

The world players' express their views on green jobs in Europe: an overview

by Chiara Gnesi

The first Ministerial Conference on Promoting green employment is the proof that both international organizations and European institutions address the transition to a low carbon economy essentially in terms of employment challenge. As well as there is a global commitment toward the greening of economy and jobs, the European Commission has therefore made it as one of its priorities in the area of employment; last 7th September, President Barroso set the objective of creating 3 million green jobs by 2020.

During the two-days Conference at La Hulpe, prominent representatives of European Union, OECD and ILO agreed on the fact that, in the process of greening the economy, labour market has a central role, as all the jobs are changing and need to be greener. Consequently, the economic structural change is inevitable. The economist Stephen White (DG Environment of the European Commission) underlined that the growing global population aspire to OECD levels of income and time is running out for climate change mitigation; as the economy needs to be 15 times its current size by 2050, deep structural changes, in what is produced and consumed, technologies and location of economic activities, are the only way to go on and get ahead.

From this starting point, the Conference has been the occasion to kick-off a discussion about how policies can promote the greening of economy and which are the actors involved with sustaining the process. As many political economic theories thought, the market needs governments and social actors' support in order to manage an efficient and sustainable transition. Although transition is not a totally new challenge for market economies, its impact on the labour market and the economy as a whole will be so deep to be considered as 'the fourth big global Revolution', as asserted by John Martin, Director of Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, OECD. Even if the economy already coped with similar structural changes in the past, this transition has more complex feature, which make policy responses complicated and unpredictable.

In the words of Belgian Minister Joëlle Milquet and the Commissioner László Andor, the European Strategy 2020 emphasizes that the new employment opportunities "can only be exploited to the full if environmental, economic and employment policies are consistent and mutually reinforcing".

According to Joëlle Milquet, the process should start from the establishment of a new and shared methodology: member States are supposed to adopt the green employment benchmarks fixed by the Employment Committee (EMCO) and set complementary objectives on green jobs, promoting the exchange among them.

The European funds (European Social Fund and European Globalization Adjustment Fund) provide support to the transition towards a green economy, also ensuring the availability of programs and financing opportunities for more qualified workers. For the European Commission, identification and anticipation of skills needs are the priorities within the green growth; within the scope of the New skills for New Jobs initiative, the Commission is working in order to identify the specific skills required for green jobs and let workers have the opportunity to face with the new green labour market. In the process of re-training and up-skilling of the workforce, the role of education and training institutions, CVET providers, social partners and public employment services must be reinforced and promoted. The Council of European Union, OECD and ILO focused on the

importance of ‘training the trainers’ and of the involvement of social partners in education programmes in order to realize a successful policy that can address real needs.

The European Commission lingered over the critical role of SMEs in the transition, as they represent the 99% of companies and their added value amounts to 57%. SMEs deserve a particular attention in the green growth and must be supported so they can improve their capacity and face with the transition. In the end of her speech, the Prime Minister mentioned the importance of enhancing information sharing and “green awareness” among all stakeholders.

Also John Martin from the OECD focused on the importance of good policy to support workers in order “to avoid the risks of skill bottlenecks and exclusion of workers with obsolete skills”. In particular, the Organization paid attention to the need of public support for continuing vocational training, as it represents a crucial component of life-long learning systems. In addition to CVT, reconciling structural adjustment with social protection for workers is equally of prominent importance. In fact, the OECD praised the “flexicurity”, as a template to be necessarily adapted to different national contexts for the regulation and protection of employment and labour markets. In the matter of normative approach, the Director of the International Labour Office, ILO, Raimond Torres, emphasized the role of the ‘green taxes’ in supporting employment. Following the examples of countries like Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and UK, the shift of taxes from labour income to carbon intensive products can be, if accompanied by properly labour market policies and coordination across countries, a valid means to promote the green growth in a ‘budget neutral’ way. Torres painted a very positive picture of the transition in terms of benefits for jobs, incomes and environment. It is the ‘large short-run challenge’ to lead to a major competitiveness on long run, achievable by adjusting skills and technologies and by promoting social dialogue and a well-design policy regulation.

Although social dialogue has been recalled from all the experts of European Institutions, international organizations and sectoral representatives, the social parts attending the conference put it in the heart of their strategy. According to the European Trade Union Confederation, social dialogue is the core of a green equitable transition. The British Trade Union Congress suggests a bottom-up approach focused on social dialogue and industrial relations at the edge of the green growth strategy: trade unions are considered as central actors in managing the transition, actively involved in education and training programmes.

Besides, Institutions’ understanding of green growth did not reserve the right attention to neither the matter of decent work nor the involvement of developing countries. In fact, decent work has been only mentioned in green jobs definition; the same criticism goes for the developing countries, which should have been included within the call for future cooperation with third countries.

Finally, as speakers from the ILO underlined, indicators that include institutional and social aspects, such as the Human development index and the global competition index, have a strong correlation with the success in green growth coherence policy, much higher than the one with GDP per capita, GDP growth, or CO₂ emissions per capita. This means that a successful transition can be achieved not only through educational and training system capable to answer to the new market needs, but also by integrating social dialogue in skills and employment policies, also going beyond the GDP.

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