

ILO Research Conference: Green Jobs for Asia and the Pacific

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Address

by

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It brings me great pleasure to welcome you all to the first ILO Research Conference held on Green Jobs for Asia and the Pacific. At the outset I wish to thank both the Government of Niigata Prefecture and the City of Niigata for their gracious hospitality extended to all of us. We are delighted to be in this beautiful city of Niigata which will also host the G8 Meeting of Labour Ministers next month.

As some of you may know, at the ILO Labour Conference last June the Director-General of the ILO, Mr. Juan Somavia launched the “Green Jobs Initiative”, a joint initiative led by the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the International Trade Union Confederation, for the promotion of development goals that are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable. With its Green Jobs initiative, ILO seeks to promote employment which is productive and equitable, ensures fundamental rights, such as advancing the representation and voice of workers, and provides safe working conditions for all. As such, Green Jobs are an essential and integral part of the Decent Work Agenda of ILO.

Ten months since the launch, this Conference is a significant milestone in the ILO Green Jobs Initiative, setting the issues and opportunities of green jobs concretely in the politically diverse and economically dynamic region of Asia and the Pacific, where, against the backdrop of a looming financial crisis exasperated by soaring oil and food prices, the modest but positive gains of poverty reduction made in the recent year could be erased very quickly. Here, our effort to promote green jobs should offer a solution for slowing growth, unemployment and pressures of increasing productivity by creating employment without aggravating social or environmental deficits. I hope very much that the many high level experts, researchers and policy-makers who have come to Niigata from across the region and beyond, help ILO bring this challenging agenda and dialogue forward.

While the idea of “green collar” jobs may sound like a new addition to our common vocabulary, the ILO has been a longstanding advocate for environmental protection built upon the mechanisms it uses to secure safe conditions for workers. Whether advancing occupational safety and health standards, encouraging cleaner production practices, or promoting more efficient work methods, the ILO and its social partners have sought to protect the welfare of workers in ways which do not compromise international labour standards and the environment. Yet, as ILO seeks to clarify the concept of “green jobs” through the strategic objectives of our Decent Work Agenda, we need to look concretely at the nature and scope of green jobs that ILO’s interventions can help to produce.

Today, the vast majority of production and work consume energy and other resources and leaves behind waste and greenhouse gases at a rate dangerous for our planet and our health. This presents a unique challenge for Asia and the Pacific, where it has been predicted that the most severe environmental and economic impacts of climate change will take place. With Asia home to some 60 per cent of the world’s total labour force and three-fourths of the world’s poor living

on less than two US dollars a day, its workers are increasingly vulnerable to new environmental and health risks. In this light, there is a growing awareness not only about the threat posed by climate change, but about the mounting environmental costs of land erosion, depletion of fish stocks, degradation of forest and coastal ecosystems, and air and water pollution as well.

What is clear is that adapting to and arresting climate change and other negative environmental impacts will require shifting to new patterns of production and consumption, bringing just transitions in labour markets and in the way people earn their livelihoods. Employment effects will be significant, including opportunities for green jobs, but realizing these opportunities will require deliberate action and policies for energy efficiency, sustainable enterprises, low-carbon economies and environmental stewardship we will also need strategies for enhanced social protection, skills development and employment promotion to ensure that the transition to new modes and methods of work is as painless as possible. How can we facilitate this? How can we manage these changes? How can we construct win-win solutions?

To begin, all countries – developed and developing alike – must recognize that the environmental challenges we face are a shared burden. In other words, we have “common but differentiated responsibilities”. This principle also applies to our tripartite partners, for if we are unable to arrive at a commonly-desired solution, we will risk the greater cost of inaction affecting all of our children regardless of whether we are from developed or developing countries. This is a price we cannot afford to bear.

The good news will come if we are able to cooperate. Green jobs have potential to create productive work for women and men – protecting the environment on the one hand, improving safety, health and social well-being for workers and creating more and better opportunities for people to earn a living, on the other.

The evidence for the potential of green jobs can already be seen across the region, according to some studies. For example:

- China has 1,000 firms making solar thermal equipment, providing employment to some 600,000 workers.
- In Bangladesh the Grameen movement has helped to develop jobs installing over 100,000 PV solar panels, providing indispensable light and power to homes in rural areas.
- The Indian city of Delhi has introduced new eco-friendly compressed natural gas buses, which will create an additional 18,000 new jobs.

It is my hope that over the next three days we will examine research programmes and pilot activities that identify the many other technological innovations, sustainable enterprise and quality job creation opportunities which exist and can benefit from effective ILO intervention. However, as noteworthy as these examples may be, it is also important to remember that they pale in comparison to the majority of jobs which keep modern economies afloat – jobs which very often are energy-intensive and environmentally inefficient.

Undoubtedly, a new approach is needed. Employers’ and workers’ organizations and Governments must rise to the challenge making the transition to a much more environmentally sustainable process of development. The ILO’s aim is to assist and guide governments, workers and enterprises through this transition. Working in collaboration with other UN agencies and international bodies, our goal is to build a new development model: a model which combines economic organization with collaborative social and environmental planning so more people are afforded the opportunity to earn a living in a green job.

How can the ILO add value to and be a partner in the efforts to promote green jobs? Addressing climate change, and more broadly, environmental management through employment

and social protection, is closely connected to the ILO mandate and numerous elements of its programme of work. A transition to a cleaner model of investment and growth will require the active participation of workers, employers and governments to develop viable, effective and fair-policy solutions— solutions which will rest on the promotion of mechanisms for social dialogue.

Progress has already been made. For instance, the ILO has designed a framework for the promotion of sustainable enterprises, developed in consultation with our tripartite partners, which provides detailed guidance on what constitutes a conducive environment for green enterprise. The framework has been strongly supported not only by governments but also by the International Organisation of Employers and the International Trade Union Confederation. Likewise, at the recent Bali Conference of Parties, the global trade union movement signalled its commitment to an 85 percent reduction in global greenhouse emissions.

So, we are moving ahead, but much work needs to be done. As it stands, the consequences of environmental change and of the mitigation and adaptation measures on employment, incomes and poverty have been little researched and understood and, therefore, have not been systematically factored into policies and programmes. I believe, however, that a new consensus on the role of green jobs for sustainable development is possible, and believe that this Conference is an important, initial step in the right direction.

I hope that we use this Conference to share research and practical experience in order to build a viable framework for future collaboration. As we start to clarify the existing knowledge gaps, we can begin extracting lessons for input into policy and pilot activities, so we might identify where and how the ILO can assist in the development of decent, green employment. I sincerely hope that in doing so the outcomes of this Conference will provide a substantive basis for the ILO's contribution to the G8 Meeting of Labour Ministers to be held in May.

In closing, as Spring has arrived in beautiful Niigata, I hope we will be inspired to agree on a way forward. I am eager to hear your experiences and views, and wish you all a productive – and fruitful – Conference. Thank you very much.