eco@work

April 2026

Sustainable reading
from the Oeko-Institut

Learning climate action from abroad

Learning more about energy poverty Interview with Dr Kristina Eisfeld

The monkeys are calling once more

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During my seven-month stay in Costa Rica while working on my diploma thesis back in 1994, the local deforestation problem was writ large. In many regions such large areas had been cleared that one no longer saw trees at all – just red soil. No calls by the famous howler monkeys which had previously populated the forests were to be heard. The national parks were the last places where one could still see what the invaluable rainforest ecosystem had looked like before. Now you'll say that hardly sounds like a story from which to take a positive lesson home. On the contrary! But for the moment, read on.

We have no rainforest here in Germany. And, of course, our situation differs from that of other countries in many ways – meteorologically, geologically, socially and more. Nonetheless, there is a lot we can learn from them when it comes to climate action. For example, we can look to the north: Norway has decided to phase out combustion-engine cars from 2025 onwards. And indeed, last year almost all new registrations were electric. This has been achieved by exempting electric vehicles from value-added tax – while keeping it very high for combustion engines – combined with exemptions from or reductions of other road usage levies, provision of free parking for electric vehicles in cities, rebated taxes for electric company cars, mandatory procurement of electric vehicles in public calls for tender and, finally, expansion of charging infrastructure. China, for its part, has employed vehicle registration as a tool to put electric cars on the fast lane – registering a combustion-engine vehicle there is time-consuming and costly, while registering an electric one can be done quickly online. That sounds like an idea that could be useful here at home, too. Wherever we look around the globe there are countless, inspiring examples of effective climate action – take just the ban on plastic bags adopted in Morocco, the scheme for non-profit municipal housing in Vienna or the luxury tax on large cars in Thailand.

Let's go back to Costa Rica. A good twenty years after my first stay I went there again with my family. I was astonished: no trace of deforestation, forest areas had grown back greatly and were linked up in habitat networks. Seeing howler monkeys had become a normal part of the scenery once more. We saw and heard them regularly on the terrace of our lodgings. What can we learn from this? That well-designed, rigorous forest and nature conservation policies can achieve much in relatively short periods if one stays focused. It is this kind of focus that we need at home, too – combined with innovative ideas and the courage to test them.

Yours,
Anke Herold

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Further information on our topics can be found online at www.oeko.de/en/ecowork-magazine

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"In-depth knowledge of the determinants of success is hugely valuable"

Learning from each other – this is in the DNA of the Climate Alliance. For this largest of all European networks of cities represents more than 2,000 members. It offers many formats of exchange – the CAIC annual conference, an array of working groups on climate change adaptation, CO_2 monitoring and other issues, and, not least, the Energy Poverty Advisory Hub (EPAH). We asked Dr Kristina Eisfeld, project manager at the Climate Alliance, why exchange is so important, what we can learn from other countries and in which aspects Germany, too, may serve as a model.

Dr Eisfeld, why is cross-border cooperation so valuable when it comes to climate action?
Every region has its own challenges – and its own solutions that can be greatly enriched by exchange at European and international level. This not only makes work easier but saves resources as the players of climate action can learn from experience already gained by others – both in terms of successes and failures. In-depth knowledge of the determinants of success is hugely valuable when it comes to the practicalities of making proven approaches replicable and scalable in other contexts. Take, for example, the one-stop shops designed to assist Europe's citizens in improving the energy performance of their buildings. We have learnt that it is vital for them to be physically close to people – for instance on town squares or markets – and for them to be open on Saturdays because for many people that is the only day on which they can engage with such issues.

What is a field in which Germany has a particular amount to learn from other countries?
Energy poverty is definitely such a field. Far too little attention has been given to this in the past and there is a lot of catching up to do. Many have only become aware of the issue of energy poverty in the wake of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the escalating energy costs that this provoked. Other countries are far ahead of us here.

Which approaches implemented elsewhere could we replicate?
To start with: Recognising the problem at all. In marked contrast to many other European countries, Germany still doesn't have a central coordination point for combatting energy poverty. A next step would be to set clear goals for reducing energy poverty levels and to monitor their attainment regularly. In broader terms, we need a consistent strategy, clear responsibilities and an integrative, strategic outlook.

