

MOVING TOWARDS A GREEN ECONOMY & SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

AN ANALYTICAL PAPER



Table of Contents

About the paper	3
Introduction.....	3
What is the EU doing in this field? Funding and policy initiatives	3
Perspectives from partners and other stakeholders	4
The transformation of the labour market	5
Employment opportunities and challenges for people with disabilities	6
The green transition and the provision of social services for persons with disabilities.....	7
Main policy recommendations	8
Examples from members on training and employment supporting a green transition.....	9
AFID Diferença Foundation, Portugal	9
Fundaciòn Rey Ardid, Spain.....	9
ILUNION, Spain.....	9
Fundaciòn Intras, Spain	9
Mariaberg, Germany	9
Rehab Group, Ireland.....	9
Workshop “Panagia Eleousa”, Greece.....	10
An example from beyond the EPR membership	10
De Laarhoeve, The Netherlands	10
Examples from members on actions taken to improve the sustainability of their services	10
Cedar Foundation, Ireland.....	10
Centre de Réadaptation de Mulhouse (CRM), France	10
Fundaciòn Rey Ardid, Spain.....	10

About the paper

This paper investigates the topics of green transition and green economy. The main thematic focus is on the impact that moving to a green economy will have on the provision of social services to people with disabilities and on identifying the main opportunities and challenges for the sector in terms of employment, social inclusion, skills needs and education. The aim of the study is to help service providers across Europe to respond to the move to a green economy while delivering high quality services and identifying EU policy support needed on this key step towards sustainability of services and the development of an inclusive green economy.

Introduction

Over the last decade climate change and environmental degradation have become existential threats, and millions of people around the world are already suffering from the effects of extreme weather events and natural disasters. Now more than ever, these challenges require major efforts and urgent societal and economic changes. In order to address these issues, national governments and international organisations have put the topic of green transition at the top of their agendas.

The concept of “green transition” is used to describe the shift from an intensive and unsustainable system of production to a new model that is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. It involves measures aimed at reducing emissions and achieving climate neutrality, such as the adoption of energy policies based on renewables, the development of sustainable transport systems and the strengthening of the economy through green technology and innovation.

At the same time, such measures are designed to be inclusive and make the green transition fair and just for all. The social aspect is particularly relevant for social service providers, as they take care of groups particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. For instance, a 2020 UN report points out that persons with disabilities are impacted by climate change more severely than others in case of natural disasters and extreme weather, and that they are subject to greater discrimination during emergencies. Social services are therefore set to play a key role in supporting vulnerable groups in navigating these delicate shifts, but they also have to address major challenges, which are analysed later in the document.

What is the EU doing in this field? Funding and policy initiatives

The EU has put the fight against climate change and the shift to a green economy at the top of its agenda by designing and implementing a series of policy initiatives and funding programmes. Among these, the European Green Deal is the most important and ambitious package of measures devised by the EU in order to become a prosperous, competitive and climate neutral economy by 2050. This objective will be reached by implementing a just transition that will provide new quality jobs, accessible transport, energy efficient housing and technological innovation.

Examples of relevant policy initiatives that have been or will be launched under the Green Deal include the European Climate Law, which aims at enshrining climate neutrality in law, the new EU Strategy on Climate Adaptation and the European Climate Pact. However, the EU has launched also other policy initiatives focusing on a green and just transition, some of which address the needs of vulnerable people as well:

- **New Circular Economy Plan** and **Farm-to-Fork Strategy**: both programmes include opportunities for green long-term care, through project funding and the development of regulations and recommendations aimed at reducing food waste;
- **EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030**: the Strategy highlights the need to ensure that the green transition to a climate neutral and resilient society is just and inclusive and involves persons with disabilities;
- **Proposal for a Council Recommendation on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality**: the Proposal stresses that a fair transition shall ensure that no one is left behind, in particular people most affected by the change and those already in vulnerable situations. It encourages active support for quality employment, equal access to education and training, social protection systems and access to affordable essential services and housing.

