A landmark report has reviewed the emergence of a ‘green economy’. It predicts that adaptation to climate change and emissions reduction schemes are creating new employment opportunities across the globe. One aspect of the report highlights the need for new training schemes to meet the growing needs of green industries.

The annual global market for environmental products and services is projected to reach 2740 billion US dollars by 2020, leading to a rapid growth in ‘Green’ job opportunities globally. A new report commissioned by UNEP reveals that climate change adaptation strategies, including pollution control and the shift from fossil fuels to renewables, will result in the creation of a high number of ‘Green’ jobs. These are defined as occupations that contribute substantially to preserving or restoring environmental quality.

The impact of extreme weather events could threaten employment opportunities in agriculture and ecotourism sectors, which would normally offer an escape from poverty for some of the world’s poorest communities. However, predictions suggest that jobs will be created from a need to develop environmental technologies to reduce carbon emissions, provide renewable energy supplies, develop new techniques and materials for construction and to sustain clean water supplies, sanitation and waste management. In addition, the need to fulfill the requirements of policies put in place to conserve biodiversity and natural resources could also create new jobs.

Job creation is predicted to take place on a large scale. 600,000 people in China are expected to be employed to produce solar thermal equipment for heating water. Already in South Africa, a number of people are employed as part of the “working for water” programme, which clears invasive alien plants from waterways to protect water resources. The programme has provided jobs and training for approximately 20,000 people.

However, as the growth in green industries accelerates, ‘skills gaps’ have been identified. Germany’s renewables industry is suffering from a shortage of qualified employees, especially those needed in highly skilled positions. The Confederation of British Industry has expressed concern that green sectors are struggling to find technical specialists, designers, engineers and electricians. Meanwhile, the US National Renewable Energy Laboratory has identified the shortage of skills and training as a leading barrier to renewable energy and energy-efficiency growth.

A policy framework is needed to address the skills gap, so that investment can be made in necessary training programmes. To ensure that communities make a smooth transition to a Green economy, polices must also prevent the negative effects of declines in traditional industries by introducing income support, retraining opportunities and relocation assistance. Many workplaces are already in the process of becoming more ‘Green’, but increased dialogue between workers and management is needed to improve aspects such as energy- and water-use efficiency.

1. This report was commissioned and funded by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as part of the Green Jobs Initiative of UNEP, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organization of Employers (IOE) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). It has been compiled by the Worldwatch Institute with technical assistance from the Cornell University Global Labor Institute.
2. www.unep.org/civil_society
3. WW programme, launched in 1995 and administered through the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (http://www.dwaf.gov.za/wfw/default.asp)


Contact: sniffenj@un.org or nick.nuttall@unep.org

Themes: Sustainable development and policy assessment