Why has the issue been neglected so severely in Germany up to now?
Because it is often viewed as a marginal problem and is not given the priority it deserves on the policy agenda. One reason for this situation is the assumption that many people in Germany are protected sufficiently by the social security system. What is overlooked is that there are also the "hidden energy poor" – households whose income is just above the threshold that would entitle them to social security benefits. These include, for instance, single working mothers, students, and widows whose pensions do not suffice to heat their homes. These are all people who often fail to be reached by assistance schemes because they are not on the statistical radar.

Coming to climate action, which are the questions posed frequently in the Climate Alliance's exchange formats?
One is how to get the issue on the agenda at all. How to shape financing schemes in such a way that measures are actually implemented. But also: How to keep the issue alive when attention wanes, and what to do when local-authority budgets become constrained. Or: How to establish renewable energy communities and involve vulnerable households in them.

Are there also things about which you'd say: Here we can pass our knowledge on to other countries?
Of course. One thing that leaps to mind is the widely established system of professional building management enterprises which support associations of homeowners, notably in multistorey buildings, with their expertise in project coordination, financial planning and implementation of climate-relevant measures – such as retrofits or heating system replacements. This is something not yet established in many countries. Many former Eastern Bloc countries could profit from this, where privatisation has led to a very great number of isolated, individual owners.

Thank you for talking to eco@work.
The interviewer was Christiane Weihe.

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Clean power, progressive women

Zanzibar's Solar Mamas

They are the bearers of light to places without power. For they have learnt to install, maintain and repair household solar electrification systems. This is what they now do in their own villages. Each household benefitting from the clean energy supply pays six thousand Tanzanian shillings per month, or roughly two US dollars. "One dollar goes directly to the Solar Mamas, giving them a regular income," explains Brenda Geofrey, Country Director at Barefoot College International Zanzibar, where the women are trained to become solar engineers. "The other dollar goes to a reserve for contingencies such as the replacement of a battery." The programme run by the Barefoot College International supplies a sufficient quantity of Solar Power Kits to the village community.

Almost half the population of Zanzibar has no access to electricity. Kerosene lamps are often used for lighting – that is expensive, environmentally harmful and, above all, harmful to health. The Solar Mamas therefore bring real change to their communities. And to their own lives and livelihoods. "The women enrolling in our programme generally have no formal education or profession. Many cannot read or write. They live as housewives, cook the food and rear the children." The three-month training course not only transforms them into solar energy experts. A key focus is also placed on many further questions of daily life. "In our Enrich – Life skills module they learn about their rights, about health matters, about gender roles, about self awareness and leadership, financial literacy and entrepreneurship. We help them learn to lead sustainable and healthy lives and be successful entrepreneurs."

The programme originated at Barefoot College International in India, where the first women from Zanzibar were already trained in 2011. Following the foundation of Barefoot College International Zanzibar in 2015, these women now train their successors. Up to now, 65 women from Zanzibar, Malawi and Somaliland have already received training. They have brought solar power to 29 villages and 1858 homes. Currently the Barefoot College International Zanzibar is training eight women from Pemba Island and the Central African Republic. This is climate action and women's empowerment in perfect unison. "The solutions to the big challenges of our time are often already present on the ground, in the communities," stresses Brenda Geofrey. "Local solutions can drive the necessary transitions – one just needs to give them space to flourish."

