

Discussion Forum

Green skills, Green Jobs, and the Green Eco-system. Where do we go?

Kenneth Abrahamsson

Frank Pot

Paul Preenen

Peter Totterdill

The global environmental, climate and biodiversity challenges require an urgent global response. The green transition and the move towards sustainability, including the transition to a climate-neutral economy, is triggering the need for a fundamental transformation of our society across a wide range of sectors. Europe must lead by example, by delivering on ambitious environmental, climate and biodiversity goals, enhancing growth, competitiveness, and quality job creation, while protecting the environment and ensuring a just transition to a more resource-efficient and circular economy.

SOURCE: EU COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS ON SKILLS AND COMPETENCES FOR THE GREEN TRANSITION. MARCH 7, 2023

Where do we go from a policy perspective?

The struggle for a climate neutral economy is a fast-paced political, social and economic hurdle race with many both known and unknown obstacles. One major institutional change is that the new US administration under the leadership of president Donald Trump will abolish President Biden's policies to fundamentally reduce greenhouse emissions and deciding to leave Paris Agreement. Other obstacles are that many countries continue to use fossil-based energy system as coal and oil. The growing geopolitical tensions and the fact the old technology energy systems also tend to be a political currency. There are also signs of the green spirit in losing its energy by declining interest and market demand for electric cars.

Another challenge or threat is that there is no one-directed highway to a sustainable green economy. It is a broader and more complex process of change influencing politics, enterprises, public sector and the civil society. It is also a process where the concepts of just transition will be tested in reality. Who will carry increasing cost for working and living, to support more long-term oriented goals of societal changes from an ecological perspective? The green transition needs new patterns of workplace innovations, but it is not easy to anticipate which occupational risks and hazards that may appear when the production stress and time for delivery is being stepped up. Another problem is staff recruitment and

composition of working teams, when employees and hired personnel are coming from various backgrounds. It takes time to build and initiate and strengthen a community of practice in a context of high products demands and in combination with various levels of algorithmic management and work intensification.

There is no standard model for how the challenge of just transitions can be solved. The concept of just transitions is both broad and blurred, reflected in the phrase just transition with or without workers. Technological and organisational changes do not always go hand in hand. Major industrial and organisational transition actualise the need for skills development and formal education upgrading. Swedish government have launched a new model for transitional upskilling offering paid educational level for eight months. This reform was part of a collective agreement between social partners on job security regulations.

More and more studies illuminate the crucial role of the local community, welfare institutions and systems of social security and public health. The move toward a climate neutral and de-carbonised economy is not just a matter for the labour market and job structures. It also has strong repercussions for the local society, and support from citizens and local interests. Shifting policies at European and global levels could both be drivers for change and major obstacles. The current policy tension between the European model for a climate neutral society with a far-reaching impact on various sectors, and the upcoming US policy on abolishing Biden's green policy mission and increase oil production, "drill, baby, drill" make the future political cohesion working climate change much more difficult, not to say impossible.

The challenge of boosting the capacity of electrification is not a one model quick fix. Installations of new plants on nuclear power is a time demanding and costly process. Wind power is an increasing field but is also meeting various obstacles and growing ethical tensions between environment, local groups and also how to make electricity available at sometimes a tripled capacity level for the industrial sector. It is a fundamental cross pressure between social, cultural, economic and technological goals. There will also be increasing global competition in the green transformation.

We are dealing with the future of work and societies with various concepts. Lehndorff compares the US New Deal initiated by President Roosevelt in the early 1930th with the EU Green Deal was proposed by the European Commission in June 2022 and was published in the EU's Official Journal in the end of 2024. Some years before that, The Global Deal was initiated by the Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven in 2016 and developed in cooperation with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as founding partners. And the EU takes a further step in talking about the Clean Deal with the focus on the industrial sector; sustainable working conditions, sustainable production systems and sustainable, zero-carbon products.

The policy for the Green Deal is not an open highway for societal and labour market change. Hopefully, the green transformation will not be a Mean deal considering various forms of problems to be solved and also social, economic and political barriers, recently reflected by President Donald Trump's counter policies to climate change and the green transformation in the US. In times of reluctance, science denial and new anti-climate popular movements, the role of EU becomes more important.

The recent policy document **Europe's Choice** provides a broad overview of ways to a climate-neutral and sustainable and energy-smart solutions. One important clarification is to relate the concept of just transition to the European Pillar of Social Rights. Another important mission is to develop a **Quality of job roadmap**. Climate change and job quality is a relation and interface that needs to be subject to further analyses and policy development.