The EU also offers multiple funding schemes to support the green transition and the inclusion of vulnerable groups in the process:

- **European Social Fund+ (ESF+)**: aims at implementing the EPSR and the UN CRPD, also by funding activities aimed at increasing employment opportunities of people with disabilities and social workers in green sectors;
- **Just Transition Fund** (within the Just Transition Mechanism): it is a key tool to support the areas most affected by the transition through economic diversification and reconversion of the territories concerned, support to SMEs, clean energy, upskilling and reskilling of workers, job-search assistance and active inclusion of jobseekers programmes;
- **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development**: it promotes social inclusion and economic development in rural areas, providing funding for projects aimed at creating new jobs for persons with disabilities in the agricultural sector;
- **Horizon Europe 2020 & Erasmus+**: they offer social service providers the chance to access funding for green projects, training and the promotion of green jobs;
- **Recovery and Resilience Facility**: it supports a sustainable recovery of Member States from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Perspectives from partners and other stakeholders

As a proof of the relevance of the green transition to social services, many European stakeholders and EPR partners have published statements, papers and recommendations on the topic, highlighting the main issues related to the inclusion of vulnerable groups.

European Disability Forum: it fully supports the Commission's goals under the Green Deal, but calls for more consideration of persons with disabilities in the policy measures. It published a position paper on an Inclusive Green Deal (March 2020), underlining the need for optimal use of EU funds, the inclusion of accessibility in the development of sustainable mobility and the involvement of more social organisations in the decision-making process from the beginning, to make sure that new legislation or policy proposals do not affect any group negatively.

European Anti-Poverty Network: in its reply to the proposal for a Council Recommendation it stressed the need to provide more support to those who are already marginalised in the labour market and to make sure that reskilling and upskilling of workers are inclusive in order to avoid labour market polarisation and unequal access to job opportunities. In its key messages on the Green Deal, it called for heavy investments in energy efficiency for social housing, green quality jobs and impact assessments of the distributional effects of green policies on poor people.

Caritas Europe together with RREUSE, Euclid Network and Microfinance Centre: they welcomed the Green Deal and called for substantial investments to support social enterprises to promote the initiative through inclusive services like recycling, re-using and repairing.

European Trade Union Confederation: in a Resolution on the European Green Deal the ETUC called for the active involvement of workers in climate initiatives and the inclusion of strong social requirements in Climate Law. The ETUC recognised that upskilling and reskilling will be essential and recommended putting more emphasis on the consequences of climate change on the world of work and the labour market, stressing that social protection systems will play a crucial role to make our societies more resilient.

European Union of the Deaf: it replied to the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality by stressing the need to implement the UN CRPD through the Recommendation and to focus more on including people with disabilities in the labour market and education through the emerging opportunities that the just transition will bring about. It also underlined that the measures on ensuring access to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning must be fully inclusive.

Cermi & ONCE: replied to the Proposal for a Council Recommendation by stressing the need to make sure that the transition creates green jobs that can better include persons with disabilities in the labour market, takes into account the issue of universal accessibility and unlocks the potential of the social economy. Furthermore, Cermi called for greater participation of European organisations representing people with disabilities at EU, regional and local levels and for the use of EU funds in order to address the needs of these groups, which might be affected by the initial shifts of the transition.

The transformation of the labour market

The shift to green economy is expected to radically transform the labour market. Broadly speaking, the green transition will heavily impact energy intensive industries such as mining, steel, automotive and chemicals, but it will also lead to new energy efficiency initiatives and the creation of new jobs. According to the Employment and Social Developments in Europe report published by the European Commission, the green transition is expected to create 1 million jobs in the EU by 2030 and 2 million jobs by 2050¹. However, some fast-growing sectors that are crucial for the transition, such as those related to insulation and renewables, are already experiencing shortages of workers.