Christiane Weihe

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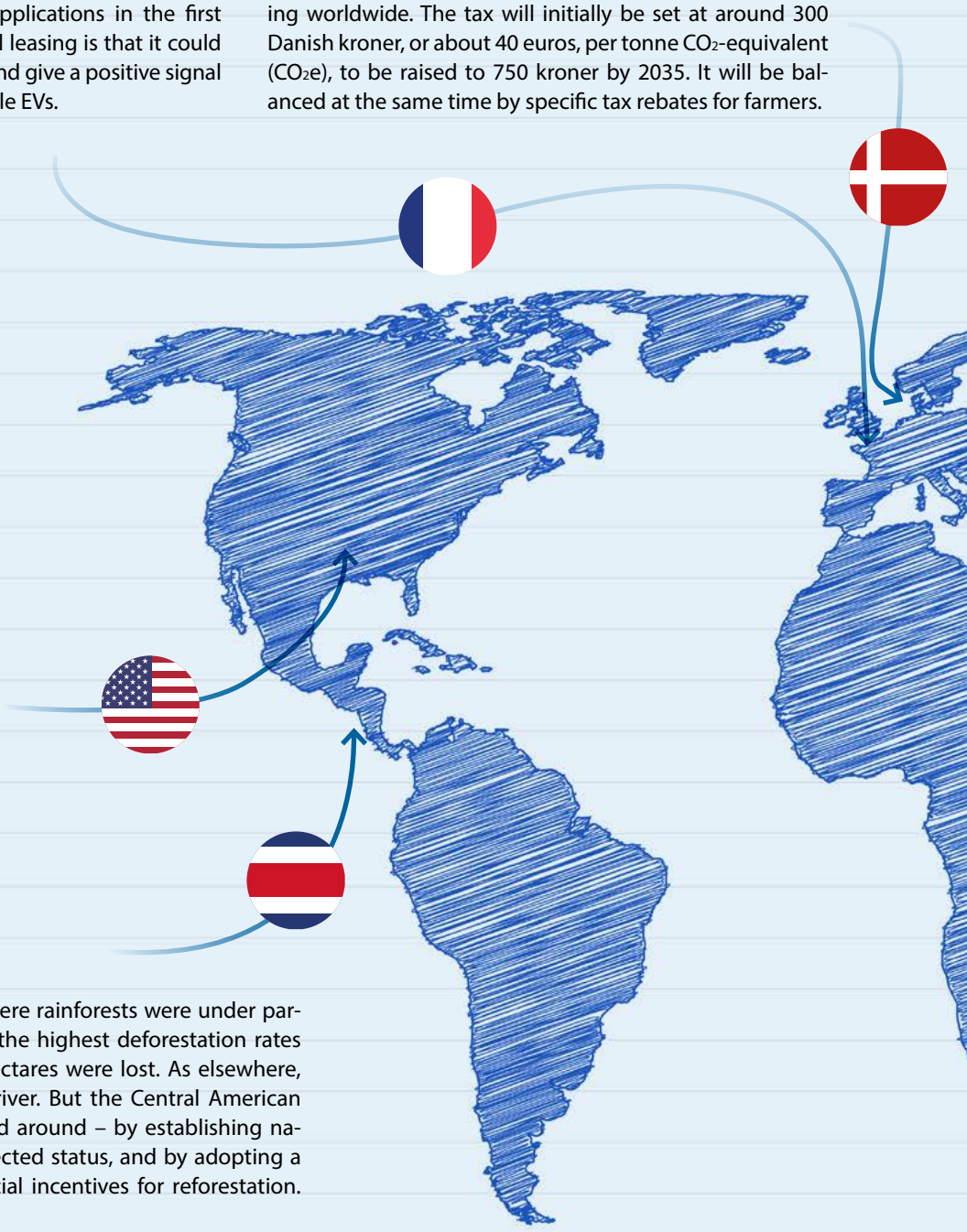
Social leasing

Making electric vehicles (EV) affordable for people on low or middle incomes – France's social leasing scheme makes this possible through low-cost, subsidised EV leasing contracts. The French scheme received 90,000 applications in the first six weeks. A positive side effect of social leasing is that it could boost the second-hand market for EVs and give a positive signal for the production of small and affordable EVs.

Cow tax

What cows release will carry a price tag in Denmark – the country will tax livestock methane emissions from 2030 onwards, thus establishing the first such climate levy on farming worldwide. The tax will initially be set at around 300 Danish kroner, or about 40 euros, per tonne CO_2-equivalent (CO_2e), to be raised to 750 kroner by 2035. It will be balanced at the same time by specific tax rebates for farmers.



Retrofit without debt

People who don't have much are often unable to improve efficiency. How should they pay the up-front costs of building energy performance improvements, for instance? In the USA, a Pay As You Save (PAYS) programme is tackling this challenge. It permits building retrofits without debt – the costs are recouped via the electricity bill. What is more, repayment is tied to the property. If someone moves away it is not they who have to continue repaying the retrofit, but those who actually profit from it. Georgia und Missouri have rolled out the programme.

Grow not log

In the 1980s Costa Rica was a place where rainforests were under particular threat. The country had one of the highest deforestation rates worldwide. Every year, some 51,000 hectares were lost. As elsewhere, demand for farmland was the main driver. But the Central American country has managed to turn the trend around – by establishing national parks giving forested areas protected status, and by adopting a new forest law that has created financial incentives for reforestation. A petrol tax has provided the funding.

