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Building Pathways, Inclusive Economies, and Opportunities for Youth and Young Adults: Principles for Green Economy Legislation and Investment

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Background

Our economy is leaving out millions of youth and young adults. Despite the country's record-low unemployment, youth and young adults experience an unemployment rate that's more than double the national rate. The economy is not working for everyone, and too many young people are locked out of pathways to work and opportunity, especially communities of color. Similarly, there are also millions of people of color and immigrants with low incomes who are still not faring well in the economy. They, too, struggle to make ends meet and find jobs with family-sustaining wages and career pathways leading to greater economic and social mobility.

The climate change opportunity: The millennial and post-millennial generations comprise over 40 percent of our rapidly changing labor force.¹ The daunting impacts of climate change on the United States come with a unique opportunity for young adult workers to reimagine how our society responds to disparate outcomes in the labor market as well as how to protect the environment and develop environmentally just practices that promote long-term sustainability.

The green economy represents one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. economy, offering a chance for policymakers, advocates, youth, communities of color and industry leaders to rethink access to work, careers, innovation, and opportunity. The green economy is already contributing billions of dollars into our economy. Millennial and post-millennial populations are on track to spend **\$1.4 trillion** on consumer products while being the most environmentally and ethically minded generation.

Growth in the demand for environmentally sustainable products, housing, and economic activities will make young people the principle influencers for what the burgeoning green economy will represent and to whom it will be tailored. The younger generation will make decisions about the redesign of communities, infrastructure, and business strategies. This nexus offers a unique opportunity to create new workforce pathways that combine environmental justice stakeholders, employers, and youth to focus on equitable growth, inclusion, and sustainability. These opportunities must center on overlooked and left out young people, such as opportunity youth, youth of color, and youth and young adults living in communities with high poverty rates.

Consider this: Approximately 4.5 million young people ages 16 to 24 are not in school or work. This cohort of young people are known as "Opportunity Youth" because they are seeking opportunity and offer the nation a chance to invest in them. Youth disconnection impacts all regions of the country—urban, suburban, and rural. West Virginia has the highest rate of disconnection (17 percent), followed by New Mexico (16.5 percent), and Mississippi (16.4 percent). Native American (24 percent) and Black American (18 percent) teens and young adults have the highest rates of youth disconnection.² Rural youth and young people with disabilities also find themselves disproportionately out of school and work.

The Green Economy

Much of the debate about climate change's impact on our economy has centered on displacement of workers such as coal miners and individuals working in fossil fuel industries, as well as regulations and requirements on business and industry. Instead, we should shift the conversation to opportunities for workers to participate in growing the public and private sectors of the economy. This includes expanding green jobs for youth and young adults in new industries, government, labor unions, and community-based organizations. The conversation must also involve collective agreements to reduce our carbon footprint and make advancements to protect the environment, and the social and economic consequences of climate change. Many advocates have also focused on the need to combine climate resilience with economic opportunity and justice for underserved communities.

So, what is the "green economy" and what exactly are "green jobs"? While people often think of retrofitting old windows and swapping in LED light bulbs, the green economy also represents an emerging array of public and private sectors that will reshape life across the country. These sectors can include the planning, construction, and design of buildings and transportation infrastructure; natural resource management and energy; and manufacturing including waste, raw materials, and supply chains. These sectors will come with varying career pathways, educational requirements, and advancement options—ultimately broadening opportunity for all. While not synonymous, these terms are complementary.

A clean energy economy generates jobs, businesses, and investments while expanding clean energy production, increasing energy efficiency, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, waste, and pollution, and conserving water and other natural resources.³

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), green jobs include:

- *Jobs in businesses that produce goods or provide services that benefit the environment or conserve natural resources, or*
- *Jobs in which workers' duties involve making their establishment's production processes more environmentally friendly or ensuring that they use fewer natural resources.⁴*

The green economy is not new. For decades, state and community leaders across the country in the public, private, and civic sectors have been working with industries and creating new jobs that are a win-win for our environment and workforce. Recent research suggests more than 2.5 million Americans work in the clean energy industry. And according to the BLS, "3.1 million jobs in the United States were associated with the production of green goods and services in businesses defined as producing goods or delivering services that benefit the environment or conserve natural resources."

