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Green jobs - what is it about?

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Green jobs is a popular subject of discussion in the context of a green economy. The concept links the two cross-cutting issues of environment and employment. But what exactly is it about? What are green jobs and how will they develop in the future?

Diverse definitions for green jobs

There exist various definitions of green jobs that are often very broad and have a different focus. The most common definition comes from the Green Job Initiative, a partnership between International Labour Organisation (ILO), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) und International Organisation of Employers (IOE). This initiative defines green jobs as positions in agriculture, manufacturing, construction, installation and maintenance, as well as scientific, technical, administrative, and service-related activities that contribute substantially to preserving or restoring environmental quality. The ILO also emphasises adequate working conditions for green jobs in the sense of "decent work". In contrast, the definition from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics focuses on the production process: jobs are green if they are either involved in the production of ecological products or in designing the production process in a more ecological way.

These definitions leave some open questions, such as the extent of ecological benefits or the definition of an ecological production process. Does the investment banker of an environmental fund have as green a job as an organic farmer or a worker in a factory for carbon-particulate filters? A further challenge poses the changing dynamics of environmentally sound technologies. What is considered environmentally sound today and produces green jobs may no longer be green in a few

years from now, because technologies become rapidly outdated.

Green jobs are difficult to measure

Depending on the definition of green jobs, the estimates on the potential of green jobs vary widely. UNEP calculated that in 2006 about 2.3 million people were working in the renewable energies sector worldwide. In contrast, the Brookings Institute uses a much broader definition and estimated as many as 2.7 million "clean jobs" alone in the United States in 2010. Results also differ depending on whether only direct green jobs are accounted for or indirect ones as well. Does a supplier for the construction of biogas plants have a green job? Where does the taxi driver in ecological tourism fit in?

In addition, the period under consideration greatly influences the employment figures. Studies show that green jobs are actually created in the short term, particularly in construction, agriculture, renewable energies, waste management and tourism. At the same time, the OECD emphasises that in the long term increasing automation can threaten green jobs (particularly in agriculture). In least developed countries the large proportion of jobs in the informal sector further complicates the measurability of green jobs.

Figures on employment potential further vary depending on whether gross or net impacts are taken into consideration. In this regard the Green Job Initiative differentiates between four impacts: (1) new jobs are created, such as climate change experts; (2) existing "brown" jobs are replaced by "green" jobs, such as when those related to fossil fuels are replaced by jobs in renewable energies; (3) jobs are completely eliminated, such as those related to production of materials prohibited in

the future, and (4) traditional jobs change in light of ecologically oriented requirements and work methods. Thus measuring green employment often provides just a snapshot of the current situation.

Green Jobs: goal in itself or by-product of sustainable development?

The future growth of green jobs is closely linked to future ecological changes, the type and extent of demand for green products, and the focus and implementation of national policies, innovations and technologies. The greatest potential for green jobs will primarily be in emerging economies, along with OECD countries. For example, in the renewable energies sector a large share of green jobs are already located in China and Brazil. The development prospects for green jobs in least developed countries have so far received little attention by researchers and are very uncertain. According to the ILO, the management of natural resources (including agriculture) and adaptation to climate change hold the greatest potential for green jobs in least developed countries.

Against this background the question arises of whether the promotion of green jobs can be a political goal in itself or much more a by-product in the transition to a more sustainable economy. The promotional instruments used so far have thus focused more strongly on environmental and climate protection or ecological technologies than on jobs.

Conclusion

A consensus on how to define "green jobs" is still missing. The estimates on the potential of green jobs are correspondingly diverse. Whenever using the term green jobs, it is therefore important to make clear how green jobs are defined, whether direct and/or indirect impacts, gross or net numbers are accounted for, and what time frame is being considered. ■