

A Green (or Blue?) Economy that Works for Social Progress

by Lisa Rustico and Francesca Sperotti

Ten years after the *Rio declaration on Environment and Development*, the transition to a low-carbon economy and its impact on the labour market remain among the key defining challenges of the 21st century. Despite bulky research and worldwide debate, in times of crisis, discontinuous public incentives and scant private investments for greening the economy, make the shift from theory to practice pretty hard. New ideas and concepts stem and echo, in search for a solution to a suffering planet and a stagnating economy. One is that of a “Blue Economy”: this new model aims at creating more income, using less input of economic capital, while creating social capital at the same time. Experts say that “thinking blue” allows avoiding all kinds of waste: there won’t be by-products any longer, as all what is produced by a productive process becomes raw material for another product, as in a cascade, where nothing is wasted. This is going to be true also for the world of work, where “waste” will be old fashioned organizational models, out of date technological equipment; also redundant workers?

It is not clear whether we are really facing a shift from the “Green Economy” to the “Blue Economy”. What is true is that climate change imposes urgent challenges to our economic and development model, and the world of work is at the heart of this transformation. Whilst research on green economy as a source of more and better jobs is still progressing, additional and new issues, such as the limits and risks linked to a greening labour market, need to be further explored, if we aim at a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges of a greening (or “blueing”?) economy. That will enable social actors to support socially acceptable climate policies and accompany a just transition to a greener economy, by dealing with environmental issues at the workplace.

With the aim of engaging unions in research carried out within workers organizations and other allied institutions, the workshop *A Green Economy that Works for Social Progress* – organized by the Global Union Research Network (GURN) in collaboration with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC CSI IGB) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), which took place on October, 24 and 25, in Brussels – offered ground for discussion about three issues, identified as the crucial stepping stones for building a just transition towards an environmentally respectful and socially empowering economy, namely: jobs created by the green economy, the potential for environmental action and rights at the workplace, and the fairness dimension of green taxation; (all presentations from the workshop are published in this Special Bulletin).

During this workshop, Adapt presented the main findings of the project WiRES (Women in Renewable Energy Sector), which the Italian research group headed and carried out in 2010 in cooperation with the University of Szeged (Hungary) and UPEE (Union for Private Economic Enterprise, Bulgaria). The presentation of WiRES contributed to the workshop by providing hints and policy recommendations on the role of social dialogue to engage more women in green careers, and, as a result, to boost female employment rates and improve working conditions of women workers in the renewable energy sector in Europe.

As the WiRES research pointed out, *ad hoc* social dialogue processes and structures covering the renewable energy sector as such might be a first step to make the transition towards a green

economy an opportunity for women workers too. But, as field-work and research acknowledge, more vocational education and training preparing young girls and women for technical jobs is needed: the female workforce indeed often lacks the skills and expertise required to fill some of the most required green jobs profiles. Beside access difficulties, good working conditions are often hindered by traditional cultural and organizational hurdles – in terms of work-life balance, gender pay gap, occupational segregation, ceiling class, work-related-stress etc. These factors, together with gender stereotypes, exacerbate women scant interest towards this sector, as well as those featured by the same employment conditions and technical job profiles. As a result, women might be less ready than men to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the ecological conversion of the economy.

In order to make the sector more accessible and more attractive towards women, social partners are called to support, first of all, interest and access to vocational education and training programs, in parallel with the anticipation and forecasting of future skills needs for WiRES. Secondly, they are called to play a key role in promoting gender mainstreaming for policies to make renewable energy sector more women friendly by guaranteeing a better conciliation between work and private life. And finally, stereotypes may be eradicated by taking awareness actions and disseminating information about the opportunity offered by a green career. By providing women with the right skills, the proper working conditions, and enjoyable career perspectives, social dialogue could help women to catch the opportunities offered by the transition to a low-carbon economy.

On the wave of the GURN workshop and in occasion of the first anniversary of WiRES final conference (23 November 2010), Adapt has the pleasure to confirm its commitment to study and develop research and projects on the impact of a greening economy on the labour market. To this end, Adapt weekly collects and disseminates documents on green jobs through its newsletter and its Green Jobs Observatory, whose management is going to be shared with the Law Faculty of the University of Szeged (Hungary) in the near future.

Considering the challenges that the transition to a low-carbon economy is posing and will pose in terms of employment, job profiles and skills, Adapt is committed to further strengthening and widening its established international network, continuously and actively engaged in the investigation of Green Economy worldwide. We are very pleased to welcome Professors, Researchers and Experts from all over the world to join Adapt Observatory of “Green Jobs”. Unless this is time for “Blue Jobs”.

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