The man struggling to bring energy efficiency in from the cold

By Terry Slavin on Apr 6, 2020, Reuters events[1]

Terry Slavin speaks to Benoit Lebot, former head of the International Partnership for Energy Efficiency Cooperation, about his frustrated efforts to elevate demand reduction on the global climate agenda

We've known for more than two decades that energy efficiency is the most important weapon in the battle against climate change, with the International Energy Agency (IEA) estimating that decreasing energy demand could deliver 40% of the Paris Agreement.

But with energy efficiency improving at a derisory 1-2% a year, why is it that the only agency that fostered global collaboration around the issue, the International Partnership for Energy Efficiency Cooperation (IPEEC), was disbanded in December?

It's a question that the IPEEC's former executive director, Benoit Lebot, has had a lot of time to ponder since he closed its offices, housed in the IEA secretariat in Paris, and let go its team of six staff ahead of Christmas.

Energy efficiency is not being taken seriously and needs to be supported with specific institutions, human capacity and an international framework

"There's a disconnect from what we know [about the importance of energy efficiency] from the IPCC or the IEA, and ongoing efforts to tap the known energy efficiency potential," Lebot told Ethical Corporation, adding that there is no UN agency that is systematically collecting data on energy efficiency.

The disbanding if the IPEEC, he said, is an "illustration that energy efficiency failed to be adequately and consistently supported, as it should be, with specific institutions, human capacity and an international framework."

Now working as senior policy adviser in the French government's ministry for the energy transition, Lebot remains hopeful that the former IPEEC, which was set up with a 10-year mandate in 2009 and reports to the G20, will yet see new life as the Energy Efficiency Hub, an energy efficiency equivalent to the International Renewable Energy Agency.

[1] https://www.reutersevents.com/sustainability/man-struggling-bring-energy-efficiency-cold

Despite being highly cost effective, energy efficiency is only improving at 1-2% a year. (Credit: Rasstock/Shutterstock)

This is something that has been under discussion internationally since 2016, when Germany pushed for it ahead of its G20 presidency. Importantly, the hub would have a seat at the climate negotiations table as an accredited party to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), something from which IPEEC was always excluded.

Diplomatic wrangling, however, meant the hub wasn't in place in time to replace the IPEEC when it was due to be disbanded last year. Then the first meeting of a steering committee to establish the new agency, scheduled for last month, fell victim to Covid-19, so has been kicked into the long grass once again.

For Lebot, it caps four years of frustration over the global failure to promote emissions-saving technologies, despite the paradoxical fact that their cost-effectiveness means they are often referred to as low-hanging fruit.

Despite the fact that energy efficiency is a beautiful thing, it is complex, it's granular, it's fragmented

Investment in energy efficiency is running at about $240bn annually, according to the IEA, well behind renewable energy. But to meet the Paris Agreement, energy efficiency will have to increase by four or five-fold, while clean energy only needs to double, he says.

And while renewable energy is on target, with the IEA expecting the fast-growing renewables market to increase another 50% in the next five years, energy efficiency improvements are not

only derisorily low, but going in the wrong direction: In 2018 primary energy intensity improved by just 1.2%, the third year of decline.

So what are the barriers? Lebot says it's not just the fact that doing more with less is regarded as boring. "Despite the fact that energy efficiency is a beautiful thing, it is complex, it's granular, it's fragmented."

Establishing fuel efficiency standards for HGVs could go a long way to curbing transport emissions. (Credit: CC7/Shutterstock)

Most critically, it suffers from a lack of baseline data, which is expensive to collect as it needs to be detailed and specific in order to inform policy, create tools and attract investment.

And in contrast to renewable energy, which is now cost-competitive with fossil fuels, energy efficiency relies not on market forces but on a constellation of factors, including available technology, the behaviour of billions of consumers and millions of companies, and governments working on their own or in concert to set building codes and agree international technical standards.

"To reach scale we need an enabling environment. Governments have to make energy efficiency a priority in every decision and develop tools like labelling, standards and building codes, so the market responds. If we don't bring visibility to energy efficiency, the market can't act. That's why it needs special attention."

Municipalities don't even employ an energy manager. There is no one looking at the bills

Despite the IPEEC's operating budget of less than $1m a year, it had a plethora of task groups working on all sectors of the global economy, from developing standards to govern the internet of things, to establishing fuel efficiency standards for heavy-duty vehicles, something he describes as a huge missing element in the battle to curb transport emissions.

What seems to excite Lebot most, however, is the potential for Big Data to help cities and landlords manage the energy efficiency of buildings, which are alone responsible for 30% of global final energy demand, a percentage that is set to rise even further with growing urbanisation.

He points out that one reason that cities have been slow to invest in LED lighting, for example, is that many municipalities don't even employ an energy manager. "There is no one looking at the bills."

But digitisation will allow energy use to become visible to everyone, he says. "It will allow us to leapfrog from a situation where you at best had an intern collecting data on energy performance on an Excel spreadsheet, to a world where big data can collect online energy demand and then start accessing information, processing information and implementing energy efficiency."

Big Data will help cities and landlords manage energy efficiency at scale. (Credit: carlos castilla/Shutterstock)

His other great hope is that as renewable energy continues to ramp up and the production of energy becomes more decentralised, and closer to where it is consumed, more attention will be paid to demand reduction.

While cooling his heels in the French environment ministry, Lebot is encouraged that he was invited by the Saudi government, which is president of the G20, to address a recent G20 workshop on the circular economy in Riyadh.

And though Covid-19 has dealt a blow to the establishment of the Energy Efficiency Hub, he sees a silver lining.

“I strongly believe that Covid-19 is offering the world the opportunity to totally reshape the world economy,” Lebot says. “We have to think local, and reinvent local circuits for food, energy and transport. We have to address climate change, because it’s a greater threat to humanity than Covid, and energy efficiency has to be fully part of that. The world needs institutions like this hub.”

Main picture credit: G.Aresteanu/Ren21 Academy

This article is part of our in-depth Energy efficiency briefing. See also:

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