

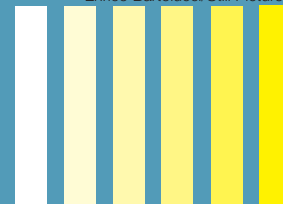


Power switch



Chris Marais/WWF-Canon

Enrico Bartolucci/Still Pictures



Dr Claude Martin, Chair of the International Sustainability Innovation Council of Switzerland (ISIS), talks to Cécile Bordier, Tunza Youth Advisor for Europe

'EVERYTHING, EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE is affected by the way we use energy,' says Claude Martin. 'The challenge is to protect the world from climate change, while pursuing people's development. We must bring energy to all, but energy that is environmentally sound.'

As populations rise and economies expand – particularly in China and India – the demand for energy is expected to grow by 60 per cent by 2030. Meeting that, he says, will mean remodelling our entire energy system and moving away from dependence on fossil fuels.

Biomass, biofuels, and geothermal, solar and wind power can all help replace fossil fuels and ensure countries' energy self-sufficiency, he says – and the transition must be a political priority.

'But,' he adds, 'humanity should not fall into the trap of replacing one problem with another. We now know that renewable energies can upset the delicate equilibrium of ecosystems.'

'In Brazil, for example, large forest areas have already been sacrificed to sugarcane plantations to produce ethanol for cars. Or in Indonesia and Malaysia, the soaring production of palm oil – in part for use as a biofuel – is to the detriment of tropical forests and the species that live in them.'

A Round Table, organized by WWF – the global conservation organization

which Martin headed for 12 years – has brought together planters, producers, processors, banks and civil society groups to promote the sustainable production and use of palm oil. 'We have a promising partnership with Unilever, which is imposing certain standards on palm oil production,' he says.

'But we have to be realistic. Renewable energy can meet only a part of the ever-increasing demand. So there must be investment in energy-saving technologies. Energy efficiency is not just an important part of the solution – it is probably the most important aspect.'

People in the industrialized world can do an enormous amount, relatively simply, through such steps as insulating their homes properly, switching off appliances, eating local produce – which has not been transported over long distances – and driving fuel-efficient cars.

But Martin adds that individuals alone cannot save the planet. 'Of course people must be encouraged to consume more thoughtfully, but this must happen alongside a commitment on the part of industry. And there needs to be a governing framework and intergovernmental agreements, like the Kyoto Protocol, to encourage energy saving.'

Countries, he adds, could increase investment in cleaner transport and introduce minimum standards of energy

efficiency for buildings, industrial processes and new appliances. But, above all, they must end all subsidies to the fossil-fuel industry.

'Governments need a clear long-term vision for energy planning. Today's response to the energy crisis is just to look for an alternative to our dwindling supplies – such as nuclear – rather than seeking efficiency.'

Car research should focus, for example, on energy-efficient models running on clean renewable fuels, he says, while people should switch their perception of cars from status symbols to something to be used with prudence. And governments should encourage local authorities to develop practical and economic public transport systems geared to people's needs.

So when might the world achieve energy sustainability? Martin is optimistic. 'Younger generations have not grown up in a system of continuous expansion, and are increasingly aware of the planet's limits. This will help in making the essential shift from an exclusively economic worldview to a broader perspective – one which must have the entire weight of society behind it.'

'We all must engage with this as a matter of urgency. No one can afford to sit back and watch. We all must develop a conscience; there is no other way of respecting our environment.'