

Asia and the Pacific are very exposed to the impact of climate change. Therefore, progress towards a global climate deal is crucial for its development and its stability. But such a global journey to a low carbon and climate resilient future will necessarily involve the world of work and those who will actually do the job, says Sachiko Yamamoto, Regional Director, ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

Meena Thakur is aged around 36. She lives with her husband and three children in a farmers' community in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, India. During the dry season she lives mainly by preparing cakes of cow dung and selling them as fuel to a nearby brick kiln. Managing and disposing of the dung produced by cows from the local dairy sector is a major issue for the surrounding communities as the dung is dumped widely and contaminates the local river. In addition it gives off methane gas.

It may seem obvious that climate change-related programmes and financial support - facilitating access to renewable energy and a wider range of ways of earning a living - would be welcomed by the farming community in Jabalpur.

But it may come as bad news to Meena and her friends in the dung cake business, cutting off their supply of dung. She and her family exist on about US\$60 per month, and any change that threatens even a cent of that income threatens her. She does not view the issues of climate change in the same way as we do. Yet without her support and that of others like her, if the climate change challenge is not converted into opportunities for better livelihoods and jobs, we will not be able to turn negotiated agreements into concrete change.

It is understandable that questions are being asked about whether mitigating climate change is feasible, whether, in current circumstances, we should not be committing resources to supporting livelihoods and the bottom line?

Although the financial crisis may be easing there is no doubt that the related social crisis continues for many of the most vulnerable countries in Asia and the Pacific, and beyond. In a region where one billion people are classified as working poor (living on less than US\$2 per day), 100 million people were for the first time recorded as being without a job in 2009. In South East Asia in the first nine months of 2009, unemployment increased by roughly 10 per cent and labour productivity decreased by 2.5 per cent, a remarkable drop in such a short period of time. In Cambodia alone, a quarter of the garment sector factories have closed.

This does not make an easy atmosphere for negotiations on reducing emissions, including those at the United Nations headquarters in Bangkok.

These concerns should be aired. But at the same time some myths need to be dispelled.

The first myth is that action on the environment is bad news for jobs. Rather, past experience demonstrates that well-designed, environment-related investments are beneficial for employment overall, although there are shifts in the labour market structure. The so-called green sectors of the economy can be expected to create more jobs, directly and indirectly, than will be lost in other sectors. A recent HSBC survey found that, worldwide, businesses selling low carbon goods and services now generate more revenue than the aerospace and defence industries combined, making this sector one of the new linchpins of the global economy.

A second myth is that environmental measures only bring financial costs. Win-win options clearly exist. Examples include the introduction of energy efficient appliances and equipment, the sustainable management of resources such as water, and improvements in housekeeping practices. The widespread introduction of such measures could greatly reduce carbon emissions in developing countries and would bring ancillary benefits such as short return-on-investment periods, net productivity gains, better working conditions and little or no harm to employment.

To these two myths I would add a third - which is that environmental issues such as climate change are the concern of specialists and can be solved by environmentalists and negotiators alone.

Whether we like it or not, climate change will revolutionize the way we produce, consume and earn a living. This historical transformation will affect all sectors of the economy, in all countries, and consequently all peoples.

Any commitment by governments will require support from all layers of society; young and old, male and female, poor and rich, urban and rural, workers and employers. When deals made in high level conference rooms do not have the grassroots support of people like Meena, they are hard to deliver on. Delivering on reduction targets starts with engaging those on the ground whose jobs and livelihoods will be the first to be affected. We need to anticipate and smooth the inevitable changes and manage a 'just transition' towards a sustainable, low-carbon path.

The good news is that the world of work is ready to be part of the solution. In June this year governments, employers' and workers' organizations from the ILO's 183 member States adopted a Global Jobs Pact that supports a shift to a low-carbon, environmentally-friendly economy as a way to accelerate a jobs recovery. Green jobs (decent, environmentally-sound jobs that fuel the growing green economy), are important agents of change and as such can play a constructive role in the debate and ultimate agreement.

For Meena and her colleagues this means concrete, timely, technical and financial help to explore alternatives, giving her in the option of more value-added tasks like dairy processing.

Progress towards a low carbon future will necessarily involve the world of work, and convincing those who actually do the job. A win-win deal that supports economic recovery and emission reduction is ambitious, but possible. Employment and green jobs in particular, are part of the solution.