A glance abroad

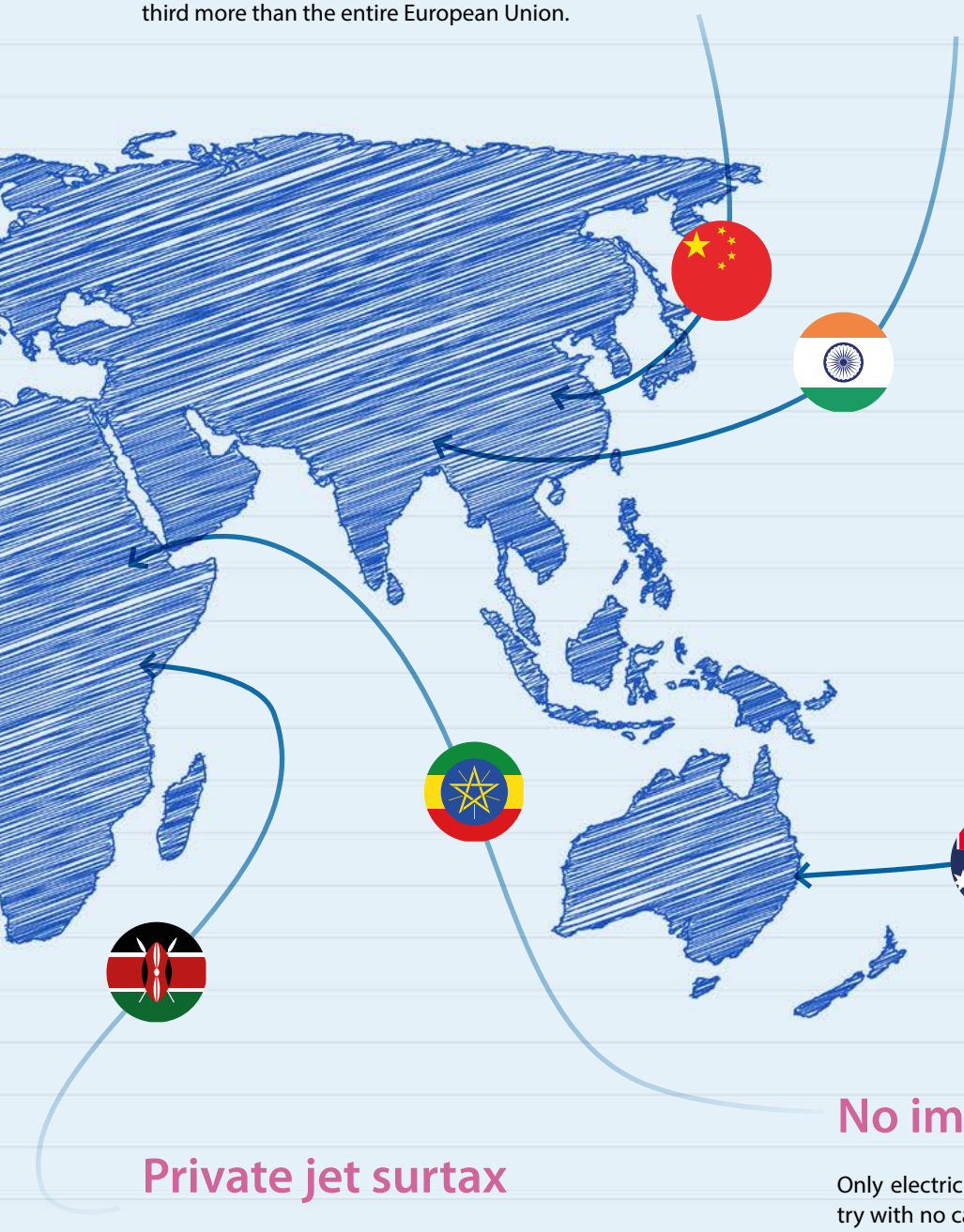
Climate action around the globe

Renewable in China

China's renewables are booming. In 2024 alone, the country installed 79 gigawatts (GW) of wind and 277 GW of solar capacity, thus already attaining its renewables expansion target for 2030. Furthermore, in the first half of 2025 China installed 212 GW new solar capacity – twice as much as Germany over the past 25 years. Wind and solar power now account for 42 percent of China's installed power generation capacity. In 2024 the People's Republic invested almost 625 billion US dollars in low-carbon technologies, efficiency improvements and energy infrastructure – about one-third more than the entire European Union.

100 percent organic

A small state in India has gone all-out organic and has been doing it for ten years with success. Most people in Sikkim in northeast India live in rural regions. Some 65,000 farmers cultivate plots that are often very small. They have been trained in organic farming methods. In addition, all farms are certified to international standards. The agriculture minister of Sikkim announced in 2025 that the state is now ready to market its produce on global markets.



