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Is green the color of our future? The green and digital transformation and the future of work

Interview with Moustapha Kamal Gueye, ILO Director of the Priority Action Programme on Just Transitions Towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies

Introduction by host:

Welcome to the ILO Employment podcast series, Global Challenges, Global Solutions: The Future of Work.

I'm your host Tom Netter, and today we're going to look at the green and digital transition, and what it means for the future of work and social justice.

Go green has become the new mantra of our times. To mitigate the impact of climate change, we're moving fast in new directions that promise to usher in a new world where healing the climate is not only the right thing to do, but the essential thing to do. As the world heats up, we're running out of time.

There's never been a more urgent need to unleash the power of digitalization to drive the green transition. Digital technology could deliver one-fifth of the emission cuts needed to

hit net-zero by 2050. This episode explores how to accelerate this green and digital transformation and move us closer to a greener future of work.

To bring us up to speed on all this, we're talking today to Moustapha Kamal Gueye, Director of the Priority Action Programme on Just Transitions Towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies.

Tom: Moustapha, welcome to the programme.

Moustapha: Thank you for having me.

Tom: Let's start by defining what we're talking about. We hear a lot these days about the green and the digital transition. For our listeners, tell us what we mean by this.

Moustapha: Well, the green transition can be understood as the process of decarbonization in many ways, moving from economies and societies that have depended for long on natural resources and healthy ecosystems, but where we find today, a number of challenges, from climate change to the collapse of biodiversity and pollution. So, achieving that transformation of society towards more sustainability is the indispensable green transition.

But at the same time, there is a shift from the analog forms of working and using data, paper, to digital technologies. This is happening across societies in our day-to-day work, in the way companies operate, and altogether, in the way the economies function. So, these are two important transitions that are critical drivers for the future of work.

Tom: Okay, thanks for that definition. We understand that this digital and green transformation is reshaping economies across all sectors and that it is fundamentally changing our way of life. Are these transformations happening at the same time and are they interdependent, and how does digital innovation enable the green transition for economies and societies?

Moustapha: It is true that these two transformations are happening in parallel, and that is the reality of the economies and societies, but one can also observe that they are somehow interlinked and, if you like, mutually dependent. So in many ways, digital innovation makes it possible to advance the environmental objectives towards sustainability, but on the other hand, there are challenges that emerge with the use of digital technologies, which also demand environmental solutions and improvements. So therefore, I see the two as very much interconnected, but both being drivers taking place at the same time, plus being indispensable for economic progress and human well-being.

Tom: Okay. So how can digital technologies help deliver the climate goals to save our planet, for example, and can you give us some examples, for instance, digital farming?

Moustapha: Well, for example, there are many challenges with agricultural productivity and employment. This is the largest employer around the world. It offers many opportunities to absorb many of the young people that are unemployed, or those not in education or training, but what we see in parts of the world, like in Africa, is young people not wanting to get into farming in the old ways.

However, digitalization, using technologies to control farming, irrigation systems, the use of fertilizers through a mobile phone, has brought such a transformation which allows a number of young people to get back to farming. This is making agriculture more productive, and more attractive, and such transformation happens in the northern countries, as well as in the developing economies.

Tom: Okay. Well, that suggests that there seems to be rapid change in the types of jobs that are becoming green, and the skills that are going to be needed. Can you elaborate on this?

Moustapha: Well, just to come back to my example earlier, where you have companies such as Tech Innov in Niger, run by young people using these digital applications for farming and irrigation, or if you go to Western Africa, there're a few companies using mobile banking systems to pay the services linked to solar home systems. So all of these require new skills plus digital and green, and the ILO has estimated that there is a need for the greening of some 70 million jobs for this transition to be able to happen.

So, there are a number of gaps that exist today in labour markets to meet the demand for green transformation, and this is going to grow over time. It cuts across sectors in energy, in agriculture, and in construction and transport. I want to mention that this is also critical from a gender perspective. We are seeing a lot of occupations emerging in the green transition, but in sectors which are currently male-dominated. So that means that there is going to be an important effort to empower female participation through training, retraining, and vocational education to have women technicians and engineers, for example, in the energy transition.

Tom: Okay. In a recent tweet, the new ILO Director-General Gilbert Houngbo, called for joined-up thinking on social and economic environmental policy, adding, and I'm quoting here, "That with the right measures to shape a just transition for all, the shift to green and circular economies can be an engine for decent job creation and social justice." So what sort of policy measures are needed, do you think, to realize this vision?

Moustapha: Well, as the director-general said, the shift to green and circular economies is a positive narrative. We have estimated at the ILO, that a green and circular economy can generate an additional 100 million jobs by 2030. However, those job gains are not going to happen by default. They would require a range of policies and frameworks.

In the ILO, our tripartite constituents have put forward a set of guidelines for a just transition, which includes a number of labour market policies, enterprise development, skills development, social protection, occupational safety, macroeconomic industrial policies, but these go hand-in-hand with a critical need for policy coordination and institutional collaboration as well.

So it has to come with ministries of the environment, climate, working together with ministries of economic planning, ministries of labour, ministries of finance, but it also has to be grounded on inclusive and effective social dialogue with governments working together with employers' organizations and workers' organizations.

Ultimately, this just transition is going to make a critical contribution to advancing social justice because it will help maximize opportunities for gain for society, for the economy, but minimize the risks that will affect everyone, in particular those who are most vulnerable.

Tom: Well, in that context, what role does international cooperation play in helping to move forward this green and digital transition? Overall, because this is my last question to you, are you an optimist or a pessimist?

Moustapha: I think the problems that we are facing with the ecological transition, in particular, are global problems and they require global solutions, and this is why international cooperation is fundamental. This is why, when it comes to climate change, for example, since 1992, nations around the world have adopted a framework agreement to tackle climate change. This brings together a collective effort, and one of the most striking examples in the recent climate conference is this initiative, an executive plan to have an early warning system for all, by the UN Secretary-General seeking \$3 billion to make that happen. So, this is going to be fundamental, and helping countries that have a limited capacity to respond will only generate global benefits.

I want to say that I am an optimist because I believe, fundamentally, that there are only solutions, not problems. One can look at problems as opportunities to find solutions, and when it comes to the green and digital transitions, they are here to stay and countries, governments working with business, trade union, and communities have to find responses. So, I'm very hopeful that collectively, there will be solutions as the world has done facing the industrial transformation and many other transitions that happened in the history of humankind.

Tom: That is very optimistic, and you're making me into an optimist. So I want to thank you very much, Moustapha, for your thoughts. It's not only extremely interesting, but you've made it pretty clear that this is critically important for our collective future.

Moustapha: Thank you.

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Indeed, the green and digital transition is urgent because, in terms of the impact of climate change on our planet, we may be running out of time.

One thing is clear: if green is going to be the color of our future, then digitalization is going to be the engine that drives it.

And it seems that it's what we need to do not only to address the challenges in the future of work, but to guarantee the future of the planet.

I'm Tom Netter and you've been listening to the ILO Employment Policy Department podcast series, "Global Challenges, Global Solutions: The future of work". For more on this, go to www.ilo.org/employment. Meanwhile, thank you for your time.