

## Advice

### European Year of Skills

Brussels, 30 March 2023

#### 1. Background

Following an announcement by President von der Leyen in her State of the Union address, the European Commission adopted a proposal to make 2023 the “European Year of Skills”<sup>1</sup>. With the European Year of Skills, in cooperation with the European Parliament, Member States, social partners, public and private employment services, chambers of commerce and industry, education and training providers, and workers and companies all together, the Commission proposes to give a fresh impetus to lifelong learning, by:

- Promoting increased, and more effective and inclusive investment in training and upskilling to harness the full potential of the European workforce, and to support people in changing from one job to another.
- Making sure that skills are relevant for labour market needs, by also cooperating with social partners and companies.
- Matching people's aspirations and skill sets with opportunities on the job market, especially for the green and digital transition and the economic recovery. A special focus will be given to activate more people for the labour market, in particular women and young people, especially those not in education, employment or training.
- Attracting people from third countries with the skills needed by the EU, including by strengthening learning opportunities and mobility and facilitating the recognition of qualifications.

To meet these objectives, the Commission will promote upskilling and reskilling opportunities, for instance by highlighting relevant EU initiatives, including EU funding possibilities, to support their take-up, implementation, and delivery on the ground. Events

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_6086](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6086)

and awareness-raising campaigns will also be organised across the EU to support mutual learning of partners in up- and reskilling.

## **2. Employment and skills in the fisheries and aquaculture supply chain**

In the same vein as other food sectors, the fisheries and aquaculture supply chain is facing significant recruitments difficulties, both in finding and maintaining workers, including for unskilled positions, which are heightened by:

- The geographical position of production units in coastal and rural areas, meaning that the geographical scope for recruitment is reduced;
- Marked competition from hotel and catering activities due to the prominent nature of tourism-related economic activities in coastal areas;
- A gap in skills linked to a marked increase in absenteeism since the COVID-19 crisis;
- Lack of technical skills related to factory employment, meaning that companies must make these skills available themselves;
- Lack of attractiveness of the sector to the younger generation due to lack of interest in the required skills and aversion to arduous aspects inherent to the professions (e.g., odour, wet conditions, temperature, working hours);
- Need to improve working and living conditions on board to increase the comfort and wellbeing of workers, who are spending long period on board – these improvements are limited by the gross tonnage ceiling, which does not incentivise vessel owners to offer better conditions to the crew;
- Despite the improvements of safety on board, the danger of the fishing profession, which remains more dangerous than many other professions – efforts must be directed at improving safety measures and training and competences of the crew;
- Dependency on workers from third countries for unskilled tasks, illustrating a lack of attractiveness of the sector;
- In some Member States, such as Portugal, collective work contracts do not frame significant salary increases, which contributes to a competitive disadvantage in comparison to other markets, namely in Northern Europe, to attract workers;

- In the case of the fishing sector, high costs and timing difficulties in the organisation of training activities due to the daily activities at sea;
- In some Member States, such as Spain<sup>2</sup>, insufficient public vocational training directed at the agri-food sector.

In the case of the processing sector, the abovementioned difficulties translate into insufficient workforce in the categories of factory employment.

### **3. Lifelong learning, promotion of upskilling, and reskilling opportunities**

To ensure lifelong learning, promotion of upskilling, and reskilling opportunities, the necessary investments should target qualified training and technical skills, including through:

- Undertaking prospective studies to take into account the evolution of professions and associated skills, linked to digital, robotic, ecological transitions, among others;
- Formulation and adaptation of training to consider the evolution in skills as well as the training tools and methods with the aim of avoiding a disruption of production tools. For example, virtual reality training tools which, beyond the absence of disruption of production chain, make it possible to prepare for emergency situations (e.g., simulation of incidents). This is even more relevant since, having recruitment difficulties, companies have additional difficulty sending their employees for training;
- Identification of career paths by building bridges between professions. This would allow to reduce training time by integrating already acquired skills. It can also be a factor of attractiveness when the employees have a vision of their career prospects;
- Mutual recognition of training and competences certificates between Member States, to increase the possibility for workers to find jobs in other Member States and have common standards for training;
- Transposition into EU legislation of the IMO International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel (STCW-F), as the

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<sup>2</sup> In Spain, the professional training title of perishable food expert was not published until 2018 and, presently, is not offered by any public professional training center in any autonomous community. In comparison, public vocational training has been made available to the hotel industry since the late 50s.

EU Social Partners for Sea Fisheries have been calling for years, and as the Commission itself is considering according to the recent Communication COM(2023) 103 final;

- Investment in public vocational training centres or full financing of private centres and organisations;
- Communication campaigns to increase awareness on the occupations of the sector.

In some countries, such as France, the sector suffers from a lack of training funding for small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) and intermediate-size enterprises (ETIs), linked to the pooling of professional training funds for the benefit of very small companies with fewer than 50 employees.

#### **4. Relevant skills**

Among the skills required in the fisheries and aquaculture sector, the following skills should be particularly promoted:

- Safety on board fishing vessels, in line with International Labour Organisation's Work in Fishing Convention N.º 188;
- Sustainability in fisheries and aquaculture production skills;
- Fair business practices and international contracts;
- Digital skills and new technologies;
- Products valorisation;
- Maintenance and crimping of production tools – particularly worrying for companies that maintain their own tools, since there is a strong competition from other more attractive sectors;
- Handling of food from a hygiene perspective, plus cutting and presentation of food products;
- Fish management for better feeding, fish welfare, and workers safety.
- Business management, marketing, and communication.

