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*A*mong the 14 industrial sectors identified by the European Commission, the strategic importance of the agri-food sector can hardly be better underlined as it represents about 36% of the overall budget of the EU.

The agri-food sector has a decisive cultural and social importance, considering Europe's strong tradition and the industry's contribution to tourism, keeping rural economies alive, and maintaining rural areas and landscapes across the EU.

Still, we have experienced an unprecedented overlap of crises: from climate shocks and the COVID-19 pandemic to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a series of economic consequences that affect the sector driving rising food prices, fuel and fertiliser.

Agri-food systems are highly dependent on climatic changes and integrally considered significant world players in the fight for long-term natural resource sustainability and a critical subsystem for the climate change challenge.

At the same time, the food industry needs to move faster on climate. A third of global greenhouse gas emissions come from the food system, and the climate crisis threatens to undermine the world's food supply chain rapidly.

Implementing climate strategies in the food sector is now business critical, and we need individuals across the industry – from the shop floor to the boardroom – equipped with the skills to get us where we need to be. The crisis we face requires accelerating the transformative initiatives to achieve the twin green and digital transition and increase resilience in all industrial ecosystems.

Skills are crucial to this fundamental societal shift. The transition pathway requires a new level of professional knowledge and capability to help underpin such a transition.

The European Commission has stressed the importance of maximising the impact of investing in improving skills through several initiatives and policies:

the Pact for Skills, a shared engagement model for skills development in Europe, and the European Skills Agenda, a five-year plan to help individuals and businesses develop more and better skills; the GreenComp, the European sustainability competence framework that identifies a set of sustainability competencies to feed into education programmes to help learners develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that promote critical thinking, planning and acting with empathy, responsibility, and

care for our planet and public health; as well as DigComp for the upskilling and reskilling regarding digital technologies and digital skills, which is also in line with the Digital Education Action Plan, the European Education Area, and the OECD's Future of Education and Skills.

New and adapted skills are needed to face the current challenges, avoid job losses due to the transition process and improve working conditions, especially in given sectors.

In particular, a focus should be put on building a more robust, inclusive and equitable food system, which requires green skills, fresh thinking, talents, and a renewed spirit of entrepreneurship.

Upskilling must start with engagement.

With their deep local footprint and approach based on collective governance and cooperation, grassroots solutions based on social economy models also provide an excellent example in the skills development field. Some focus on reskilling, upskilling and facilitating access to the labour market.

Others encourage social economy entrepreneurship and social innovation to address societal challenges and strive to develop entirely new markets.

In the last decade, the social economy has shown resilience and a great potential to help the EU's economic and social recovery by addressing economic, environmental and societal challenges in the most inclusive and innovative ways. The industry needs to invest significantly in re/upskilling its workforce to remain competitive and meet its economic and social responsibilities.

Upskilling requires an ecosystemic approach.

Green skills are the knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a sustainable and resource-efficient society. The holistic multisector and multi-stakeholder approach are required. Green and sustainable competencies include design thinking, cultural actions, creativity, adaptability, resilience, and empathy involving our communities.

European experience.

The European project VET4FOOD goes exactly in this direction. The VET4FOOD project aims to foster professional development of teachers and to improve the quality and efficiency of initial vocational and educational training to meet the needs of the food industry.

Sustainable food system and VET education innovation should provide high-quality green jobs and permit to create new professional and entrepreneur profiles to fight unemployment and at the same time combat climate change and environmental decline from the food (and in part tourism) industry as well as promote the green transition of existing companies and the creation of new ones. ◆

VET4FOOD
VET Training for Food Sustainability

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