



Since the first preparatory conference in April 2008, representatives of all continents have met to discuss the formation of an international renewable energy agency. In particular, many developing nations and countries with a strong renewables industry are showing great interest.

Towards a global breakthrough

IRENA: At the end of January, the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) is to be founded. Its goal is to ramp up alternative energy sources worldwide. Over the past year, preparatory conferences have taken place.

Hermann Scheer smokes one cigarette after the other. Yet again, his fellow members of the Social Democratic Party in Germany are feuding. Scheer wants to make his position known in a protest letter. Under extreme time pressure, he is writing the note to the comrades in his office at the German parliament in Berlin. At the same time he makes sure that the press is informed so that the impact is greater.

Now, he can finally take a breather. His next job has a scope much greater than the political infighting within the SPD. The goal is nothing less than the found-

ing of an international agency for renewables – something that would shake up the global energy market for the long term. As Scheer puts it: “This German initiative is our contribution to global development.”

Inauguration in January

The International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) is scheduled to be founded at the end of January. As a powerful international governmental organization, it is designed to help its member states generate energy from the sun, wind, and biomass on a large scale in order to make renewables a global player.

Developing nations in particular believe the agency offers them an opportunity to wean themselves off the global market for coal, petroleum, and nuclear power. Industrial nations could be interested in the considerable market potential of alternative energy technologies. At least 45 nations attended the final preparatory conference in Madrid to specify the objectives, bylaws, and future headquarters of the agency. Just a few months before the agency is to be founded, a lot of questions had yet to be answered.

For a long time, the stars did not seem properly aligned for the founding of an alterna-



Hermann Scheer, one of the founding fathers: "One thing is certain: the International Renewable Energy Agency will not be a trade organization."

tive energy agency. Back in 1989, Herman Scheer and his organization Eurosolar began the campaign, but IRENA was not included in Agenda 21. In 2002, the organization was once again taken up in Germany's governing coalition's platform, but it once again failed – this time due to criticism from within. Then-Environmental Minister Jürgen Trittin was not convinced that such an agency was needed. As Olaf Denter, research assistant to Jürgen Trittin, explains: "We had the impression that there were enough other international organizations dealing with renewables." Scheer can only shake his head when he hears that. "Non-governmental organizations cannot do the same work as an international governmental organization. That is obvious."

Networks are not enough

Scheer points out that while governments do take part in such networks as REN21, they do not have any institutional competence and no budget worth mentioning. On the wall behind Scheer is a painting of an oversized match head on a black background. The caption reads, "It is better to make a little light than to complain about the vast darkness." While small lights may

give people hope, Scheer wants change – and he wants it now.

In 2005, he therefore once again put IRENA on the agenda of Germany's newly elected grand coalition. "We want to form a coalition with countries that understand the need for such an agency," he says. The German government therefore began to address potential members directly. In the spring of 2007, special envoys were sent to negotiations in Africa, Asia, and South America. The goal was to see which governments would be interested in becoming "members of the club," as Scheer calls them. This time, his hard work paid off: 170 participants representing nearly 60 countries came to a first preparatory conference in Berlin in the spring of 2008.

Almost two thirds of them were developing or industrializing countries. Countries with little infrastructure are especially interested in getting electricity and heat from the sun, water, and biomass. Currently, more than two billion people do not have access to clean, safe energy. Often, wood and manure are the only sources of energy. Where the rural population does not have access to the grid, solar energy can provide power in the desert, while wind power is available on

the coast. And these countries can reduce their dependence on fossil fuels, with prices on the global market fluctuating wildly and probably skyrocketing once again in the near future.

