

Position Paper on the 2023 European Year of Skills

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RREUSE Position on the 2023 European Year of Skills

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Social enterprises carry a long tradition of providing inclusive circular upskilling and reskilling to vulnerable groups. They foster manual circular skills necessary for a circular economy, social cohesion and job creation. Rather than outdated, manual re-use and repair-related skills are essential to power an efficient circular economy.
- Besides green skills, social enterprises active in the circular economy guarantee access to technology and promote foundational and advanced digital skills, including those fostering the green transition. Finally, they promote cognitive and interpersonal skills like self-motivation and teamwork, crucial for acquiring any skills for the twin transition.
- Where formal education opportunities present multiple access barriers (e.g. costs, location, minimum requirements and so forth), the work-based approach of social enterprises ensures a right to training for vulnerable groups and is a stepping stone for their future access to the conventional labour market and formal education.
- Despite construction professionals, repair specialists, waste management trainers, and re-use experts being among the most needed professions for greening our societies, social enterprises face obstacles in setting up training programmes. Reasons include lack of funding, data on skills for the circular and social economies, qualifications recognition, or cooperation with VET systems and public authorities.
- The **2023 European Year of Skills** calls on the EU Institutions and Member States to focus on policy interventions that promote skills for *all* people. These include integrating social enterprises in labour market policies, enhancing recognition of foundational skills, partial and low-level qualifications, and promoting work-based skilling initiatives that support vulnerable workers' social mobility for their integration into the labour market and society at large.
- Ultimately, a successful green transition requires a robust demand for circular economy skills, especially those related to re-use and repair, which mirror the waste prevention priorities of the EU Waste Hierarchy. Measures to encourage partnerships between social enterprises and VET systems or mainstream businesses can help address skill data gaps and promote workers' social mobility.

RREUSE is an independent non-profit organisation representing social enterprises active in the field of re-use, repair and recycling, with 32 members across Europe and the USA. Our main vision is for Europe to support the role of social enterprise in a circular economy, providing meaningful work opportunities to thousands of vulnerable members of our community through innovative economic, social and environmentally beneficial activities. RREUSE's primary mission is to help tackle poverty, social exclusion and a throwaway culture by promoting policies, best practices and partnerships that support the professionalism and development of social enterprises working in environmental services with high potential for local and inclusive job creation, notably re-use and repair.

1. INTRODUCTION

Skills shortages for a green transition undermine our ability to divert from a “take-make-dispose” economic model.¹ Social enterprises can make a decisive difference in addressing that skills shortage. They carry a long tradition of providing inclusive circular upskilling and reskilling to vulnerable groups. The training they provide – such as in the repair of electrical appliances and bicycles, textile upcycling, construction materials recovery, and refurbishing furniture – fosters manual circular skills necessary for a circular economy, social cohesion and job creation.^{2 3}

Re-use and repair social enterprises contribute to implementing the **European Skills Agenda** and its goals of ensuring social fairness, building resilient societies and strengthening sustainable competitiveness. They also work to uphold the **EU Social Pillar**⁴ - where a right to training is the first principle - and to achieve its **EU 2030 Social Headline targets**. These include 60% of all adults participating in training each year.⁵ Overall, supporting the work of social enterprises active in the circular economy contributes to implementing the EU objectives under both the **EU Social Economy and Circular Economy Action Plans**.^{6 7}

As the European Center for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) attests, frontline workers such as construction professionals, repair specialists, waste management trainers, and re-use experts are among the most needed professions for greening our societies.⁸ However, social enterprises face several obstacles in setting up training programmes. Reasons include lack of funding, recognition of qualifications, or cooperation with VET systems and public authorities. Ultimately, the lack of data on skills of the social economy and the circular economy - especially on more accessible manual skills - impedes support for work-based training for disadvantaged groups.

On behalf of its membership of social enterprises active in the circular economy, this paper aims to present RREUSE’s insights and recommendations to policy makers when designing interventions to

¹ The “take-make-dispose” economic model characterises the step-by-step plan of a linear economy. This means that raw materials are collected, then transformed into products consumers use until thrown away as waste, with no concern about their environmental footprint.

