

## **‘Green skills’ as such do not exist**

by Lisa Rustico

‘Green skills as such do not exist’ This is the striking message people heard in La Hulpe, during the Ministerial Conference ‘Promoting green employment’ organized by the Belgian Presidency of the European Council, on 28-29 September 2010. ‘Green skills’ do not exist to the extent that skills for green jobs are mainly traditional, existing skills, even though blended and redefined according to updated knowledge, values and new techniques for green markets. Although approaches and strategies widely vary across countries, different national experiences shared a common red thread: ‘very few jobs today are based purely on new competencies’, using the words of the French Ministry of Environment. ‘Emerging occupations are based on a blend of existing skills’, said Peter Szovics from Cedefop. Besides technical skills, generic skills such as leadership, management, communication, financial and inter-disciplinary knowledge, should not be underrated. There is nothing new under the sun, then. No revolutions in skills development. Not even dramatic needs for additional VET courses or disciplines. Or, at least, a milder approach to these themes. And yet, ‘green skills’ and ‘training for green jobs’ echoed along rooms and corridors during the whole two-day event. On the one hand, ‘green skills’, were praised as the strategic tools for enabling the workforce to take up job opportunities opened up by the green economy. The session ‘How to train workers for green skills’ focused on this specific topic. While Ms. Olga Strietska-Illina from the ILO was more sceptical about a revolutionary approach to green skills, Peter Szovics from Cedefop remarked that green skills are a mix of generic and technical skills. In any case, traditional labour market weaknesses should not be forgotten, as skills imbalances, negative externalities (e.g. lack of information), short-term demands of skills exceeding the response capacity of education and training systems, may interest green employment as well. ‘Training’, on the other hand was acknowledged as the major lever to trigger the engine of green jobs, no matter how many and in which sectors they will be created.

At the Conference in La Hulpe, despite that ‘green skills and training’ were on everybody’s lips, data showed that Countries destined only a relative amount of money out the total spending for green recovery to skills measures. Some best practices were presented though, from France, the UK, Belgium and they all laid within the scope of vocational education and training, promoting partnerships and a multi-stakeholder approach, including local/regional administration, with companies or sectors and education and training providers. Theory confirmed the consistency of such an approach. Cedefop’s studies demonstrate that the most effective responses come from a joint approach, combining the country sector and company level. Social partners confirmed also their willingness of engaging in the management of a historic shift, from a late-consumerist phase, towards the green utopia.

Great consensus, then.

But, considering that the mainstream nowadays is claiming that all jobs should get greener, the meaning of ‘green jobs’ *strictu sensu* fades, or it becomes articulated in different ‘shades of green’. Not only sectors like transport, energy and construction struggle for adequately trained and skilled workforce, but all workers, in every country, profession, sector, should undertake a greener approach to their jobs.

One question, hence, is what segment of the education and training systems can most effectively address skills needs for green jobs. If all jobs have to become greener, and if skills for green jobs are nothing but traditional skills redefined and updated according to new drivers of change, what can make a difference is the way people carry out their jobs, due to their motivation and commitment. In other words, not only retraining and strategies for skills updating and upgrading are among the priorities of companies; but also the engagement of all workers in making business greener. This can be developed only through a (green) lifelong learning approach that goes well beyond initial vocational education and training supply. Developing green awareness is something that cannot be achieved but from the earliest stages of education, including primary school, and all life long.

By the way, policy makers, experts and social partners expressed their consensus about the necessity of expanding the borders of what is green and converged towards the relevance of skills needs analyses and forecasts, as a precondition for matching companies' needs. In a world where the EGS (environmental goods and services) demand ceaselessly grows, binding regulations, norms and standards entail restructuring processes and job becomes increasingly flexible, skills are strategic in so far they allow workers adapting to new conditions, jobs, technologies. But this holds true not only for 'green skills', provided that they exist. But for all those skills that make people competent and able to cope with the rapid and unforeseeable labour market changes, including those entailed by the mechanisms of the green economy.

During the first ever ministerial conference on 'green jobs', within the EU framework, guest speakers and participants were invited to contribute to collect visions and policy recommendations for a European action plan in order to tackle the employment dimension of tackling climate change. Training and skills will surely be on the list. Hopefully a clearer understanding, concrete tools and strategies will shed light on the right path to achieve the EU2020 goals.

*Lisa Rustico*  
WiRES Project Coordinator