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## **Consumers as the Engine of the Energy Revolution**

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The revolution which is necessary in the field of energy is only possible with the help of consumers. The role of the consumer has not, up to now, been sufficiently accounted for in political strategies. Consumers are not only users of electricity. They are simultaneously consumers of technology, and are hence producers of renewable energies themselves.

### **1. Current Situation**

Knowledge on how to generate renewable energies in the most diverse areas of application on a decentralized basis already exists today. Decentralized generation is also profitable insofar as resources like sun, wind, water, biogas or geothermal and environmental thermal energy are based on existing regional conditions.

#### **a) Industrialized Countries**

In industrialized countries, technology is available for producing household electricity on a decentralized basis via photovoltaic units or by converting biogas into electrical energy. In addition, modern technology can be incorporated into the development of new products in order to integrate renewable energy into product-specific energy production. Nowadays there is a range of solar powered calculators, computer keyboards or electrical bicycles on offer. Existing technology provides great potential for generating heat by means of solar energy or geothermal energy.

To a certain extent, the use of renewable energies still seems quite expensive. This is especially true where the costs of renewable energy generation are simply compared with the production costs of conventionally produced energy, and the costs of damage to the environment and to health are ignored.

In practice, the opportunities presented by renewable energies are still not adequately taken advantage of. For example, in the construction industry, solar heating is hardly in widespread use. The inadequate provision of information to the consumers is a particular obstacle in this case. Consumers need information and advice regarding the use of renewable energies and the application of specific product solutions. Informed consumers would induce a boost in demand and provide a stimulus for making such innovations economically successful.

Engineers, architects and craftsmen need to be familiarised with the technical possibilities of renewable energy production so as not to be hampered in their technical implementation. The incorporation of renewable energy technology for the supply of electricity and heating to houses and the incorporation of technical possibilities in product-specific solutions in the development of new products very often fails due to the deficient knowledge of the supplier.

## **b) Developing Countries**

In developing countries, ensuring basic power supply is often the most urgent problem. Some two billion people in developing countries, that is one third of the global population, live without electricity. Moreover, the basic power supply in hospitals and schools is often deficient.

Basic power supply requires the provision of energy. For this purpose, renewable energies provide special advantages. Photovoltaic units, wind power units or conversion of biogas into energy from biomass have the great advantage that they can be set up and used on a decentralized basis. The costs of energy generation are essentially based on acquisition costs, whereas there are no fuel costs for oil or natural gas. There are no immense costs for large supply networks which are otherwise necessary in the case of large conventional power stations. Hence, there can be an economical, decentralized production. Decentralized production especially provides the opportunity of supplying sparsely populated rural areas with power. The decentralized use of renewable energy could already ensure a more economical and less resource-intensive power supply of remote areas better than complex power stations with extensive electrical networks.

The opportunities provided by decentralized energy supply are currently being neglected. The emphasis continues to be placed on central super-stations such as dams, irregardless of the fact that consumers live in remote regions. World Bank loans for major projects also hamper development in this field.

## **2. Commitments**

The provision of energy is of fundamental importance to public welfare and the well-being of consumers worldwide, with particular needs in developing countries. Efforts should thus be strengthened to:

- work towards and implement, mandatory targets for major, sustainable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, allocated in line with principles of global equity
- reduce wasteful energy production and consumption patterns and promote a supply of sustainable alternative energy sources promote investment in renewable resources
- promote the provision of loan facilities and microcredit schemes to enable investment in sustainable energy technology
- provide incentives for energy efficiency purposes.

Action needs to be taken by government and the business sector. However, demand for renewable energy by consumers also needs to be activated. Consumers International and its members commit themselves to motivate consumers to demand and use renewable energies. In particular, they will act at all appropriate national and international forums to promote the objectives of increasing the share of renewable energies.

### 3. Demands

- In view of the existing obstacles, an international institution which promotes the development of renewable energies and represents consumers' needs is necessary. Its services and use for consumers should define its activities.
- Authorization obstacles for the use of renewable energies must be prevented. At the same time, the scope for legal regulations, e.g. for the use of solar technologies in construction, should be taken advantage of.
- Demanding goals (e.g. quotas) for the use of renewable energies need to be set at national level.
- Joint ventures between researchers and businesses are required in order to implement the existing possibilities of renewable energy usage and in order to further advance development. The focus in this case must be on user-friendliness and cost-cutting.
- Political strategies should enable the consumer to demand renewable energies. An active consumer policy is required. Information deficits have to be reduced by the provision of free information and advice by a neutral party. In the diverse national and cultural regions, awareness of the possibilities and advantages of renewable energies has to be created.
- In the implementation of proper policies, attention needs to be paid to the lowest sustainable energy prices and to universal access to energy supplies. There needs to be an equitable distribution of costs between domestic and industrial consumers and special measures to protect the energy-poor.
- Many small solutions are required in order to ensure basic power supply. For this purpose, small loans must be made available so as to facilitate the acquisition of technology for the decentralized generation of renewable energies.