² RREUSE (2023), Putting people and skills at the core of the circular economy: 18 stories from social enterprises (Available [here](#)).

³ RREUSE (2021), Job creation by social enterprises in the re-use sector (Available [here](#)).

⁴ European Commission (2021), Communication: The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (Available [here](#)).

⁵ Social economy enterprises contribute to the achievement of all three EU Social Headline Targets: i. at least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 should be in employment by 2030, ii. at least 60% of all adults should be participating in training every year by 2030, iii. a reduction of at least 15 million in the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

⁶ European Commission (2021), Communication: Building an economy that works for people: an action plan for the social economy (Available [here](#)).

⁷ European Commission (2020), Communication: A new Circular Economy Action Plan For a cleaner and more competitive Europe (Available [here](#)).

⁸ CEDEFOP (2022), Too good to waste: tapping the potential of vocational education and training in the waste management sector (Available [here](#)).

develop skills for a twin transition. The window of opportunity under the **2023 European Year of Skills**⁹ calls on the EU Institutions and Member States to focus on policies that promote skills for *all* people. This requires recognising social enterprises' contribution to inclusive circular upskilling and reskilling.

2. SOCIAL ENTERPRISES PROMOTE THE SKILLS FOR THE TWIN TRANSITION

Social enterprises in the RREUSE network use re-use and repair activities as vehicles to foster an inclusive and targeted approach to green skills development in the workplace. They preserve vital skills to extend the products' lifecycle and reduce waste, yet are in decline in the predominant "take-make-dispose" economic model.

In the 2023 study on green skills, RREUSE highlights how its network promotes manual circular competencies such as the **circular demolition of buildings** and **repair skills for items ranging from bicycles and furniture to electrical appliances**.¹⁰ Some skills – for example, those required to repair the winding of copper wires of a washing machine's engine – are transferable to other important sectors for a green transition such as the tram and wind turbine industries.¹¹

Social enterprises also contribute to an inclusive digital transition. They ensure access to technology for vulnerable communities and promote essential **digital skills like using emails, spreadsheets, and browsing** for a fulfilling professional and personal life. RREUSE members also promote more advanced digital skills critical for a green transition. These include **route planning for the collection of reusable goods, skills for inventory control systems and second-hand e-commerce**, to name just a few.¹²

Ultimately, social economy enterprises carry the expertise to empower vulnerable groups in an uplifting environment. Alongside social workers, they also nurture cognitive and interpersonal competencies like **better work habits, self-motivation, problem-solving, and teamwork**. Such skills build the foundation for acquiring further green or digital skills. Some social enterprises of the RREUSE network even organise social cohesion training on topics ranging from **gender equality to work-life balance**.¹³

3. INCLUSIVE, ADAPTED, AND TARGETED APPROACH TO LIFELONG LEARNING

Conventional programmes at Vocational Education and Training (VET) centres are not inclusive enough due to multiple access barriers.¹⁴ These include certification requirements for entry into a course, direct

⁹ European Commission (2022), Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Skills 2023 (Available [here](#)).

¹⁰ RREUSE (2023), Putting people and skills at the core of the circular economy: 18 stories from social enterprises (Available [here](#)).

¹¹ Ibid. Case study 8, Le Hublot (p. 36) (Available [here](#)).

¹² RREUSE (2021), How social enterprises contribute to the digital transition (Available [here](#)).

¹³ RREUSE (2023), Putting people and skills at the core of the circular economy: 18 stories from social enterprises Case study 2, Cambio Circular (p. 17) (Available [here](#)).

¹⁴ International Labour Organization (ILO), Guide on making TVET and skills development inclusive for all (Available [here](#)).

or indirect costs for participants, caring responsibilities, location of VET centres, or lack of flexible rules.¹⁵ Thus, the on-the-job and inclusive training opportunities provided by social enterprises ensure that every worker can access training based on their personal needs.

However, the verification process to issue certifications – usually regulated by the public employment service – tends to be overly complicated. Consequently, it hinders social innovations in training programmes and undermines workers’ motivation to undergo adult lifelong learning since certifications are critical to employability. It is then crucial to improve and simplify the recognition of foundational skills, partial qualifications, and work-based skilling initiatives. They support the social mobility of vulnerable workers and their integration into the conventional job market.

