



# ZERO POLLUTION TALKS



## Flash report: "Zero Pollution & the European Year of Skills" - Zero Pollution Talk 27 June

On 27 June 2023, the Zero Pollution Stakeholder Platform (ZPSP) hosted the first in a series of Zero Pollution Talks. This first event, on "Zero Pollution & the European Year of Skills", focused on the critical role of green skills and a sustainability-guided educational curriculum in achieving zero pollution and driving the broader green transition.

The meeting opened with remarks from the co-chairs **Veronica Manfredi**, Director for Zero Pollution, DG Environment, European Commission and **Marieke Schouten**, Alderman of the municipality of Nieuwegein, Member of the European Committee of the Regions.

**Veronica Manfredi** said: *"the Zero Pollution Talks initiative aims at exchanging policy ideas and knowledge to raise awareness around how to reach the Zero Pollution ambition that the European Union is committed to. Two years ago, the Zero Pollution Action Plan highlighted the importance of developing a core green skillset for the labour market to guide training across the economy, with a view to creating the generation of climate, environment and health-conscious professionals that we need for the transformation to happen"*.

**Marieke Schouten** added: *"There is a strong connection between the green agenda, Zero Pollution, and the development of current and future skills. Given these links, we need to consider how we can effectively integrate education and global issues. The Zero Pollution agenda has ambitious goals, making the focus on skills development key"*.

In her opening statement **Sophia Eriksson Waterschoot**, Director for 'Youth, Education & Erasmus+' in the EC's DG for Education and Culture, highlighted that *"education is so much more than skills and competence. It is also about helping and encouraging individuals and learners to be empowered, to live sustainably and to embrace the whole idea of a Zero Pollution environment"*. She also highlighted how EU initiatives – such as the Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development, and the European Competence Framework – will serve as a roadmap for Member States to make necessary reforms, empowering educators and setting the needed groundwork for education, environment, and climate change to become integral parts of future-fit education systems.

**Manuela Geleng**, Director for 'Jobs and Skills' in the Commission's DG for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion, started her introduction by drawing attention to the European Year of Skills as a tool to increase investment, upskilling and reskilling of the workforce in accordance with business and society needs. She said: *"now we have a new policy framework that actually focuses on how to make vocational education and training more attuned to the needs of the labour market, the role of the Member States is to set out the implementation plans."* She also emphasised the need for cross-sector collaboration and the importance of sharing good practices to foster enthusiasm and facilitate the successful implementation of this transition.



**Veronika Safrankova**, Head of Brussels Office, UNEP, added: "Green education and skills are essential for addressing the triple planetary crisis. It is a precondition to tackle not only the climate, biodiversity loss, and pollution crises, but also other interconnected threats and risks. Co-creating with young people and equipping them with knowledge and skills is crucial to effectively address this challenge". She also highlighted the need to think about how environment translates into other disciplines and outlined the collaboration between the International Labour Organisation, UNICEF and UNEP in creating green jobs for youth, equipping young people with green skills and supporting businesses in greening their operations.

The speakers also discussed the significance of adopting a systemic and "whole institution" approach when considering how the educational sector can address the scale and urgency of environmental challenges. This approach involves engaging multiple actors, working across ministries, sectors and disciplines, increasing investments and empowering educational leaders through targeted professional development and training. Additionally, the speakers highlighted the importance of mainstreaming green skills in the labour market, and vocational education and training. Recognising that different countries and individuals have varying levels of understanding of green transition and green skills also underscores the importance of communication and awareness raising.

Regarding the role of local and regional governments in facilitating the green transition through green skills, speakers highlighted the need for a strong curriculum for professional development and a toolset that extends beyond educators, including actors from outside the educational sector. Furthermore, it is essential to equip regional and local governments with the necessary tools to ensure a just and fair green transition. At the European level, this should be facilitated by establishing bridges between different ecosystems and partnerships to encourage engagement that surpasses the usual suspects and promotes collaboration across sectors and all levels of government. The speakers also emphasised the importance of not only educating citizens but also businesses and stressed the need to involve women and youth in green upskilling, reskilling, and job opportunities.

Finally, the discussion concluded with an acknowledgement that education systems can often be entrenched in tradition and resistant to change. The importance of collaboration at all levels was emphasised as a means to expedite the pace of transformation. It was highlighted that adequate investment and resources in education and training, coupled with a skilled population and a prepared workforce, are critical for facilitating this process. Access to education, training, and lifelong learning was identified as a fundamental aspect of European social rights, ensuring individuals possess the capacity to adapt and acquire new skills throughout their lives. This concept of "learning to learn" is applicable not only to businesses and governments but also to young individuals entering the workforce, and its application holds the potential for the transformative impact necessary to achieve a Zero Pollution future.