Briefing Note

The key outcomes of "The new age for EU-MENA relations: turning ambitious partnerships into tangible impact. In focus: workforce readiness" event

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Background

The EU is ramping up its engagement with Southern Europe and the MENA region, by launching a dedicated Mediterranean portfolio under the new Commission. The development of a **New Pact for the Mediterranean** and a **Trans-Mediterranean Energy and Clean Tech Cooperation Initiative** is among the key projects. The goal of these initiatives is to increase renewable energy trading and boost clean tech manufacturing in the region. It's off to a promising start. However, **there is a catch:** the rapid growth of renewable energy is outpacing the development of a suitably skilled workforce. Subsequently, a growing skills gap threatens progress.

Nevertheless, if the right measures are being put in place, the New Pact for the Mediterranean could represent an opportunity for local economies to attract investments and offer employment prospects, especially for young people and women in the region. Yet, **when it comes to practical steps, what is the starting point?** What models of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) are best suited to prepare MENA workers for emerging industries like green hydrogen and clean tech manufacturing? Are there any best practices in the region so far? And ultimately, how to shape and ensure the respect of appropriate labour standards and working conditions? This briefing provides a detailed view of these aspects.

One of the most important challenges to transform the economy and lead on energy transition involves meeting skills needs. The transition requires the acquisition of new skills either to progress in current jobs that need to be adjusted or to access emerging jobs. Today, energy transition is changing the nature of jobs. And this change is affecting not only Europe, but also other regions of the world, including the MENA region and the Gulf states. In fact, when we look closer at the labour market of the MENA region, it currently faces four key challenges:

- high unemployment rate, especially among youth and women
- lack of basic protection measures for workers
- exclusion of migrant workers and refugees from the legal frameworks
- and skills mismatch, when young people are trained for jobs that no longer exist.

Therefore, addressing these challenges represents an opportunity to integrate the skills needed for energy and digital transitions and ensure that these meet the current and future labour market needs across both shores of the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, what are the concrete elements that this partnership should take on board?

Wind industry as a case study

Wind industry currently employs 300,000 workers within Europe, in both offshore and onshore wind. However, in order to scale up the industry needs double the amount - more than 600,000 people by 2030. The issue is not only related to numbers. **When the challenge of workforce is being discussed, the matter of professional roles and specific skill sets also gets prominent.** Wind industry needs a wide range of specialists, starting with planning and land acquisition managers, project managers to oversee site selection, permitting specialists, experts in conducting environmental impact assessments, cybersecurity professionals, wind turbine assemblers, machinists, technicians responsible for manufacturing, assembling, and installing turbine components, as well as health and safety experts, data analysts, supply chain managers, and legal specialists to support the sector's growth and sustainability. This broad spectrum of roles highlights that workers also require different skill sets that are relatively new and very specific. Furthermore, data shows that around **50% of jobs in the wind industry require vocational education and training (VET) graduates rather than university degrees.** Within this context, a two-fold question arises: how to attract more people in these areas, especially the youth, and can upskilling programmes help address the shortage of workers in the industry?

On one hand, young people across Europe and globally express a strong desire to be part of the transformation process of our economies, recognising both the urgency of climate action and the career opportunities in the sector. For example, in the latest OECD report the key findings highlight that young people want to be part of the transition, and hence they demand more climate and STEM education. However, the current education systems, policy frameworks, and economic structures do not fully meet their needs. Often the curriculum is not adapted to the industry needs and the current innovations in the field of climate and energy. Moreover, the set-up of more vocation, education and training centres, require also well-prepared trainers. However, is there enough qualified trainers and instructors in the vocational education to meet this challenge? This also represents a bottleneck that the wind industry is struggling with nowadays. On the other hand, upskilling is often promoted as a solution to workforce shortages and rapid technological change. However, in practice, many companies face significant challenges implementing upskilling programs, such as resource constraints (companies lack enough staff to spare workers for training, as taking employees out of their roles for upskilling can disrupt operations), time pressures and a widening skills gap.

Considering the challenges of wind industry taken as a practical example, some potential solutions should be considered and further amplified in the EU's engagement strategy with the wider MENA region. Some examples in this sense include:

a. **Aligning vocational programmes with the industry needs**: energy transition is outpacing the capacity of education and training sector to catch up. Currently there is not enough up-to-date training, which is aligned with the needs of the labour market.
b. **Streamlining the opportunities of transitioning from one sector to another:** workers from the oil and gas industry can transfer their skillset for the new industries. For example, they already possess the skillsets that are needed in offshore wind, as they already worked offshore for gas exploration. This clearly indicates the chance to transition from one job to another without losing the core skillset.
c. **Addressing the issue of certification inconsistencies** which is present even within the different regions of the same European country. For example, in Spain, the requirements and processes to become an electrician can vary between the northern and southern regions. Therefore, harmonisation and certification alignment within the countries, but also across Europe must be addressed. Additionally, having the certifications that would also enable people to come to Europe, and also enable people from Europe to go to other countries would be also beneficial to increase the pipeline of the workforce for the energy sector.