These radical changes will require people to move from some sectors to others, and therefore to acquire completely new skills or improve existing ones in order to adapt to the new labour conditions. Ensuring that all of them have access to concrete opportunities to upskill and reskill properly will be a major

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8219&furtherPubs=yes>

challenge for the EU. In addition to that, the need to develop new energy-efficient production technologies will give a strong boost to technological innovation, making digital skills a key factor in the labour market. In this regard, the EU will have to provide workers from different economic sectors the chance to learn digital skills through proper training programmes.

Employment opportunities and challenges for persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities and vulnerable groups have the potential to personally contribute to building a greener society. The green transition can benefit them as well, especially when it comes to employment opportunities in the emerging labour market. Examples of sectors where people with disabilities can find green jobs include:

- Eco-construction
- Energy efficiency
- Waste disposal and recycling
- Conservation of landscape and green areas
- Ecotourism
- Social Farming

Whilst opportunities are there, social services providers supporting employment of people with disabilities will face the following challenges:

Education and training. People with disabilities might struggle to find new jobs more than others, as they often have less education and training opportunities. Furthermore, most VET for persons with disabilities still don't include information on sustainability, green best practices or skills that are highly needed in emerging labour market areas such as sustainable tourism or renewable energy.

Exclusion from the labour market. People with disabilities are at a higher risk of marginalisation in the labour market. Social services providers must raise awareness about the importance of offering disability-inclusive green jobs which match with candidates or trainees with disabilities.

Social exclusion. Social services providers face the challenge to make sure that the needs of people with disabilities are mainstreamed and recognised by EU policies and initiatives. If this doesn't happen, a "disorderly transition" which doesn't take into due consideration the needs of all groups might further exacerbate exclusion from the labour market and widen the gap between high educated-high income and low educated-low income groups;

Staff training and underfunding. Social workers are unable to provide adequate support to people with disabilities if they lack the skills and knowledge about sustainability and green practices. Ensuring that social services providers get the right training is a major challenge due to underfunding and lack of investment in the sector, despite the recognition that it will play a key role to implement a just transition.

The green transition and the provision of social services for people with disabilities

The green transition offers important opportunities for social services and people with disabilities, as both providers and users are strongly affected by climate change. Within a European context, 100 millions of people with disabilities suffer from pollution, urban heat, droughts and violent storms. According to a 2020 Report on global warming from the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, the number of European citizens who will suffer from heat waves is expected to grow from 10 to more than 100 million, while the number of fatalities might increase from 2,700 to over 30,000 deaths per year². The same report underlines that the most vulnerable groups exposed to higher heat-related mortality are older people and those with health conditions affecting their thermoregulation, such as brain and spinal cord injuries or neurological diseases³.

The health and general well-being of people with disabilities is therefore heavily affected by global warming, which can further exacerbate existing social divides and forms of discrimination too. Extreme weather events, for instance, can highlight the lack of accessible infrastructure and transport, as well as the lack of disaster relief or evacuation plans that take into consideration the needs of people with disabilities. Another issue worsened by climate change is energy poverty, which affects an increasing number of people with disabilities in Europe due to hot summers and frequent extreme cold waves across the continent. Persons with disabilities and reduced mobility might in fact need to keep the air conditioning or heating on for longer periods than the general population in order to avoid health complications, and therefore face higher energy costs. Given that many people with disability in Europe already live in conditions of poverty, global warming might make it even more difficult for them to afford good living standards.

High energy costs and extreme weather events pose a risk also for European social services providers, which will need substantial resources in order to respond to the increasing needs of users. Social services providers, however, have the chance to redesign their activities in order to make them greener, since they take a toll on the environment as well, especially in terms of energy consumption and waste production, including sanitary and pharmaceutical waste which need special treatment. For instance, service providers might take advantage of the renovation wave that is expected with the transition to improve the accessibility and the energy efficiency of social care structures and social housing. Moreover, the aforementioned EU funding schemes and policy initiatives incentivise social service providers to take on such green projects by providing economic support and promoting the participation of all people, communities and organisations to climate action, so that no one is left behind by the transition.