Principles for Green Economy Legislation

To ensure youth living in low-income communities and young people of color are connected to these opportunities now and in the future, we must be intentional in policy development, implementation, and accountability about partnering with young people and supporting youth voice and leadership by targeting resources to historically marginalized communities and building equitable education and career pathways.

Green economy legislation must target resources to where they are needed by:

- Prioritizing opportunity youth, low-income youth, young adults of color.
- Ensuring that youth and young adults who have been impacted by the criminal justice system are not obstructed from training, employment, and options to advance in their careers.
- Allowing undocumented immigrant youth and young adults to fully participate in federally funded job training programs and employment services. Most federally funded employment programs are closed to undocumented immigrant youth and adults because of their citizenship and work authorization status. That's why any legislation or policy proposal should expand eligibility requirements for immigrant youth and young adults to ensure that they can also benefit from existing and newly created programs in the green economy.
- Investing in high-need communities. Build on research and lessons learned from comprehensive, community-wide approaches, such as the U.S. Department of Labor's Youth Opportunity Grants, to create a funding stream for high-need urban and rural communities to implement innovative community-based and effective national strategies that connect young people.

Just policy frameworks must encompass a racial and gender equity lens by:

- Including an explicit focus on race and gender in all policy investments.
- Focusing on closing the racial wealth and income gap by including youth involvement as a cornerstone to achieving its goal (e.g., by creating youth wage ladders, equitable outreach, and multiple entry points to careers).
- Ensuring sustainable land development, such as upgrading and redesigning housing stock, by centering on the growth and retention of wealth in historically land-oppressed communities (e.g. African American and Native American, Latinx, rural, and other groups).
- Recognizing the vitally important role that national, state, and local community-based organizations led by communities of color must play in discussions regarding climate change and the green economy.

Green economy legislation should partner with young people⁵ by:

- Recognizing youth as assets and centering their voices. Central to authentic youth partnership is young-people-initiated ideas, projects, and solutions supported by shared decisions with adults. Investing in young people begins by embracing their innate assets, supporting their empowerment, and listening to their experiences so we understand what they need and how best to assist them. Comprehensive investment strategies should promote a sense of young peoples' agency in shaping their lives, families, and communities by securing their basic needs and ensuring access to resources and supports.

Green economy investments must provide access to careers, not just hard hats, by:

- Building large-scale employment and postsecondary pathways to good jobs and careers in the green economy that reach young people who face systemic and structural barriers to employment and/or who live in high-poverty communities.
- Supporting a career pathways approach that connects progressive levels of basic skills and postsecondary education, training, and supportive services in specific sectors or cross-sector occupations to optimize the progress and success of youth and young adults in securing marketable credentials.
- Using the green economy as a vehicle to open a variety of experiences for youth and young adults to promote innovation and entrepreneurship, including green infrastructure, environmentally sustainable engineering, and community and business development, which includes internships, career and technical education, work-based learning, service learning, pre-apprenticeships, and subsidized and unsubsidized employment.

Green Economy legislation must create quality jobs that provide family-sustaining wages and benefits to support themselves and their families, including:

- Guaranteeing youth and young adults receive sufficient wages to support themselves and their families.
- Providing youth and young adults with essential benefits such as healthcare, paid family and medical leave, retirement, and paid sick days.
- Ensuring youth and young adults who are parents are provided with adequate resources to support them and their child, such as childcare
- Assuring fair and predictable work schedules for all working people so they can have stability in their schedules, income, and time with loved ones.

¹ Robert Fry, "Millennials are the largest generation in the U.S labor force," Pew Research Center, April 11, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/11/millennials-largest-generation-us-labor-force/>

² Kristen Lewis & Sarah Burd-Sharps, *Zeroing in on Place and Race: Youth Disconnection in America's Cities*, Measure of America, <http://www.measureofamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/MOA-Zeroing-In-on-Place-and-Race-Final.pdf>

³ Pew Charitable Trust, *The Clean Energy Economy*, Pew Charitable Trust, 2009, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2009/06/10/clean-energy-economy-exec-summary.pdf>

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment in green goods and services, 2010*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012, https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2012/ted_20120327.htm?view_full

⁵ Ibid.