

Questions and answers on the skills for green jobs challenge

Developing new skills or upgrading existing ones is the key to unlocking the potential of green jobs. The Green Jobs Initiative of the ILO, the UN Environmental Programme, the International Organisation of Employers (IOE) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has been working to turn this potential into reality since 2008. ILO News talks to Olga Strietska-Ilina, Skills Development Specialist with ILO's Skills and Employability Department, about a new landmark ILO study developed together with the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) on skill needs for greener economies.

11/7/2011

FTR/greenskills

You've just published a new study "Skills for Green Jobs – A Global View". What are its main points?

Moving to greener economies requires new skills. Without a suitably trained workforce the transition will stall. The country studies show that shortages of those skills already form a major barrier to the transitions to green economies and greener jobs, a trend that is likely to be exacerbated in the future. Sustained inclusion of skills development in strategies to speed up the greening of national economies remains limited to isolated initiatives. Shortages of teachers and trainers in environmental awareness subjects and in fast-growing green sectors are reported in many countries.

How can the skills shortages be tackled?

Environmental awareness needs to be part of education and training at all levels, starting as a core skill taught from early childhood onwards. Countries need strategies that bring together energy, environment, education and skills development objectives, policies and ministries. Countries that are doing so place a high premium on effective social dialogue, coordination among ministries and communication between employers and training providers. Public-private partnerships, using government's resources and the hands-on knowledge of businesses – and sometimes their resources too - have proven effective in most cases. Government and training providers in collaboration with industry need to anticipate changes in skill needs.

Will many new occupations emerge?

The change will mostly affect existing occupations and, as a result the education and training system. It will therefore require adjustments of curricula and qualification standards. New job profiles, mostly at higher skill levels, will emerge, particularly in the new technologies and regulations areas - such as eco designers, carbon consultants or geothermal engineers.

How well do education and training providers cope with the challenge?

Enterprises have been the first to respond to the skill needs. Compulsory level education and universities have coped by new demand relatively well by incorporating new courses, such as on environmental awareness and technical competencies, but technical and vocational education and training need to be upgraded.

Can governments expect a major increase in employment?

The transition to a greener economy has the potential to create millions of jobs. It is also likely to lead to downsizing in emissions-intensive industries, but most scenarios suggest the net effect will be positive. How long and how painful the transition will be will depend largely on prior planning and policy coordination. Retraining of workers and upgrading of skills will be crucial, as those who get “green” jobs will not necessarily be the ones who lost their jobs in “brown” industries.

Which sectors will be affected?

Extensive restructuring is anticipated in many sectors. Agricultural production will be affected by growth of biofuels and organic farming. Farmers in many part of the world also have to adjust to more severe drought conditions requiring them to learn how to grow new crops or use new methods to grow the same crops. Fossil fuel energy generation will decline relative to growth in renewable energy sources and emissions-intensive industries will shift to more environmentally friendly manufacturing.

Will many skills become obsolete?

While certain activities will be phased out, the skills they require can still be applied, sometimes by the same workers – who will need to be retrained to make the most of their existing skills.

Will everyone have access to a green job?

While green growth provides an opportunity to make new jobs accessible to all and address inequalities, inclusive green growth can only be achieved if disadvantaged groups are targeted for training to ensure they can get those jobs. Emerging occupations offer a chance to break gender barriers. Incentives to increase women’s participation in technical training programs will put more women in technology-driven occupations and ease skill shortages.

Is the discussion on skills and green jobs relevant for developing countries?

Developing countries bear the least responsibility for climate change but are the hardest hit. People dependent on farming, fishing and traditional crafts rapidly fall below the poverty line when deprived of those sources of income. They urgently need adaptation skills. Mitigation of climate change and investments in green sectors do create the opportunity to generate income, fight unemployment and reduce poverty. But special measures are needed, such as the provision of entrepreneurship skills in conjunction with microfinance projects and continuing business coaching to help establish and maintain green businesses. There is also need for environmental awareness raising, capacity development to strengthen tripartite dialogue mechanisms, and improving formal education and training to provide basic skills for all and enhance the skills base of the national workforce.