Efficiency down under

Comparing the energy efficiency of commercial buildings such as offices is a difficult undertaking. Australia has developed an approach that has proved its worth in practice. The NABERS scheme appraises buildings on the basis of their actual energy consumption. The result is presented by an easily understood rating from one to six stars. It has been shown that the improved transparency on the real estate market has indeed reduced the energy consumption of office buildings. NABERS is also a beacon of successful policy export: it has now been introduced in New Zealand and England as well.

Private jet surtax

Higher levies on private jets and premium flights: This is an idea being advanced by Kenya – for luxury travel causes much higher carbon emissions than economy class. The extra revenue will in turn be used to benefit climate and development projects. The initiative was presented jointly with Barbados and France at the 2025 Climate Conference and is now being promoted by the Global Solidarity Levies Task Force which further nations have joined.

No imports!

Only electric vehicles on the roads – Ethiopia, a country with no car manufacturing industry of its own, aims to achieve this by means of an import ban on combustion-engine vehicles. For transport is the source of 40 percent of the country's greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, Ethiopia's power supply is already almost entirely renewable today. Some 90 percent of the electricity consumed in the country comes from hydropower. In parallel, imports of EVs have been promoted by removing tariffs on them.

From Pankow to Massachusetts

Learning climate action from abroad

Be it about energy poverty or energy efficiency, electric vehicles or renewable energies. The climate action topics on which we can learn from the experience, knowledge and initiatives of other countries are many and varied. Let's take a trip around the world, looking at projects that may inspire action here at home. But let's also take a look at the studies produced by the Oeko-Institut that build upon insights transcending national boundaries.

Berlin, Pankow. Our staff scientist Johanna Cludius is taking a trip abroad, at least in spirit. For it is abroad, she says, where we can encounter much from which we can learn for climate action at home. "Germany still tends to see itself as a country others can learn from. Yet there are countless projects and initiatives abroad from which we can learn a great deal. Moreover – and not least – we can also learn from mistakes or from things that have not worked."

One key issue on which Germany can take a lead from other countries is energy poverty. "Measuring and monitoring this through an Energy Poverty Observatory is standard practice in many countries", Cludius notes. In Germany, in contrast, we know scarcely anything about the current situation, partly due to a history of inaction in this regard because of reliance on a strong social security system. "But it can't stay that way – climate policy and social issues are far too closely intertwined and must always be addressed in a unified approach."

NOT JUST IN GREAT BRITAIN

We first join Johanna Cludius on a trip to Ireland – the country is a pioneer in combatting energy poverty, the scientist stresses. Commissioned by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, the Oeko-Institut has produced energy poverty country reports on Germany, Greece, France, Poland and Ireland as input to a project titled "Vulnerability in the context of the ETS 2: Existing data and instruments in the housing sector". "In my view, this kind of work too is normal scientific practice: seeing what there is, finding out which solutions to certain problems others have devised, and building upon this." There are certainly things to build upon in Ireland. One is the Warmer Homes programme – providing financial support to vulnerable households so that they can carry out energy performance improvements to their homes. Another is the Stay Well & Warm initiative – helping such households gain access to key information on potential support schemes.

BETTER HOUSING IN GREECE

We move on to Greece, a further country in which a much stronger focus is placed on energy poverty than in Germany. Here an action plan to combat energy poverty is in place. Greece's national energy and climate plan envisages halving energy poverty by 2025 and reducing it by 75 percent by the year 2030, all from a 2016 baseline. "To achieve these targets, Greece has developed a whole raft of measures – including financial assistance for building retrofits or heating system replacement, and an act on energy cooperatives jointly operating renewable energy plants", Cludius notes.

WHEREVER ONE LOOKS

The Vauban district of Freiburg. We're briefly back in Germany, at the Oeko-Institut head office. Malte Bei der Wieden is just as convinced as his colleague Johanna Cludius that looking abroad can only yield benefit for one's own climate activities at home. "Seeing what works abroad expands one's conception of what is possible. It also greatly facilitates debate on ways to take action at home if one can refer to something that already works well elsewhere", he points out. "Conditions and challenges can vary greatly depending upon the continent one looks at. Nonetheless, even in a foreign country where climatic conditions are very different one can learn about successful ways to involve the public."

