

SEI Asia podcast miniseries: Air pollution in the world of work

Episode 3: Air pollution and just transitions to green economy

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Guest: Eric Roder

0.36 - 1.12

Diane: Hi. My name is Diane Archer. I'm a Senior Research Fellow in the urban cluster at Stockholm Environment Institute or SEI in Asia. In this episode of our podcast series, we want to talk about air pollution in the world of work, and how we can ensure a green transition in the labour sector today. I'm joined by Mr. Eric Roder from the International Labour Organization, or ILO. He is a specialist on green jobs, climate action and resilience through just transitions. Eric, welcome to the podcast.

1.13 - 1.17

Eric: Thank you so much, Diane. I'm very fortunate to join the podcast.

1.19 - 1.35

Diane: Great. We look forward to the conversation. So, maybe we can start with a question about how ILO defines a transition to a green economy, and what does this mean for transitioning the types of jobs that people do?

1.36 - 2.36

Eric: First of all, let me give you a definition of what a just transition is. According to the ILO, a just transition is a process and a goal to undertake climate change actions that equally advanced job creation, social justice and fair transitions for workers, enterprises and communities on an equal footing. Further on the ILO angle, we really want to push the social justice part of it because we feel that no transition to a greener economy is going to be possible without workers inputs. So, a part of this is there's a shared goal, but different pathways for different countries dependent on their individual context, providing for all just transitions will allow us to address both climate changes but also the sustainable development goals by contributing to decent work, social inclusion, and poverty eradication. And the need to... for a just transition will be a significant driver of change in the world of work, but potentially positive change.

2.38 - 3.30

Eric: To boil all this down, a just transition would be if you're, for example, working in coal mining or coal fired power plants, and you want to transition to cleaner energy sources such as intermittent energy

sources such as hydropower or solar or wind. Then you want to retain those workers that would lose their jobs in coal fired power plants and upskill them so they can continue work in greener technology areas. But also, there has to be the linkage. It doesn't necessarily mean that if you're working in a cleaner energy area, mean that it's a safer transition. So, we have to look at the occupational safety and health issues that are linked to, let's say, working on solar panels.

3.31 - 4.08

Diane: There's quite a lot of components to transition to a green economy and green jobs then. And this podcast is actually arising out of a project that is looking at air pollution in the world of work. And we've seen from our project case studies across Southeast Asia that many workers are still working without adequate protection from pollutants, especially those who work in informal jobs and in an informal economy. So, how do we ensure that the transition to green jobs also reaches the informal sector, which remains largely unregulated?

4.09 - 4.57

Eric: It's a tough question because, in the informal sector, the biggest challenges are that people are in this informality, they don't have access to social benefits that you could get in the formal sector. So, it's a hand-in-hand process dealing with pollution. For example, if we go all the way down to the SMEs, people that are operating food carts in countries such as Thailand, countries such as Lao PDR, and around Southeast Asia, how can we improve their occupational safety and health if their livelihood is simply operating a food cart where they're either grilling banana or grilling chicken or all these types of things? How can we change it and how to move it to a more formal setting?

4.58 - 6.31

Eric: Well, firstly, it should be a concern to everyone, including the government in these countries that the smoke from these vending pursuits [are] somehow mitigated. And some of that is through innovations. Unfortunately, not all the innovations are going to be cost effective. But let's say changing your grill away from charcoal to electric, you're still going to produce smoke. So, you're going to need a fan that would suck up the smoke and send it higher above in the air around you. I think perhaps the best way to approach these issues is also look at other ways of producing the same food. It doesn't have to be grilled, perhaps it can be dried. So, these are things that need further exploration. But these workers also need to join a trade union, for example, workers that operate food carts. And if a trade union was set up, they could be part of a trade union. And then their voice is collective. Then there's the opportunity to move from the informal sector to the formal sector. The co-benefits, obviously, you have to elaborate the co-benefits to people that are in the informal sector. So, they understand that they can

gain access to social security, access to better health care, and have a stronger voice as a collective as opposed to a single vendor that could face harassment from other businesses or even from the police and so forth. These are some of the things to think about and some of the challenges.

6.32 - 6.51

Diane: And can you think of any particular incentives or policies from the side of government that could also help to facilitate this transition, especially in the context of informal workers, whether they're street vendors or maybe small family run businesses?

6.52 - 8.09

Eric: Before we go into the actual policy, if governments consider what health issues that are related to air pollution and how that impacts not only the vendors, but people who are in the immediate area. In the long term, what you have is increased healthcare costs as people are exposed to pollutants that can increase their risk of lung cancer and so forth. It was like 15 years ago here in Thailand, I think it was, Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, they tested street dogs, and they tested traffic police to see they checked their lung conditions. They found that 70% of the street dogs who are living along the major roads had lung cancer. And a significant number of police who were directing traffic also exposed and had lung cancer as well. Since that time, the changes I've seen is there are some masks that reduce the PM 2.5 that the police do wear, but it shows that it's a significant problem to deal with these issues. And I think over the years here in Thailand, as an example, you see the street vendors, there's not as many and they're more organized in certain parts of the city.

8.10 - 8.46

Eric: Maybe they're in areas where they're not being monitored but they have something called a "tessakit" who are the kind of police that monitor street vendors. And so they've sort of looked at ways to move them out of really congested areas. And I think they're exploring ways to be more like Singapore, where they create these types of food courts. And then they also can offer different ways of ... maybe introducing innovations that don't use charcoal, for example, in cooking food and these types of things.

