

Zooming in on the safety and health dimension of greening the economy

The 21st century presents humanity with growing challenges to protect natural resources and life support systems. The shift to a green economy is perceived as a way to reconcile the world's economic and social needs with environmental sustainability, and is likely to resemble no other transition in human history. In this interview, Ms Manuela Tomei, Director of the ILO Labour Protection Department (PROTRAV), looks at the less visible dimension of green jobs and the greening of traditional sectors.

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The shift towards a green economy

The 21st century presents humanity with growing challenges to protect natural resources and life support systems. The shift to a green economy is perceived as a way to reconcile the world's economic and social needs with environmental sustainability, and is likely to resemble no other transition in human history. The promotion of green jobs is central to this transition.

According to a new ILO report on "[Promoting safety and health in a green economy](#)", the greening of the economy provides an opportunity to make all jobs healthier and safer while benefiting the environment and society, provided occupational risks are identified and managed at the onset.

1. What constitutes a green job?

For the ILO, green jobs are decent jobs that contribute directly to reducing the environmental impact of economic activities and do one or all of the following: reduce consumption of energy and raw materials, limit green-house emissions, minimize waste and pollution, and protect and restore ecosystems.

There are various shades of "green" in green jobs, different thresholds that define the degree to which a job protects or improves the environment. Originally, only jobs with a specific mission to directly protect biodiversity and the environment were considered green. But now it applies to various jobs which strive to be resource-efficient as part of the greening of the economy across all sectors.

Examples of green growth sectors can be found in renewable energies, energy-efficient buildings or sustainable forest management. Green jobs are also found in the "greening" of traditional sectors. This is done by ensuring that industrial green-house emissions do not exceed the established limits or by selecting goods and services on the basis of criteria for environmental sustainability.

Without the active involvement of managers, technicians and workers, the shift to a green economy would not be possible.

2. Are all green jobs safe and decent?

According to the ILO, for a green job or any other job to be considered decent it has to fulfil a number of requisites, including adequate working conditions and the protection of workers' health and safety.

Unfortunately, that is not always the case in both traditional and green jobs. Take for example the recycling industry, which is considered key in the "greening" of waste management. There is no question that recycling is good for the environment. Recycling is needed to recover valuable and increasingly rare materials and to save the energy used from producing things from scratch.

However, in developing countries, this work is mainly carried out by informal economy operators. This is an activity which can expose workers to hazardous substances, broken glass, pathogens and other hazardous agents. At the same time, the volume of electronic waste is growing rapidly and part of it is being recycled, but mostly in informal enterprises by workers who do not possess the adequate skills. The result is widespread contamination of the environment and the exposure of workers, their families and communities to hazardous agents.

3. How can waste management be turned into a green and decent industry?

For waste management to be green, waste pickers should work in an improved environment and children should not be allowed in disposal sites. To address this situation, a number of basic and low-cost measures could be put in place, such as better machinery and equipment, improved disposals layout, protective equipment, washing facilities and sanitation, basic safety and health measures and training, especially in handling hazardous waste. All these measures would contribute to improved working conditions and to the quality of life of waste pickers and their families.

4. What is the link between the workplace environment and the general environment?

The working environment and the general environment are two sides of the same coin. For example, workers are often the first to be exposed to hazardous chemicals within the workplace. The inappropriate management of hazardous chemicals in the workplace has also detrimental effects on the general environment through the contamination of air, water and soil. Consequently, the adoption of adequate preventive and control measures at the workplace yields dividends for the workers concerned, the surrounding communities and the environment.

However, replacing certain substances that are harmful to the environment by others that are more “environmentally friendly” may prove to be more hazardous to workers’ health. For example, the substitution of hydro-chlorofluorocarbons for chlorofluorocarbons has shown to increase the risk of workers’ exposure to carcinogens, increase the risk of liver and kidney damage and workplace fire hazards.

Environmental protection should also take into account the protection of workers and communities when selecting alternative substances, processes or technologies considered environmentally friendly. An integrated management of chemicals at the national level and at the workplace is needed for the protection of both workers’ health and the environment.

Likewise, the protection of the general environment should be integrated into an enterprise operation. Work which protects the environment but overlooks the protection of workers cannot be green, and neither can jobs that protect workers but endanger the environment.

5. What can be done to ensure that a greener economy also means that all jobs are safe and decent jobs?

Contrary to other “revolutions”, the transition to a green economy cannot be purely technological and economical in nature. Enhancing the well-being of the world’s population must be part and parcel of achieving sustainable development. We have a golden opportunity to guarantee, from the onset, that all jobs -not only green jobs- are safe and healthy for workers while benefiting communities and the environment. The introduction of new “green” technologies and the “greening” of technologies in traditional sectors, such as mining or construction, offer an unprecedented opportunity to improve the health and safety of workers at the workplace.

However, first it is necessary to identify and address the occupational hazards and risks associated with technological innovation and changes in work organization. Risk assessment and management on safety and health should be present in the design phase and life-cycle analysis of “green” or “greener” production processes and throughout their supply chain.

This should also include the assessment of the environmental impact of these processes and not only their climate change neutrality. Preventive and control measures should be extended also to procurement, maintenance, sourcing, use, re-use and recycling. This is especially relevant for sectors such as agriculture, construction, waste recycling, and energy production.

Training for employers, designers, contractors, managers and workers so that they are aware of risks and prevention methods is equally important. At the same time, the creation of green jobs requires changes in policy in order to support approaches such as “prevention through design” in the creation of green jobs.

The bottom line is that workers can be exposed to risks of accidents and diseases, whether the job is green or not. That’s why at the ILO we say that the application and management of occupational safety and health (OSH) measures and regulatory systems do not depend on the “colour” of the job.

6. What is the ILO doing to promote OSH in the green economy?

The promotion of the safety, health and well-being of workers are core aspects of decent work, which in itself is a precondition for sustainable development and social inclusion. There are numerous ILO instruments on occupational safety and health, some of which are sector or hazard-specific, which assist governments, employers and workers and their organizations in the prevention and management of traditional, emerging and new occupational hazards and risks.

The ILO is determined to include a strong social dimension through improved compliance with our international labour standards which promote decent work, fair employment and the protection of workers’ right to a safe and healthy working environment. In 2007, the ILO and its constituents committed themselves to the promotion of decent work for all in a fair and just transition to a green economy. The ILO’s engagement is also expressed in its strong support and participation at the upcoming Rio + 20 Conference on Sustainable Development.

Finally, the message of this year’s World Day for Safety and Health at Work serves to highlight that the safety and health of all workers is essential to achieve an environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive green economy.