

Global challenges – Global solutions: COVID-19 and the Employment Policy Response

Q&A for:

How nature-based solutions can power a green jobs recovery

**Interview with Maikel Lieuw-Kie-Song, Technical Specialist,
ILO Employment Policy Department and Vanessa Pérez-
Cirera, Deputy Leader, World Wide Fund for Nature Global
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Introduction by host:

Nature is hiring. Our natural world provides enormous opportunities for creating jobs and stimulating economies, while protecting the planet. More than half of the world's GDP – some US\$44 trillion – is moderately or highly dependent on nature. And globally, some 1.2 billion jobs in sectors such as farming, fisheries, forestry and tourism depend on the effective management and sustainability of healthy ecosystems.

But today, the natural world and our economies are experiencing multiple challenges, intensified by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. This cascade of crises has had a dramatic and tragic impact on labour markets, eliminating hundreds of millions of jobs and livelihoods.

Unprecedented times call for unprecedented responses. So, for the first time, the Worldwide Fund for Nature or WWF and the International Labour Organization—have collaborated on a new, ground-breaking joint report urging policymakers to urgently explore the potential of so-called Nature-based Solutions, and seek to integrate them in their crises responses.

With us today are the two editors of the report, the WWF's Global Deputy Lead for Climate & Energy Vanessa Perez Cirera and ILO Employment Intensive Investment Programme technical specialist, Maikel Lieuw-Kie-Song. Vanessa and Maikel, welcome to the podcast.

So my first question is for Vanessa. What are nature-based solutions and how do they connect to employment and job creation?

Vanessa: Hi, Tom. In a nutshell, nature-based solutions are interventions that protect, sustainably manage, and/or restore natural or modified ecosystems, but with the objective at the center of creating a positive and sustained impact on socio-economic development. So these are activities that conservation is to have done for a huge number of years, but now with a measurable socio-economic development impact purpose. Basically nature-based solutions connect to employment as they require a fair amount of labour activities. And the interesting side of nature-based solutions is that at the same time, they create broader societal benefits. So while they enhance or maintain the natural capital base, they create other ecosystem services for other ages in populations, or even global populations, such as storing carbon and helping to address climate change or helping mitigate the impacts of climate change in vulnerable populations.

So that's basically the way that they connect. Sometimes they have a huge amount of labor requirements at the start, with different labor requirements later such as urban restoration or creating urban forests. But sometimes, and this is the very interesting part, is that when you have very well-connected land tenure regimes at the local level, they can actually enhance the natural capital base where communities depend on, such as, for example, sustainable forest management or ecotourism or creating no-take zones for fisheries, with the objective of creating increased productivity in adjacent areas. So they are very interesting in the way that they create immediate no harm jobs. And also they can actually enhance the income source flow in the future for local communities.

Okay. Thank you for that explanation. Can you tell us how nature based solutions help with the recovery or can help with the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis? Both in the short-term and in long-term.

Vanessa: So, as you mentioned at the introduction of the podcast, we are seeing an economic downturn of unprecedented magnitude. And one of the ways that this economic downturn is expressing itself is in job losses. We will see an important impact in the labor force. And the interesting side of nature-based solutions is that they often require non-specialized labor, and that can be immediately put to work with no harm effects on nature. So when you think about recovery packages and we must be very clear about this, there are really not a huge progress in green recovery packages around the world except for specific countries, particularly located in Europe. In most cases, governments are spending into very conventional measures that don't necessarily create value into the future.

So when we think about recovery packages that don't take us to a downward spiral, which would be the case if we actually invest in things like increasing oil and gas extraction or other unsustainable infrastructure, that would create or that would harm environment and that would harm the natural base that sustains our healthy development in the future. So thinking about recovery packages, we have identified five principles. They should improve human wellbeing without harming nature, they should aim for setting foundation to transform sectors in the future towards more sustainability, use existing institutional arrangements and proven measures, that they can include cross-sectoral approaches or collaboration, and that they maximize the creation of decent jobs. And what we found in this study, is that nature-based solutions can actually tick all of these five boxes. They do no harm. They enhance the ability of nature to provide services in the future. They create a good amount of immediate jobs and importantly, in populations that are often the most fragile socioeconomic wise.

Something important to mention as well is that many of these solutions are synergistic in nature. So for example, while you are creating jobs you're also

enhancing the community's resilience to future climate events. And many of these communities are actually very hard-hit by both the pandemic as well as climate impacts. So the climate crisis is important to recognize that it hasn't gone away.