Best practices

The EU is currently supporting the establishment and expansion of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) schools in Egypt, aiming to extend similar cooperation frameworks in Tunisia. For example, in Egypt, the EU has invested €115 million in major TVET programmes, supporting educational reform and the expansion of Applied Technology Schools (ATS), with a target of 100 ATS by 2030 (up from 84 in 2024). The EU, through the European Training Foundation (ETF), is also involved in policy dialogue, teacher training, and the development of new curricula, including green and digital skills. The ETF, EU Delegation, and OECD have assessed and informed Egypt's technical education reform strategy, and the Ministry of Education is modernising TVET with new specialisations in renewable energy and green economy.

Furthermore, under the meetMED project's capacity building activities, a market survey of the renewables and energy efficiency professional training schemes in Algeria, Egypt, Greece, France, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Portugal, Spain and Tunisia was conducted by the project experts. From the research conducted, several recommendations have been elaborated for improving the capacity development of the VET focusing on renewables and energy efficiency in the assessed countries:

- The availability of the training infrastructures and courses must be equally distributed in the target countries
- The collaboration between the private and public sectors in the provision of courses enhances the capacity building of the vocational training
- Legal frameworks and training infrastructures are essential for the continuous development of the training activities
- Qualifications of the trainers contribute to the success of the training and its market relevance.

Other best practices conducted by the meetMED project include:

- **training on Energy Audits in Industrial Small to Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)** which provided the basic skills and knowledge to improve energy efficiency and profitability in the industrial sector and to complete a thorough energy audit
- **training on Sustainable Energy Design Toolkit for Public Authorities** which provided guidelines to public authorities to use sustainable energy design toolkits and financing solutions for sustainable energy projects.

When it comes to the European-based best practice that could be scaled up with a similar approach in the MENA region, a good example is the **SHOREWINNER project**, that set up and developed a Southern European offshore wind energy Community of Practice (CoP) to foster education and training based on cooperation among five Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) that are located in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece and Cyprus. Concretely, through round-table events and workshops, SHOREWINNER has brought together industry leaders, vocational trainers, and policymakers to align vocational training programs with the real needs of the offshore wind sector. This has helped develop curricula and skill sets directly relevant to current and future job profiles. Furthermore, the project also organises training programmes, internships, exchanges, seminars, and workshops to upskill and reskill the workforce.

Recommendations

Building on the best practices and the progress made so far, the EU's engagement in skills development with the countries of the MENA and Gulf regions should consider the following recommendations:

a. All skills initiatives under the New Pact for the Mediterranean must be **co-designed with social partners, trade unions, employers and industry companies, as well as national and local governments** that are representing the region**.** Moreover, it must include concrete mechanisms for monitoring and reporting outcomes so that both parts can track results. This could include for example the establishment of joint monitoring committees, with the participation of trade union community representatives and companies to oversee delivery and strengthen labour inspectors with EU technical and financial support to ensure compliance.

b. **Skills programmes and trainings must be connected with job guarantees or job prospects** in the respective industries. This has not been applicable in the past, and must be addressed this time as part of the New Pact for the Mediterranean.

c. The EU and MENA governments should also consider implementing a **social framework** for all new energy investments, including provisions that will ensure local added value creation. As an example, this could be done via the set-up of a minimum threshold for local jobs creation.

d. **Clarify the role of gas in cooperation:** the EU must offer more clarity on its gas diversification strategy and how can partner countries quantify the need for short-term supply of gas to the EU. This would help the partners that are currently producing gas and exports it to the EU to better understand and plan their investments for future diversification. There is the expectation, in this sense, that the New Pact for the Mediterranean will be emphasizing on more investments in renewables, cross-border interconnectors, and grid expansion, rather than new long-term fossil fuel projects. This approach would help to ensure that partner countries benefit from the energy transition, supporting their economies in the long term and avoiding "lock-in" to fossil fuel

infrastructure that may become stranded as the EU accelerates its clean energy transition.

e. **Emphasize the localisation of benefits**: the partnership should highlight the "win-win" approach in this cooperation, which will equally benefit local economies and people in partner countries. It is essential to communicate how these projects will create jobs, generate new revenue streams, and support sustainable, long-term development. At the same time, it is equally important for partner countries to plan transparently for how they will use these financial gains to maximise positive local impact.

Conclusions

The shift from a relationship based solely on economic transactions to one rooted in socially responsible partnership will be key in this new stage of EU-MENA partnership. The renewed interest in EU-MENA cooperation is promising, but for the New Pact to truly benefit workers, it must serve as an economic stabilisation plan with concrete protection and benefits for workers that will ultimately build trust and resilience throughout the entire energy transition process. If the EU aims to succeed in making this partnership sustainable and on equal terms, then it must be built as a social contract where energy, trade and investments are inseparable from rights protections and decent jobs creation in the region.

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