GOODBYE TO FOSSIL GAS IN HOLLAND

Malte Bei der Wieden first takes us to the Netherlands. On behalf of the European Climate Foundation (ECF), scientists in the Oeko-Institut's Energy & Climate Division joined forces with the Regulatory Assistance Project to examine successful pathways to phase out natural gas in a project titled "Planning and regulating Europe's gas networks: breaking up with fossil gas". They analysed the status quo and the regulatory situation in seven European countries.

No plastic in Rwanda

Many countries on the African continent have adopted bans on plastic bags. They include Rwanda in 2008, Mauritania in 2013, Morocco in 2016 and Kenya in 2017.

Participation in Spain

Guzmán is a small town with a population of less than one hundred on the mountain plain of Burgos, Spain. With Guzman Renovable, these people have established one of the most advanced rural energy cooperatives in the country.

Its heartpiece is a large, jointly owned photovoltaic installation. The electricity this generates is shared among the participating households according to clearly defined distribution coefficients.

"Up to now Germany lacks any clear strategy by which to close down the gas grid in a planned manner. However, first cities such as Zurich and countries such as the Netherlands have taken the lead. Germany, too, will have to address this issue sooner or later: if more and more people use renewable sources to heat their homes and disconnect from the gas grid, the grid usage charges for the remaining consumers will rise. And those will be low-income, tenant households." The Netherlands has adopted a measure he would like to show us: "In 2018 the decision was already taken that new buildings are no longer permitted to be connected to the gas grid. What is more, local authorities have the right to prohibit new gas connections themselves."

MORE EFFICIENCY IN THE USA

On the other side of the Atlantic – in the USA, to be precise – there are also initiatives that Malte Bei der Wieden would like to show us. Commissioned by the European Climate Foundation (ECF) and working together with the Institut Wohnen und Umwelt, the Oeko-Institut's scientists compiled such initiatives in the USA and elsewhere in a project titled "Minimum Energy Performance Standards for Non-Residential Buildings". They explored numerous approaches designed to implement minimum efficiency standards for non-residential buildings in a wide range of countries. "The European Union's Energy Performance of Buildings Directive aims to boost energy efficiency in buildings – and must be transposed into German national law by May 2026", Malte Bei der Wieden explains. "In that endeavour, we can learn a lot from other countries." In addition, minimum energy performance standards are a highly effective climate policy tool. "They address those buildings where the savings potential is greatest." He notes positive examples in California, Colorado, Maryland and Massachusetts. "In Boston, for example, a regulation of this kind was adopted in 2021 for municipal and commercial buildings and for multifamily residential buildings. It requires climate neutrality for these buildings by 2050 and the deployment of renewable energy sources to meet that goal."

TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES

Back in Germany, the Oeko-Institut scientists are keen to stress that looking abroad is not a matter of carbon-copying ideas or projects. It is more about finding inspiration in them. And seeing them as pathbreakers for one's own efforts. And, not least, it is about gaining indications of areas in which research efforts need to come together and generate synergies. "If we see climate questions to which no approaches have yet responded, we can be fairly certain that answering them is difficult", says Johanna Cludius. "We then need to tackle such questions together, transcending all boundaries."

Christiane Weihe

Dr Johanna Cludius and Malte Bei der Wieden both work in the Oeko-Institut's Energy & Climate Division, where they address climate issues from diverse angles. For instance, Cludius, an economist, explores the distributional effects of energy and climate policies and analyses market-based instruments of climate policy. Bei der Wieden, an environmental engineer, works on energy efficiency and the renewable energy share in supply systems for the buildings sector, among other topics.
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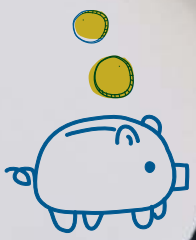
Smart in Finland

The washing machine only runs at times of day when electricity is cheapest. The electric vehicle feeds electricity back into the grid at times when it pays for the owner. In Finland, this is possible. For here **smart meters** have been installed throughout the country. As an added benefit, dynamic electricity tariffs help to stabilise the grid.



EVs in Nepal

The number of electric vehicles is rising steeply in the land of Mount Everest – from 250 in 2020 to more than 13,000 in 2024. Today, more than **70 percent** of all cars imported are electric.

One reason is the reduced tax rate on EVs. The Nepalese government has announced that **90 percent** of all new private vehicle registrations are to be electric by 2030. It is investing in charging infrastructure to make sure that the target is reached.