8.47 - 9.21

Eric: So by increasing your occupational safety and health in the long run, you're reducing costs. And then the government also increases its own tax base, bringing in people from the informal sector to the formal sector. And then for those people that have joined, obviously, the biggest incentive is they have

greater voice because they could join a trade union. So obviously those are some, just briefly on some of the co-benefits of why the government should take up these types of policies.

9.22 - 9.48

Diane: So, it sounds like organizing informal workers is a key step. So, this brings us on to the next question, which is around the stakeholders, as well as the obvious actors such as Ministries of Labour or Ministry of Environment and Health. What other stakeholders should be engaged to ensure a green transition in the labour sector?

9.49 - 10.43

Eric: As you have touched on already. Firstly, it's government. Secondly, it would be industry and firms, and thirdly is workers. So, this is what in the ILO we call the wage workers, employers and government. This is the tripartite and these are the key elements that support the just transition, green and decent job creation. On the industry and firm side, I'd say industry and firms play a role in exploring and implementing innovation for sustainability at all levels, and links into the supply chain and taking up opportunities and incentives to reduce emissions and environmental impacts. This obviously requires closer knowledge and collaboration across the supply chain with customers, suppliers, and even competitors. And so collaboration skills and networks will be crucial from the industry side or private sector side.

10.44 - 11.27

Eric: Now for the workers, workers will play a key role in increased environmental sustainability as it will be workers who will design and implement new processes and products. As the pandemic has shown that workers, particularly in the early stages of the supply chain bear a lot of the risk and cost of our current globalized supply chain system, so protecting and empowering these workers, the majority of which in the sectors that ILO deals with such as garments and even all agricultural activities, most of these workers are women and they will be an essential strategy and strengthening and creating resilience; for example, in the garment supply chain.

11.28 - 11.54

Diane: I think these links nicely to whether you could share us a couple of case studies preferably from Asia about examples where just and green transition in the labour sector has been achieved and if you have examples that are relevant to air pollution context where workers might have been exposed to air pollution, and as a result less exposed, that would be great.

11.55 - 13.00

Eric: From my experience working with the private sector, I've come across examples in the garment and textile sector in Vietnam. For example, this company produces denim. It's called SAITEX. And what they have done with their factories in Vietnam is they've become zero emissions or almost zero emissions factory. And what that has done for workers is that has increased occupational safety and health. The dying process is they've applied energy efficiency and cleaner production principles at SAITEX. And it has allowed better empowerment of workers who now if they see a problem such as let's say a boiler leak, they will report it, and not be ignored by management. And I know that we've had them for roundtables and workshops in the past not just with the ILO but with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia Pacific.

13.01 - 14.21

Eric: And a more recent example, there's a company in Thailand, TPPPI, what they do is they're making cement on one side. But they also have two coal fired power plants and they have already phased those power plants out. They move from coal fired power plants to waste to energy, and strictly only taking plastic waste and converting it into energy without producing any greenhouse emissions that would enter the environment. And then using the leftover in the ash from that process to use in their cement making processes.

13.43 - 15.24

Eric: And if you're familiar with the issues of plastic waste that the city produces, you can see piles of plastic that could be like two stories high and actually go on for like a kilometer. So, there's a lot of waste being produced because we as a society and globally ... we're a throwaway society, we haven't learned to really recycle yet, even though you hear the term recycling a lot. But this particular company is taking all this waste and they have "before and after" photos. So, even though the energy produced from this waste to energy is 40 percent less than what you would get from coal, the tradeoffs and the benefits are much higher. They were able to retain all the workers and they actually increased their workforce because there was a lot of informal workers in the plastic collection process. And they formalized those workers because they wanted to incentivize them to ensure that the separation of other types of waste that could go directly to a landfill was separated from plastic. So no, workers lost their job and they actually increased jobs. And they developed all this technology in-house, and there were no government incentives or anything. So, you can look at it in the reverse, where companies follow policy set by governments. But in this case, the private sector entity has taken the lead because

they saw a cost-effective way to continue to produce energy using waste. So, I thought that these were two really very interesting examples.

15.25 - 16.03

Diane: Thank you, Eric. Those are great examples and they also, especially the second example, just highlights the fact as well that for many workers, their exposure to air pollution might be not just at the workplace, but also ambient air pollution as well, especially if their workplace is outdoors. So, there is also a real need to try and reduce overall ambient air pollution if we want to ensure a safer environment for everyone. So, initiatives such as this, which transition from coal to waste as energy sources, would help to contribute to cleaner air.

16.04 - 16.50

Diane: So, thank you very much, Eric, for sharing your insights and those of the ILO about how we can achieve the transition to green jobs in a just and inclusive manner. I think we've still got a long way to go. Our research has shown us that exposure to air pollution in the workplace is still an issue, but hopefully with more and more organizations, companies, workers and the government gaining increasing awareness of the importance of acting on a safer workplace for everyone, not only for their health, but also for increased productivity, hopefully we will achieve a just transition to a greener economy.

16.51 - 17.00

Diane: I really appreciate the time you spent with us today and your willingness to share your knowledge and experience. Thanks very much.

Eric: Thank you so much, Diane.