While quality criteria are essential, a flexible and targeted approach to green skills promotion is fundamental to ensuring inclusive training. A case in point is Ireland’s only dedicated employer of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) community: **Deaf Enterprises**. They provide green skills training – such as upholstery of furniture or bicycle repair – in Irish sign language. Following their work integration contracts, Deaf Enterprises Ireland redirects participants to targeted job opportunities. Furthermore, they are also planning to launch their own employment service. These initiatives are crucial given that only 51% of people with disabilities in the EU are employed, and merely 20% of women and 29% of men are in full-time positions.¹⁶

4. FOSTER DEMAND FOR CIRCULAR SKILLS

A crucial element to ensure the long-term sustainability of green skills development is increasing the demand for circular skills across industries. Measures to promote a circular economy - including via financial incentives - and fostering cooperation between societal actors can help address this. Other than an essential requirement for greening our societies, a higher demand would also ease vulnerable groups’ access to the labour market after their jobs and training in re-use, repair, and recycling social enterprises. Thus, partnerships between social enterprises and VET providers or conventional businesses help foster vulnerable groups’ employability and promote learning exchanges to address gaps in circular skills intelligence.

Despite their expertise in work integration, social enterprises are often not recognised as strategic partners in VET systems. They find that conventional VET providers display a rigid mindset that influences funding and cooperation opportunities. For instance, they might only focus on formal education unsuitable to disadvantaged workers’ needs. Equally, where a certified VET trainer may be required to teach training designed by social enterprises as a precondition for certification, some RREUSE members report struggling to find trainers with expertise in the re-use and repair sectors.

¹⁵ RREUSE (2023), Putting people and skills at the core of the circular economy: 18 stories from social enterprises (Available [here](#)).

¹⁶ European Disability Forum (2023), 7th Human Rights Report. The Right to Work: The employment situation of persons with disabilities in Europe (Available [here](#)).

However, best practices exist and serve as examples of mutually beneficial partnerships. For instance, some RREUSE members have agreements with conventional businesses for the latter to hire workers once they have completed their work integration contracts.¹⁷ Other members work closely with VET providers to deliver a portion of the training programme.¹⁸ Some social enterprises are also recognised as VET providers themselves. Still, the situation considerably varies across the EU, highlighting the urgency for harmonising rules for the European social economy, including via the adoption of an ambitious **Council recommendation on Developing social economy framework conditions**.¹⁹

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

RREUSE has the following recommendations for the EU and national policy makers to address the shortcomings of current policies and harness social enterprises' potential:

- **Integrate social enterprises into labour market policy to recognise their role as skills providers, including for the green transition.**
National labour market policies should recognise social enterprises for their upskilling and reskilling initiatives. Public authorities should encourage partnerships between VET providers and social enterprises. They should designate specific funding programmes to support their inclusive and learner-centric approach to upskilling and reskilling for the circular economy.
- **Enhance the recognition of skill qualifications provided by social economy enterprises.**
A more innovative and targeted approach to skills recognition requires more flexible rules. Micro-credentials, partial qualifications, or so-called skills passports are valid tools to certify blocks of skills acquired in the workplace and ensure vulnerable workers can demonstrate prior experience to future employers. Equally, fostering skills recognition helps boost workers' motivation to complete training programmes and learn new skills for the twin transition.
- **Allow social enterprises greater flexibility to adapt work integration programmes' duration to disadvantaged individuals' needs.**
More extended programmes provide better stability to vulnerable groups and ensure the likelihood of consolidating the vocational skills they need to succeed in the job market. In some EU Member States, work integration programmes are limited to 6 months. Given the challenging backgrounds of vulnerable people, RREUSE recommends a 24-month timeframe.
- **Address the lack of data on skills needed for a circular economy.**
Datasets and platforms such as the Labour Force Survey, the ESCO classification, the CEDEFOP

¹⁷ RREUSE (2023), Putting people and skills at the core of the circular economy: 18 stories from social enterprises. Case study 5, Fédération Envie (p. 29) (Available [here](#)).

¹⁸ Ibid. Case study 4, Formació i Treball (p. 23) (Available [here](#)).

