

Keyword: climate-change

Headline: Cleaner, greener, and richer

Byline: Christiana Figueres

Published Date: 12:11 AM September 29, 2014

Section: opinion

Word Count: 843

Content:

GENEVA—In the past, action to combat climate change was viewed largely as running counter to economic growth, with “going green” implying a sacrifice of prosperity for the sake of the environment. Today, we know better. By taking action to mitigate climate change, companies are promoting sustainable growth and creating high-quality employment.

The United States, for example, has added 1.2 million “clean” jobs to the economy since January, according to a new study by the Ecotech Institute. Since last year, employment has risen by more than 115 percent in the solar industry, and jobs related to energy efficiency have increased by over 50 percent.

In China, the International Renewable Energy Agency reports that more than 1.7 million people are already employed in the renewable-energy sector. And the Global Climate Network estimates that seven million additional jobs could be created if government targets for wind, solar, and hydropower are met. Worldwide, an estimated 5.7 million people were employed directly or indirectly in the global renewable-energy industry in 2012—a figure that could triple by 2030.

Of course, expansion of renewable energy alone is not enough to combat climate change. Smarter ways of managing the planet’s natural assets—such as forests, freshwater supplies, soils, and biodiversity—are also needed to enhance the environment’s capacity to absorb carbon-dioxide emissions, while increasing the capacity of communities and countries to adapt to the climate change already underway.

One initiative that addresses climate change from both angles is South Africa’s Expanded Public Works Program, which generated one million employment opportunities during its first five-year phase, and aims to create 4.5 million more by the end of this year. In addition to renewable-energy production, the program emphasizes wetland and forest rehabilitation and fire management. It even addresses social inclusion, with many of those employed coming from vulnerable groups, such as single mothers.

Likewise, India’s Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act aims to ensure livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to perform unskilled manual labor. The lion’s share of this work involves projects that can boost environmental resilience, from soil and water conservation to flood protection, reforestation, and small-scale irrigation.

In Brazil, the Bolsa Verde (“green grant”) program, which offers incentives to poor families to carry out conservation work in local nature reserves, provided monthly payments of \$35 to more than 16,600 families in its first year. There are plans to extend the program to 300,000 families, and to add other climate-friendly projects, such as renewable-energy schemes. Colombia and Mexico have introduced similar initiatives.

Achieving a meaningful global climate agreement at next year’s United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNCCC)—one that advances the long-term vision of a climate-neutral world by 2050—would substantially boost the potential to create high-quality green jobs. The

alternative—continued growth of global CO2 emissions—would not only limit this potential; it would also undermine economic output and, according to estimates by the International Labor Organization (ILO), reduce productivity by more than 7 percent, on average, worldwide.

Extreme weather events, which will increase in frequency and severity as global temperatures rise, are already taking their toll. Hurricane “Katrina,” which struck New Orleans in 2005, led to 40,000 job losses that year. Cyclone “Sidr,” which ravaged Bangladesh in 2007, disrupted several hundred thousand small businesses and adversely affected more than 560,000 jobs. In other words, climate action will not only create new jobs; it will also save existing ones.

To be sure, some job losses are inevitable, as carbon-intensive industries give way to more sustainable businesses. Managing these losses is integral to ensuring a “just transition” to a climate-neutral economy.

The good news is that the seven most highly polluting industries, which account for 80 percent of CO2 emissions, employ just 10 percent of the labor force. Job growth in the low-carbon economy can easily compensate for these losses.

Moreover, governments must initiate retraining and skills development to enable workers to take advantage of new employment opportunities in clean energy and natural-resource management. After all, creating jobs means little if the labor force is not equipped to fill them.

The fact that two of today’s most pervasive challenges—climate change and unemployment (especially among the young and the unskilled)—can be addressed simultaneously, with mutually reinforcing policies, leaves governments and international institutions with no excuse for inaction. The ILO and the UN climate convention recognize this, but they cannot do it alone.

By putting the planet on the path toward decarbonization, world leaders who met in New York for the UN Climate Summit last week and in Paris for the UNCCC next year can deliver a safer, healthier, and more prosperous world that provides millions with decent work opportunities. It is an opportunity that all should seize. Project Syndicate

Christiana Figueres is executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Subscribe to our daily newsletter

By providing an email address. I agree to the Terms of Use and acknowledge that I have read the Privacy Policy.

Guy Ryder is director-general of the International Labor Organization.