A necessary alternative

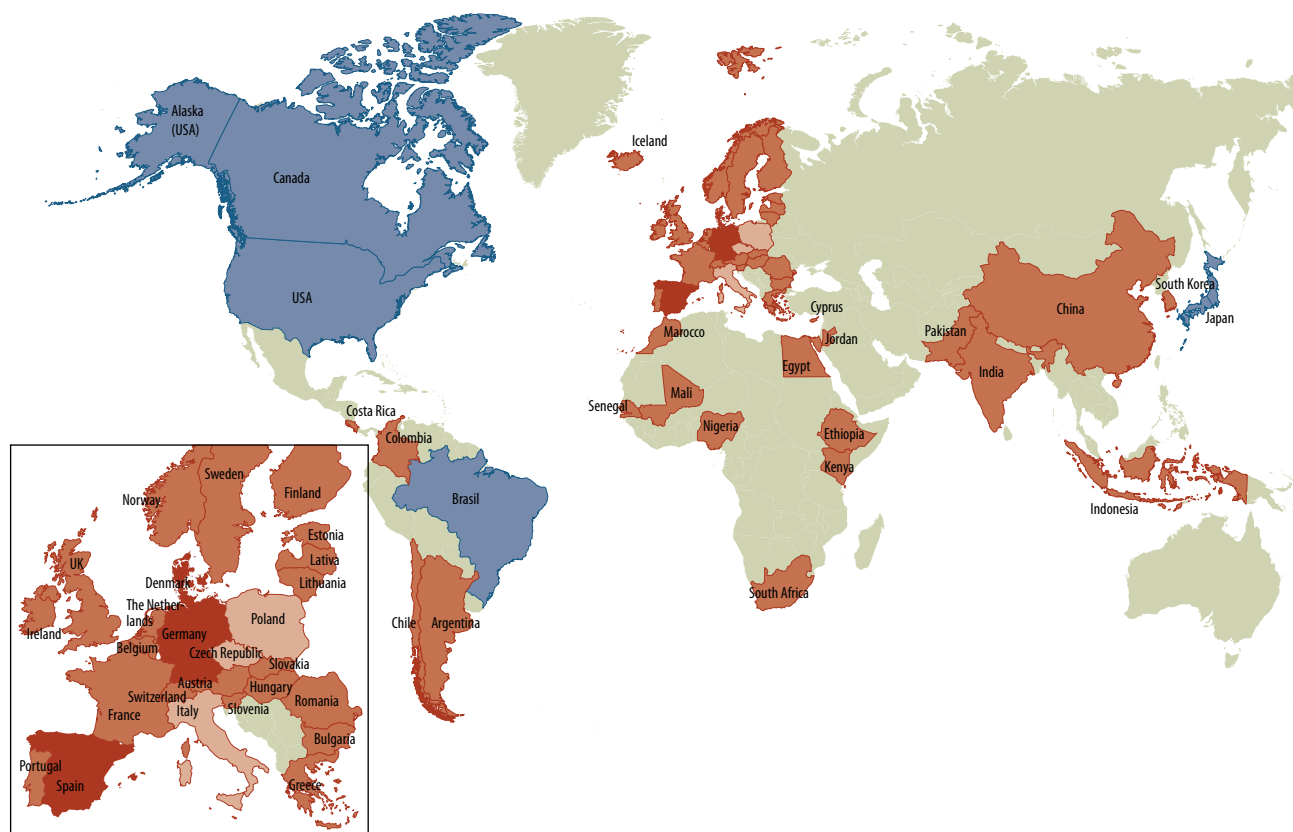
Pakistani governmental representative Irfan Afzal Mirza has great hopes for the new agency. "IRENA will help renewable energy technologies unfold very quickly in developing countries." IRENA is expected to bundle knowledge and experience with renewables to make all of it available to members.

The agency will also provide consulting services to governments (not only of developing nations) to help them exploit their local potential. Should a country set up several megawatts of wind turbines or install small solar panels to power single light bulbs in huts? The answer depends on local geography, the government's budget, and local culture.