In order to provide green and high quality social services, it is necessary to ensure that social workers themselves acquire new skills and knowledge about sustainability, energy efficiency and waste management, especially when it comes to special waste generated from sanitary and healthcare provisions. A well prepared and skilled staff will not only be able to reduce the ecological footprint of the service provided, but also to properly train users and help them to successfully adapt to social and

² <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC118540>, p.9

³ <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC118540>, p.1

economic change. For this reason it is indispensable to foster awareness within the sector that social policies are closely intertwined with environmental ones, as climate change has a substantial impact on social services and vice versa.

Main policy recommendations

Below is a summary of recommendations for supporting the active inclusion of people with disabilities into the green transition and the green economy.

Funding. To provide quality and greener social services, it is important to have more funding from governments and EU programmes. Many EU funding schemes include measures for people with disabilities, but it is important to make sure that those resources are properly channelled and support social workers at all levels too.

Education and training. Efforts must be made to ensure that people with disabilities have equal access to quality education and training programmes that anticipate skills needs and include knowledge of sustainability, climate change, recycling, energy efficiency etc. Reskilling and upskilling programmes focused on sustainability should be made available also to social workers, so that they can both provide greener services and better support people with disabilities through their professional development.

Employment. For the transition to be inclusive, people with disabilities must be able to access the labour market. Policy makers should consider the promotion of initiatives to maximise disability-inclusive green jobs that match with candidates with disabilities and to incentivise employers to hire them.

Social protection systems. There is the need to ensure the implementation of tailored measures to address temporary negative effects caused by the transition to a green economy, as these effects might affect people with disabilities more than others. These measures should include social protection, strong safety nets and expanding basic services providers on energy provision and transport. Particular attention should be given to energy poverty, as it already affects vulnerable groups across Europe.

Stakeholders involvement. In order to ensure a fair and inclusive green transition, it is necessary to embed the social dimension in the process and make sure that vulnerable groups are included at every stage through the active involvement of social services providers, sector stakeholders and service users. These should have the opportunity to exchange information and recommendations with policy makers, funders and public employees, in order to deliver policies that consider the needs of people with disability and allow them to be actively involved.

Sharing good practices. Good practices should be shared among social services providers in order to encourage the adoption of sustainable measures and initiatives, particularly in terms of services sustainability, training and access to the labour market.

Examples from members on training and employment supporting a green transition

AFID Diferença Foundation, Portugal: its project AFID Green provides services for the creation and maintenance of green spaces, including tree planting, irrigation systems installations and waste management. It combines quality with social responsibility and inclusion by training and employing people with disabilities (for more information see <https://afidgreen.pt/category/afid-green/>).

Fundaciòn Rey Ardid, Spain: it offers to people with mental health issues and unemployed a wide range of training courses in gardens and green area maintenance, horticulture and floriculture. Moreover, the foundation has various social enterprises which offer employment opportunities to vulnerable people in green sectors and sustainability, for example Emprey Jardinería Fundación Rey Ardid, focused on garden planning and maintenance with reduced water waste and the use of eco-friendly products and electric tools, or a florist in Zaragoza which creates vertical gardens and an Industrial Laundry service in Zaragoza which limits plastic production and water and electricity waste by using efficient washing programs, renewables and paper strapping machines (for more information see <https://www.reyardid.org/servicios-empresas/>).

