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The Consumer and Environmentally Motivated Energy Conservation - Research and Challenges

In Finnish energy policy programmes since the 1970s the motivation for energy conservation was at first the immediate need to reduce oil costs, which was later refined into reducing the dependence on oil, and further into overall economies. As energy prices settled on a lower level and consciousness about environmental problems increased, environmental protection, lately especially controlling carbon dioxide emissions, became an important motivation for energy conservation.

The local and international impacts of emissions have been taken into account throughout the time of energy policy. The programmes have first sought to solve these problems by means of anticipating strategies, e.g. energy conservation, and then by means of filtering and cleaning up. Global climate change first appeared in cautious remarks, to turn into the main environmental concern in more recent programmes. The need for ecological modernisation is admitted in a roundabout way. Energy conservation is, however, defined in terms that restrict it into a form of an anticipating strategy, excluding structural considerations.

During the energy crisis energy conservation efforts concerned private households and the service sector. As energy policies were developed, the focus was on conservation investments in industry and on heating. Consumers received information concerning energy conservation methods. In 1990 a campaign was carried out to raise the consciousness of individuals about the connections between energy and environmental problems, and to move more of the responsibility for energy conservation to consumers. In 1992 consumers got a larger role in the energy strategy. Consumers were seen as actors on the market and therefore as important influencers. Consumers were to receive feedback on their energy consumption, not only information about how to reduce it. Finally in the energy conservation programme of 1995 the consumer is seen in the context of larger systems and organisations which may need to be influenced, rather than the consumer him/herself.

After a tradition of individual projects with a social science approach, research concerning the consumer has been carried out within programmes since 1990. At first the purpose was to understand consumers' energy consumption and conservation. Later, specific means to promote conservation were sought. These phases coincide with the way the consumer was seen as an important influencer on the market. There have been other studies on the knowledge and attitudes of consumers.

In the future research will focus more on the systems, conditions and situations that influence the ways in which consumers can make energy efficient decisions and assume energy conserving habits. Structural aspects should be included in a creative way, so as not to overlook important energy efficiency potentials beyond simple technical efficiency improvements. The potential of self-imposed, collective restrictions or other agreements to conserve energy should receive more attention.