also create meaningful, sustainable green for people with disabilities, and should be integrated, as employers, in education and training, upskilling and reskilling schemes for just transition.

Further reading

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