ILUNION, Spain (business branch of ONCE Social Group): it has a circular economy division which encourages recycling and re-use of products, aiming at a positive triple impact: economic (profitable and sustainable), social (social and workforce inclusion of vulnerable groups or at risk of exclusion), and environmental through recycling activity. It launched ILUNION Recycling in 2009, specialising in WEEE recycling. Since 2020 the project is called Recycling4All thanks to an alliance between ILUNION and Repsol Foundation. In 2020 they treated 14,000 tons of WEEE, of which 90% was reintroduced to the productive circuit, reducing CO2 emissions by 100 tons/year thanks to a sustainable vehicle fleet. Recycling4all is the only treatment plant in Spain awarded with and EFQM+500 Certification. The company creates employment in rural areas and 101 of its 166 employees have disabilities (for more information see <https://www.ilunion.com/es/ilunion-y-fundacion-repsol-crean-una-nueva-compania-de-economia-circular>)

Fundaciòn Intras, Spain: Intras has launched two green projects. The first is an eco-friendly apple orchard, which aims both at recovering the orchard, which has been abandoned over the last few years, and improving the life of people with mental health issues. The second project revolves around two shops of eco-friendly products in Toro and Valladolid called “Un punto de locura”. Both shops promote a circular economy and socially responsible consumption by selling vintage articles or organic products collected from an orchard, while also employing people with mental health issues and fostering an inclusive working environment (for more information see <https://www.intras.es/articulos/abrimos-tienda-de-productos-ecologicos-en-valladolid>).

Mariaberg, Germany: with the project Green³, the facility trains and offers working opportunities to PWD in gardening, green area maintenance, garden planning and others. It also has a flower shop in Gammertingen (Germany), where PWD work and create bouquets and decorated potted plants. Mariaberg also offers PWD the chance to work in farming and agriculture in an area of more than 100 hectares of land. The organic products are then sold in a farm shop that was opened in 2020 (for more information see <https://www.mariaberg.de/gruen3> and <https://www.mariaberg.de/landwirtschaftshofladen>).

Rehab Group, Ireland: Rehab Recycle is a market leader specialised in confidential data and document destruction, WEEE recycling and refurbishing with a cost-effective and earth-conscious

‘nothing wasted’ approach, which employs PWD. Clients can also decide to donate electronic equipment which Rehab will then re-use to support charities, schools and community groups (For more information see <https://rehab.ie/enterprises/rehab-recycle/>).

Workshop “Panagia Eleousa”, Greece: Environmental Training Department organises lessons on environmental training and at practical level recycling programs are implemented. For the implementation of all the training programs educational methods tailored to the specific needs of people with intellectual disabilities are used such as imitation, task analysis, repetition, the visual display, etc. (for more information see <https://www.ergpanel.gr/pagesen.php?m=24>)

An example from beyond the EPR membership

De Laarhoeve, The Netherlands: a care farm which employs people with mental health issues and processes agricultural produce that are discarded or are not sold in supermarkets because of their shape or colour. The farm receives funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and from national and private programmes. The farm cooperates with retailers, farmers and educational centres, and its employees make products like jam and sauce. It sets a good example of how new business models can provide green jobs to PWD such as in food management (for more information see <https://delaarhoeve.nl/>).

Examples from members on actions taken to improve the sustainability of their services

Cedar Foundation, Ireland: with the Greening Cedar initiative the Foundation aims at preventing and reducing the production of waste and promoting recycling and reusing in its daily working activities. The Foundation provides its workers with a guide that explains how they can work in an environmentally friendly way (for more information see <https://www.cedar-foundation.org/greening-cedar>).

Centre de Réadaptation de Mulhouse (CRM), France: it implements a sustainable development policy focused on sustainable mobility, energy efficiency and waste reduction. Examples of measures taken are the purchase of electric vehicles and the installation of charging stations, insulation work to reduce energy consumption, replacement of plastic cups and water bottles with mugs and water decanters and fight against food and water waste (for more information see <https://www.arfp.asso.fr/>).

Fundaciòn Rey Ardid, Spain: the Foundation has an Alzheimer’s specialised residence in Rosales del Canal (Saragoza) which has received a Passive House certificate thanks to its great thermal insulation and a vertical garden, which helps to purify the air and reduce the temperature of the building during hot days, thus limiting the use of air conditioning and increasing energy efficiency (for more information see <https://www.reyardid.org/servicios-mayores/residencias/zaragoza/residencia-rey-ardid-rosales/>).