Maikel, I'd like to elaborate a little bit on this issue of the impact of the crisis or the crises on unemployment. The ILO has estimated that as many as 1.6 billion workers or nearly half of the global workforce, are at risk of losing their livelihoods due to the COVID-19 crisis. So could you explain to us how we can integrate and coordinate nature-based solutions with more conventional recovery methods? In effect, I think creating what we could call a kind of hybrid response where they function together.

Maikel: Thanks, Tom. And thanks for having me as well on the podcast. So one area where you can really see a potential for hybrid approach is in climate change mitigation. So on the one hand, we know nature-based solutions can play a really important role as our forests or wetlands or grasslands and other ecosystems all have the ability to absorb and store vast amounts of carbon, and so will help address climate change. But for this to be done, they need to be restored and they needed to be protected. And to do this at scale, we can get a lot of people working in these areas to do so.

But at the same time, we also know that nature-based solutions alone are not sufficient to respond to climate change. And so we need to also have the other solutions we're all aware of, such as shifting to renewable energy sources and the low-carbon economy. So this is kind of an example at the macro level where you need both. You need a hybrid approach. We can have nature do part of it, but we need the other approaches as well. But we can see this also at a much smaller scale. And a nice simple example are green roofs. Such green roofs provide excellent insulation, so they save us heating costs on the one hand. But on the other hand, they really provide space and they support nature, and provide space for nature to blossom. And again expanding such a solution, for instance having a program to have a large-scale effort to install more green roofs can again lead to substantial job creation in many countries.

Okay. I'd like to ask both of you if you can tell us how the nature-based solutions are being translated into action on the ground? I mean, for example, can you give us some concrete examples, where nature-based solutions have been successfully implemented and contributed to job creation? Vanessa?

Vanessa: Sure, Tom. I can talk about a couple of examples. Probably one interesting example where you can see the amount of jobs created at the very start, is the restoration of urban forest. For example, in Germany, the Emscher Landscape Park created as much as 60,000 jobs in its initial stages. And as you can imagine those jobs cannot be sustained necessarily in the future. However, the direct value of ecosystem services that the park provides yearly is estimated at 21 million euros and the additional benefits to users at about 107 million annually. So you can really think about these as kind of job creating opportunities that create public benefits.

In other cases, such as the ones that I mentioned before, for example, when you invest in sustaining the capital that maintains sustainable fisheries, for example, there is evidence across the world that if you select voluntary no-take zones through community science and community surveillance, sometimes fishery yields can actually double. So you have these schemes where you actually enhance natural capital, and you can see returns double in the future.

Another great example probably at the very large-scale, is the Great Green Wall Initiative of Sahel that provided about 350,000 jobs and sequestered 250 million tons of carbon by 2030. And it's actually focused on a particular challenge and increasing food security. So you can actually see how these work. So, if you look at tackling food security but through using nature as your ally, you can have important co-benefits such as carbon storage, and in doing so create an important amount of jobs. Over to you, Tom.

And Maikel can add some concrete examples as well?

Maikel: Sure, Tom. So one area, or one approach also where we can see the use of NBS is also to very specific job creation schemes. And a great example of this

is the Working for Water program in South Africa that has been running for more than 25 years already. And essentially, it's called Working for Water and essentially it's a large scale watershed management program. And we know in many areas you see increasing water scarcity both due to climate change and increasing population pressures. And addressing that by working with nature can really help. So, in the one hand, if we poorly developed watersheds, we got a lot of water run off that cannot be used, the water quality goes down. But by restoring watersheds we can really turn this around, increase water availability, as well as water quality for many urban areas. And so the Working for Water program, for example, does this around many areas, around many cities in South Africa. At any time, probably about 20,000 people who are primarily engaged in restoring these landscapes and removing alien invasive plants, which use up a lot of the water, that would otherwise be feasible for the city. And it's been shown that such an approach in Cape Town which is famous for its water shortages, it was in the news a few years ago, that such an approach is one of the most cost effective ways of addressing water shortages in this area. Much cheaper for instance than building a desalination plant, which is one of the other options that has been on the table.

Another example we cite in the report is the Grain for Green Program in China, which is really the largest reforestation effort in the world. It involves reforestation of the watersheds along both the Yellow and Yangtze rivers in China, where due to deforestation we saw a lot of problems with declining agricultural productivity, soil erosion, runoff into these rivers, silting up of dams and reservoirs. And essentially a lot of the forest areas along these rivers was restored and it was done by compensating local farmers to reforest at least part of their land. So this then provided them with livelihoods and they are engaged in maintaining these forests as well so they have continued livelihood. And at the same time they are addressing all these problems related to water management in these watersheds.

