EuropeOn response to the Call for Evidence on the EU solar energy strategy

EuropeOn, the European association of electrical contractors and installers, welcomes the initiative of the European Commission to publish a Strategy dedicated to solar energy. Accelerating the deployment of solar power is of the highest importance in order to reach the EU's goals for both climate and energy independence and requires strategic planning. The necessity to phase out fossil energy imports, especially from Russia, has now added on to the urgency of climate action to make the increase of renewable capacity within Europe the top priority.

Phasing out fossil fuels and switching to decentralised renewables is highly beneficial to our economy by lowering costly imports and creating green jobs, to our climate goals which hinge on renewable electrification, to our air and environment that won't be polluted by burning fossil fuels, and to our consumers who'll be able to become energy prosumers. However, these benefits will only be attainable if the pace of the deployment of solar can be increased to match our ambitions, which entails coordinated action on multiple fronts.

One of the main issues affecting the deployment of solar PV centres on the installation workforce. We need both to increase the numbers of installers to meet the growing demand as well as to equip them with an enhanced skillset to reap the full benefits of solar installations thanks to an efficient integration within buildings' energy systems.

Securing the sufficient and adequately trained workforce is not a short-term endeavour.

Solar PV installations must be safe and should be integrated with other technologies such as electric storage, electric heating or EV charging. This requires professionals with the specific skillset to safely and efficiently integrate those devices and make the most of the energy produced on-site.

While a sizeable part of installing solar PV can be carried out by laborers who can be trained in a few weeks, they must still be supervised by electricians whose training takes several years, enabling them to carry out the sophisticated aspects of such installations. It should be noted that electrical contractors already report many vacancies which are set to increase as higher climate targets are adopted. A first step to take at EU and national level in order to address this shortage is to promote technical careers at the earliest stage and ensure that youth and students are not turned away from construction jobs by unfair misconceptions. Then, quality training must also be made available more widely to ensure that solar and renewable installations are of the highest quality and safety.

This process takes several years and answers a need that cannot be addressed with quick fixes. Besides, education and training are national competences, set in diverse national contexts and structures. To address worker shortages in the short term, EU and national governments must work closely with representatives of installation professionals to see how their workforce can be scaled up rapidly, depending on national situations. In some Member States, this could be achieved with short top-up courses to enable labourers to mount solar panels under the supervision of qualified electrical contractors or with support to increase the share of apprentices working in electrical businesses. Further, in some countries, re-skilling of Ukrainian refugees can also be a short-term solution to

support their economic integration while addressing this workforce issue. In any case, such efforts can only be based on concertation with social partners and employers' representatives.

On the positive side, efforts to scale up the solar and electrical workforce will result in employment gains and green growth taking place at local level. Electrical contractors provide quality jobs and have many vacancies to fill, contributing to a just transition.

Electrical contractors have also reported supply chains issues making it difficult to procure building materials critical to renewable installations (especially containing electronic components) which will need to be addressed in this Strategy.

Also, electrical contractors often face more barriers on the ground such as difficult procedures to obtain building permits to set up solar installations on roofs. More effort is needed to streamline administrative and permitting procedures linked to rooftop installations, grid connections, renewable energy communities and collective self-consumption.

Finally, electrical contractors are too often confronted with ageing electrical wiring and electrical installations that are not able to support the integration of solar with electric heating or EV charging. This aspect is too often overlooked and needs to be considered to a greater extent when incentivising energy renovations and prosumer installations.

EuropeOn has already written to the Commission President and proposed actions that will contribute to address the workforce shortage:

- The revision of the Fit for 55 Package should require Member States to assess the gap between available and needed installation professionals to achieve EU climate and energy objectives.
- An ambitious EU campaign must be launched to change mindsets across Europe and enhance the attractiveness of technical/vocational education and careers in the twin transitions.
- Setting up a "Skills4Climate/ Climate crafters Platform", similarly to the "Just Transition Platform", is key to gather Member States, social partners, academia and all relevant EU and national stakeholders.