¹⁹ European Commission (2023), Communication: Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Social Economy Framework Conditions (Available [here](#)).

Skills Forecast and Skills-OVATE should include the circular economy manual competencies of the re-use and repair sectors. Learning exchanges with social enterprises active in re-use, repair, and recycling would facilitate data sharing.

- **Adapt Vocational Education and Training (VET) to promote a learner-centric and inclusive approach to skills.**

Public authorities should cooperate with social enterprises to harness their expertise in providing inclusive and work-based training opportunities. Social enterprises can complement existing VET programmes, creating innovative dual VET systems that facilitate vulnerable groups' transition from work-based to formal education.

- **Ensure everyone can access upskilling and reskilling opportunities.**

Public services should provide financial incentives to improve adult training accessibility. They can include cost reimbursements or additional allowances to unemployment benefits, as is the case in the Wallonia region of Belgium.²⁰ National legislation should also remove minimum educational attainment barriers to accessing VET opportunities that risk reproducing poverty traps. Ultimately, interventions should reduce the over-regulation of low-level training programmes like those of social enterprises to promote inclusive adult training and to speed up adaptation to the needs of a circular economy.

- **Enhance demand for circular skills.**

Circular policies must mirror the EU Waste Hierarchy²¹ to increase the demand for central re-use and repair skills. Incentives from public procurement, state aid, and taxation rules must better match EU social and environmental policy objectives. For instance, a reduced value-added tax (VAT) rate for the supply of repairing services would significantly incentivise repair skills that have been in decline.²² Such measures should accompany those easing partnerships between social enterprises and mainstream businesses so as to ease vulnerable groups' transition to the conventional job market and address data gaps in circular skills.

- **Raise awareness of European and national-level funding opportunities.**

The new entry point for the EU social economy - the Social Economy Gateway²³, the European Year of Skills, and other fora should raise awareness of current funding opportunities to support social economy actors' upskilling and reskilling work. The European Social Fund+ and Cohesion Policy funds should better align with regional, national and EU circular economy strategies to

²⁰ RREUSE (2023), Putting people and skills at the core of the circular economy: 18 stories from social enterprises. P.36 (Available [here](#)).

²¹ The waste hierarchy is a tool used in the evaluation of processes that protect the environment alongside resource and energy consumption from most favourable to least favourable actions. The EU Waste Hierarchy is enshrined in Article 4 of the EU Waste Framework Directive 2008/98/EC.

²² RREUSE (2022), Position Paper on the Revised EU VAT Directive (Available [here](#)).

²³ European Commission (2023), The EU Social Economy Gateway website (Available [here](#)).

reinforce the contribution to a socially fair circular economy promoted by social enterprises.

- **Adapt academic curricula to promote green social entrepreneurship among the youth.**

According to the latest 2023 Eurobarometer, most young Europeans find it important to work for organisations with social or environmental goals.²⁴ However, few academic curricula focus on social and green entrepreneurship to match this interest. Social economy business models, the employment potential of the circular economy, and climate justice, to name a few, are crucial concepts curricula should integrate to empower the future social economy generations and address today's biggest challenges.

6. CONCLUSION

The **2023 European Year of Skills** calls on EU and national policy makers to enact policies promoting skills for all people, with particular attention to disadvantaged groups. It is then imperative to ensure policy interventions for upskilling and reskilling consider the work of essential actors closely working with underprivileged categories, like social enterprises active in the circular economy. Together with the other social economy actors, they already provide innovative examples of advancing an inclusive approach to upskilling and reskilling for a twin transition.

The work-based, inclusive, and targeted approach to skills development of re-use, repair, and recycling social enterprises of the RREUSE network ensures a right to training for vulnerable groups to develop essential skills such as those to power a truly circular economy. More flexible and inclusive interventions to upskilling and reskilling are thus needed to tap into their innovative initiatives, ensuring skills for a twin transition are accessible and incentivising to all.

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²⁴ European Commission (2023), Eurobarometer: Social entrepreneurship and youth (Available [here](#)). A majority of young people find it 'very' or 'fairly important' that a potential employer has defined social goals (75%) or environmental goals (73%) for the company.