Well, this all sounds very good and very interesting, but of course there must be some obstacles or roadblocks to the wider adoption of nature-based solutions, both at the national and global level. Vanessa, can you elaborate on this a little bit?

Vanessa: Sure, Tom. So I think the first one is that greening the recovery has become now the new buzzword in the international arena and debates and lots of conversations happening at the international level. I don't think the same level of conversation is actually happening at the national level. And it could be for a variety of reasons. I think that in many cases, for example, environment ministries that are in charge of these solutions are really probably the third or the fourth layer of ministries within a country. And they're not the ministries that normally, the finance ministers who are negotiating loans and recovery packages internationally are the ministries that they normally or usually speak to. They speak to sometimes the labor ministries, the economic ministries, then probably energy and social development. And I would think that the very last they speak to environment ministers. So I think moving from the global to the national and to the local and creating that awareness, it's key. I think the officers are not taking seriously nature as a possibility both to create short-term impacts and then of course the longer term impacts. I think the other bottleneck is that in many places environmental civil society is not as strong as we would like it to be. I think that is growing across the globe in a positive way, but still many governments are not accountable to civil society in the way that you could see in Europe for example. And then of course the immediacy of the response. Many governments are still dealing with the sanitary emergency, while others have already started to craft deals.

So I think importantly, we have to create awareness, we have to put these numbers on the table and we have to also extrapolate these numbers at the macro level. So thinking about what this could mean if this could be picked up at scale. And of course at scale doesn't mean to do programs in a fast and wrong fashion. We've seen examples of eel restoration programs that are not made with local species and in a way that they would sustain themselves in the future. So I think also we have to steer away from populist measures and really

think about the good examples and the evidence that has been brought about now, really clearly on the interventions that work and that work quite really well, sometimes in combination with some conventional measures, sometimes alone. And that they're just really changing the mindset that we're not talking small anymore, we can talk large, we can talk immediate and we can talk with specific numbers.

Maikel.

Maikel: I just want to add a few things there. I mean, I think there's also in many places still this kind of, what I call inertia or falling back to what we know already, what we're familiar with. So that people kind of tend to respond with the easiest solution or the more familiar solution. And I think adopting these at scale does require some openness to doing things differently and being more innovative or being more collaborative. So I think this is also something that is an obstacle to the wider adoption.

So another thing we need to address really to be able to get a wider spread adaptation of these nature-based solutions is really how we deal with co-benefits. So one key characteristic of nature-based solutions is that they generate multiple benefits, but these accrue to multiple stakeholders, so they may not always accrue to the person or to the institution that is financing the intervention. And so these benefits also often don't weigh into the actual decision on whether to use these approaches or not. And there are two issues here, sometimes these benefits are hard to quantify because, for example, if there's increased biodiversity or increased access to nature, how do you quantify that? And then there's a problem of them then directly accruing to the person or institution responsible for the financing.

Thank you, both. We just have a little bit of time left, so can I just ask you for a very brief, just the most important thing you think needs to happen for nature to become more of a centerpiece within the recovery packages that are moving forward? Vanessa let's start with you.

Vanessa: Thank you, Tom. So regardless of the challenges that both Maikel and me just mentioned, I think that the most important thing that needs to happen is for policy makers to realize that nature-based solutions can create both short and long-term benefits as well as global benefits, but as well as local quantifiable benefits such as job creation. And I think that if they have that long-term vision, but that short-term imperative, that nature-based solutions can actually be a very powerful ally in recovery packages moving forward.

Maikel.

Maikel: Yeah. I think this notion that we should see nature as an ally, both in addressing our practical everyday problems towards access to water and sanitation or improving food production and making cities more livable, as well as that nature is an ally and can be an ally in creating jobs. I think that's the shift we need to make away from this false choice of whether we value nature or whether we value the economy, but actually to recognizing that these two are actually symbiotic and we need both. I think that's really the shift you need to make.

Moderator out:

Well after hearing that, I think it's fair to say that ultimately, building a better future of work means building it green. And it goes without saying from what we've just heard that the potential of Nature-based Solutions to provide job-intense economic recovery while having a multiplier effect in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, to help make sure that no one is left behind. The joint ILO WWF report and these issues will be the subject of a webinar as part of London Climate Action Week on the 16th of November. Together, these factors send a critical message – we must mend our broken relationship with nature. Why? Because without a healthy planet there can be no healthy economies, nor decent jobs.