Europe's way of life depends on the protections and opportunities of our social model and our social market economy. This is why it is so important for the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights to become a reality across our Union, respecting each country's social model. We need new impetus in areas where more progress is needed, and we will frame this work in a new **Action Plan on the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights**.

It will include initiatives looking at how digitalisation is impacting the world of work, from AI management, to telework and the impact of an "always on" culture on people's mental health. New forms of work should not lead to fewer rights, and I will propose to introduce a right to disconnect.

People and their jobs must always remain at the heart of our social market economy even as our industries and economies change shape. We need to ensure a **just transition for all**. This is why I will put forward a **Quality Jobs Roadmap**, developed together with the social partners. It will support fair wages, good working conditions, training and fair job transitions for workers and self-employed people, notably by increasing collective bargaining coverage.

And we will significantly increase our **funding for a just transition** across the next long-term budget. This will be part of a renewed commitment to strengthening European social dialogue in a time of economic and social change. Together with European trade unions and employers, we will deliver a new **Pact for European Social Dialogue in early 2025**.

EUROPE'S CHOICE POLITICAL GUIDELINES FOR THE NEXT EUROPEAN COMMISSION
2024–2029 URSULA VON DER LEYEN CANDIDATE FOR THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION PRESIDENT

The ILO/UN resolution on Just transition that was taken summer 2023 underlines the role of the social partners in the green transition.

“Members should give special attention to respecting, promoting, and realizing freedom of association and collective bargaining as enabling rights, which are vital for social dialogue. Consultations, exchange of information and other forms of dialogue between social partners and with governments are also important for a just transition.”

The twin challenge of climate change and digitalisation in a post-covid society, also calls for new and innovative workplaces, horizontal and vertical mobility and skill development and investments in new education programmes. It is also a process that are in the hands of social partners, but also with support from governments and other actors.

Where do we go from an analytic and theoretical perspective?¹

Green Transformation and Workplace Innovation

Peter Totterdill (WIE)

The achievement of corporate sustainability is likely to be strongly associated with companies in which employees across the workforce are fully aligned with strategic goals and in which employee involvement in continuous improvement and innovation is firmly recognised and valued.

Organisational distance between senior leaders and the wider workforce leads to lack of engagement and the misalignment of day-to-day practice with strategic goals, including sustainability. Workplace innovation emphasises flatter organisational structures and co-created leadership, through which front line employees can actively engage in the development and delivery of company strategy and thereby ‘own’ it. A good example highlighted during the San Sebastián Conference is that of Booth Welsh², where every employee is given the opportunity to contribute to the design and delivery of measures related to strategic goals based on “People, Planet and Profit”.

¹ As part of the editorial work, I asked for comments by EJWI friends on the analytical focus of green jobs and workplace innovation, and received responses from Peter Totterdill, Paul Preenen and Frank Pot.

² Totterdill, P. Exton, R. (2022) Workplace Innovation: Are we Serious? In: Abrahamsson, K. and Ennals, R. Sustainable Work in Europe: Concepts, Conditions, Challenges. Berlin: Peter Lang.

Likewise, workplace innovation plays a pivotal role in driving sustainability by embedding continuous improvement and employee-driven innovation in day-to-day practice, leading to greater employee involvement in the adoption of digital technologies whilst empowering individuals and teams to create and adopt eco-friendly solutions and the optimisation of existing processes.

We already know much about how to create workplace practices and cultures which empower workers to deliver organisational goals whilst also improving job quality. It is important to start with what we know, understanding workplace innovation as the catalyst for sustainable transformation by aligning organisational practices with environmental objectives, ensuring that growth, job quality and sustainability go hand in hand.

The concept of green jobs is problematic.

Frank Pot

The concept of green jobs suggests something good: architects who design green cities, engineers designing low carbon production processes, workers who discuss with their management how organisations and processes can become greener. But green jobs can also cover (very) bad jobs from a point of view of job quality or decent work. Workers installing solar panels on roofs rather often work not safely and/or have low wages. Workers in the recycling business (collect, sort, process) are exposed to dangerous substances and have often 3d jobs (dirty, dangerous, demanding/difficult).

Workers who must dismantle equipment, toys, etc. to recycle the components have heavy repetitive work with musculoskeletal problems and are exposed to hazardous substances. Workers in biomass may be exposed to microorganisms and endotoxins which may have the potential to affect health.

For green production processes and products special materials are necessary such as cobalt, cadmium and lithium. The mining of these materials is done under very bad working conditions, often also at the expense of local communities (water supply).