In the context of higher education, there should be specialities available that facilitate knowledge about the entire fisheries and aquaculture value chain.

## 5. Attractiveness

To attract workers to the fisheries and aquaculture sector, including people from third countries, measures should be undertaken for:

- Greater wage investment and greater capacity for integrating human resources, particularly in the case of the manufacturing sector, plus additional work categories and recognition for workers;
- Development of better working conditions, especially considering the aspirations of younger generations;
- Raising awareness about jobs that suffer from a negative image, especially due to “food bashing”, among the younger generation, parents, teachers, and job seekers;
- Due to the partly seasonal activity of the sector throughout the territory, facing current housing and transport issues, particularly in coastal areas where housing is scarce, expensive and geared towards tourism;
- In the context of apprenticeships, also facing the current housing issues;
- Raising awareness, across the EU, on the importance of immigrant workers, including measures against xenophobia and discrimination and the need to employ them on an equal footing with EU workers;
- As often becoming a fisher is an important decision of the individual due to the implications for the family and the nature of the job, ensuring that the sector is perceived with potential and future development – when young generations observe the reduction, over the years, in fishing vessels and companies, operating in their regions, the attractiveness is even further reduced;
- Development of production practices, including automatization, robotisation and digitisation, with the aim of removing arduous aspects inherent to the professional activities, while also promoting a more “modern” image of the professional occupations.

## 6. EU funding and assistance to invest into skills

Funding and assistance mechanisms available to the fisheries and aquaculture sector include, among others, the European Social Fund Plus, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Digital Europe Programme, Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, and the EMFAF Blue Careers Call 2023. Amongst the membership of the MAC, there are reports of participation in Erasmus+ and the EMFAF Blue Careers. It remains unclear whether companies have a good knowledge of these mechanisms and of how to access these. To effectively increase awareness on EU funding possibilities as well as their take-up, implementation and delivery on the ground, the following issues should be considered:

- Improvement of the readability of the mechanisms, particularly by clearly identifying the problems that are meant to be solved by the mechanisms;
- Better communication on these mechanisms, for example through newsletters, including through the dissemination of information in the national languages of each Member State. In the case of the fisheries and aquaculture sector, as most companies are small and medium-size, the expert staff does not necessarily have skills in foreign languages;
- In the different Member States, identification of liaison officers in the companies and sector associations to publicise the actions as well as available funding and support;
- Provision of assistance to address the administrative requirements.

## 7. Pact for Skills

In the context of the European Skills Agenda, the Pact for Skills<sup>3</sup> was established with the aim of supporting public and private organisations with upskilling and reskilling, so that they can thrive through the green and digital transitions. Amongst the membership of the MAC, there were no reports of participation in the Pact. Companies, particularly SMEs and ETIs, are probably not familiar with the benefits of the Pact, as the current members of the Pact seem

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<sup>3</sup> [https://pact-for-skills.ec.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://pact-for-skills.ec.europa.eu/index_en)

to be primarily institutions and large companies. There are concerns that the Pact remains overly theoretical on the intentions and insufficiently concrete.

## **8. Recommendations**

In the context of the ongoing European Year of Skills, in relation to the fisheries and aquaculture sector, the MAC believes that the European Commission should:

- a) Set up a Roadmap to address the significant recruitment difficulties faced by the sector, such as inheritance and passing on of production tools, linked to geographical distribution of production units, competition from other economic activities, gaps in skills, competitive disadvantages in salary levels, difficult working and living conditions on board, high training costs, lack of public vocational training, lack of attractiveness of the sector to the younger generation, and dependency on workers from third countries;
- b) Ensure lifelong learning, development of a cross-sector scheme of accreditation for existing skills, promotion of upskilling and reskilling opportunities, including through investments in prospective studies, formulation and adaptation of training, identification of career paths, communication campaigns to increase awareness on the occupations available, and investment in vocational training centres;
- c) Promote awareness of skills related to safety on board, both for the crew and the skippers, and at aquaculture farms, sustainability in production, fair business practices and international contracts, products valorisation, digital skills, maintenance of production tools, and business management, marketing and communication;
- d) Undertake measures to promote the attractiveness of the sector, such as better awareness on the jobs and removal of the negative image of the sector;
- e) In order to attract workers, undertake measures to increase availability of housing and transport;
- f) Transpose into EU legislation the IMO STCW-F Convention and improve the mutual recognition of training and professional certificates between Member States;
- g) Make it easier to avail and take-up of EU funding and assistance mechanisms, including through the organisation of an increased number of clarification sessions –

throughout the fisheries and aquaculture sector, improvement of the readability of the mechanisms, better communication – including dissemination in the national languages of each Member State, identification of liaison officers in companies and sector associations, and provision of assistance to address administrative requirements;

- h) Increase awareness on the Pact for Skills, while especially taking into account the need of concrete benefits throughout the fisheries and aquaculture sector;
- i) Engage aquaculture, fishing, processing, trading and retail undertakings in the design and implementation of training, upskilling, and reskilling courses;
- j) Ensure stakeholder engagement across the Pact for Skills and throughout the work done to increase the attractiveness of the fisheries and aquaculture sector.