IRENA will help design policies to promote renewables. It will also provide training to create a skilled workforce to service the new technologies. Finally, the new agency will also speak on behalf of all renewable energy sources internationally so that renewables can catch up with conventional energy sources. To this end, an entirely new agenda has to be created. "On the one hand, we have no customs charges for international shipments of primary energy; on the other, we have custom charges of up to 80 percent for renewable energy technologies," Scheer says. "These technologies are the equivalent of supplies of raw materials." If IRENA gets its way, concentrator cells and wind turbines would soon be freely traded internationally without any customs charges. IRENA also aims to step up the development of international standards. "When standards differ, imports are hampered. As a result, competition can be unfair rather than productive, and markets may not develop," Scheer explains.

The "enemy" sets an example

Despite the lively discussions at the first conference, only 44 countries took part in the workshops at the end of June to specify tasks. The Czech Republic and New Zealand were among those who did not return. But Scheer is not concerned. "Fewer than 20 countries were represented when the International Atomic Energy Agency was



Graphic: Solarpraxis AG/Harald Schütt

The countries in red participated in the last preparatory conference in July. The dark red nations were especially important in the founding process. The United States, Canada and Brazil did not attend the meetings.

founded in 1957. That figure rose to a hundred after three or four years, and today there are more than 140.” The success of the IAEA is taken as a model for IRENA. Whereas the former quickly helped make nuclear power widely used across the world, IRENA hopes to do the same with renewables. “The goal is to close institutional ranks,” Scheer explains. The IAEA has an annual budget of nearly 300 million euros and a staff of 2200.

IRENA will be much smaller at the start. Monika Frieling of Germany’s Environmental Ministry is involved in the founding of IRENA; she says that 25 million dollars is a realistic figure for the launch. 100 to 150 staff members could be employed. The contribution that each country pays will depend on that country’s state budget. In this way, developing nations will be encouraged to participate – an important step towards promoting renewables worldwide. “The states of the European Union, for instance, can purchase competence themselves,” Frieling argues. But otherwise, everyone is tight-lipped shortly before the founding of the agency. Bylaws have to be specified in detail. Bonn, Madrid, and Vienna are offering to host the headquarters, and the new orga-

nization needs a president. The founding is a diplomatic process, and a number of countries have not yet committed to joining the organization. But the list of those who have committed includes Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Jordan, India, and Pakistan.

“We already have 30 to 40 pledges,” said Scheer shortly before the last preparatory conference. “And China has also indicated its interest.” The main allies of Germany are Spain and Denmark, who are already considered co-founders. “Spain, like Denmark and Germany, is unreservedly committed to the founding of IRENA,” explains Rafael Conde de Saro of Spain’s Foreign Ministry, which was visited by a German special envoy in 2007. Indeed, Spain would like to have IRENA’s headquarters in Madrid as a sign of Spain’s full support for renewables. Canada, the U.S., and Japan have already opted out. But Scheer is not worried. “That is only for the time being. Once the agency is up and running, they can always opt in.” In the U.S., Democratic Congressman Edward Markey called on George W. Bush in March 2008 to support the founding of IRENA. And when the U.S. did not send a delegation to the first conference in Ber-

lin, he complained in writing to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

A pragmatic change of heart

After all, membership in IRENA would be a good way for the U.S. to spruce up its tarnished image. “Everybody likes renewables. So this step would be easy for us to take.” It would also be a good way of boosting domestic economic growth. After all, participation in global international markets would have its own benefits in the future. Phillips also points out that political obstacles have to be done away with in order to open markets for future American products.

Interestingly, the tenor on the other side of the Atlantic is much different. Either the initiators of IRENA are reluctant to put their national agendas on the table, or they simply have a different idea about what IRENA should do than their American colleagues have. “All countries will benefit,” says Spanish representative Conde de Saro. “We all face the same challenge, but individually we only have some of the solutions.” Scheer is sticking to his idealism. “One thing is certain: IRENA will not be a trade organization.” And he adds, “Germany does not really need the agency.” But the world does. ♦

BD