Concluding. When we practice or talk about green transition and/or green jobs we must pay attention to job quality and how to prevent precarious employment and segmentation (migrants doing the 3d-work) and leave no one behind.

The importance of social *intrapreneurship* for the twin transitions

Paul Preenen, TNO

Countries, regions, and organizations that are able to make both the green and digital transformation (twin transition) will likely emerge as the new leaders in the new (green)

economy. At a high level and from a top-down perspective this logically demands strong guiding policies, strategic investments, and bold leadership of politicians, policy makers and leaders.

From a bottom-up and intra-organizational perspective this requires the involvement and engagement of employees who are able and motivated to drive and integrate the two transitions. Social intrapreneurship, an emerging concept in practice and science, can play a significant role in driving these transformations bottom-up within organizations. Social intrapreneurship is defined as discretionary and informal employee-led process of identification and exploitation of entrepreneurial opportunities that address social or environmental challenges while contributing to the objectives of established organizations (Alt & Geradts, 2019).³

Social intrapreneurs are employees who act as change agents *within* an organization, driving innovative, purpose-driven projects that align business goals with social and environmental impact. Social intrapreneurs can bridge gaps between corporate sustainability goals and on-the-ground innovations by promoting sustainable practices and foster a culture of social responsibility and human centricity within organizations. These individuals could push for policies that prioritize green innovations while simultaneously addressing social concerns, such as job displacement or unequal access to training for new green technologies.

Social intrapreneurs focus on creating synergetic solutions that deliver both social value and business success. In the context of climate and digital change, this means leveraging digital tools and innovations to drive sustainable and social outcomes. For example, a social intrapreneur might promote the use of AI or big data to track and reduce carbon emissions, aligning environmental goals with organizational efficiency and profitability, while simultaneously safeguarding decent working conditions for employees.

In sum, social intrapreneurship can be a powerful tool for organizations facing the twin challenges of climate change and digital transformation. However, even though we can expect that social intrapreneurs can make things happen in many but not all organizational contexts, the question remains how we can optimally stimulate and facilitate social intrapreneurship in organizations.

Which organizational factors and practices drive social intrapreneurship? Future research should investigate this further by making the connection with Workplace Innovation theory. Which Workplace Innovation practices and organizational structures stimulate social intrapreneurship? Or alternatively, can social intrapreneurs enhance and implement Workplace Innovation in organizations to successfully guide the green and digital transformations in organizations?

³ Alt, E., & Geradts, T. (2019, July). Social intrapreneurship: Unique challenges and opportunities for future research. In Academy of Management Proceedings (Vol. 2019, No. 1, p. 16643). Briarcliff Manor, NY 10510: Academy of Management.

Selection of literature

Abrahamsson, K.& Ennals, R. (Eds.) (2022) Sustainable Work in Europe. Concepts, conditions, challenges. Berlin: Peter Lang Verlag

Castillo, Monica, Green jobs, green economy, just transition and related concepts: A review of definitions developed through intergovernmental processes and international organizations, Geneva: International Labour Office, 2023

Cedefop and OECD (2015). Green skills and innovation for inclusive growth. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop reference series.

Cedefop (2019). *Skills for green jobs: 2018 update: European synthesis report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series, 109. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/036464>

Cedefop and Eurofound (2023). Fostering skills use for sustained business performance: evidence from the European Company Survey. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/425052>

ILO (2019). Skills for a greener future: A global view based on 32 country studies. Geneva: ILO.

OECD (2017). Employment implications of green growth: Linking jobs, growth, and green policies. Paris: OECD.

UNEP, ILO, IOE, ITUC (2008). Green jobs: Towards decent work in a sustainable, low-carbon world. United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), ILO, International Organisation of Employers (IOE), International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

Verdolini, Elena Interlinkages between the just ecological transition and the digital transformation. Working paper. European Trade Union Institute. 2023:01.

About the authors

Kenneth Abrahamsson, Ph.D., former programme director, Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare, Forte, and adjunct professor, Human Works Science Luleå University of Technology, Sweden. Mail: Kenneth.abrahamsson@ltu.se

Peter Totterdill. Founding Director, Workplace Innovation, Europe CLG. Mail: Peter.totterdill@workplaceinnovation.eu

Frank Pot, Emeritus Professor of Social Innovations of Work and Employment, Radboud University, Nijmegen, and former director of TNO Work and Employment, Netherlands. Mail: frank.pot@ardan.demon.nl

Paul Preenen. Senior scientist at TNO and Professor at Saxion University of Applied Sciences. Mail: paul.preenen@tno.nl