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## **Time for an International Renewable Energy Agency**

At the invitation of the German Federal Government, representatives from more than 60 countries met in Berlin earlier this month to discuss the founding of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), an intergovernmental organization that will exist to exclusively promote the adoption of renewable energy worldwide.

Participants expressed a sense of urgency to begin a swift transition to a more secure, sustainable renewable energy economy with the assistance of an international body. A variety of countries have expressed support for IRENA, including Spain, India, Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Portugal and South Africa.

During the Berlin meeting on April 10th and 11th, government representatives met to discuss and hone the objectives, activities, finances, and organizational structure of IRENA. A common point of discussion during the workshops was the relationship between IRENA and other existing international bodies that deal with energy issues. Some countries expressed concerns over the duplication of activities or unnecessary competition with organizations such as the International Energy Agency.

While there were concerns over how IRENA would work alongside other bodies, it was made clear by participants that a strong, independent force for supporting renewables is necessary to realize the full social, economic and political benefits of clean energies. It was generally agreed that most of the existing initiatives lack a focal point. With limited mandates and capacities, current international renewable energy associations, networks and UN bodies cannot fill the institutional gap that IRENA plans to fill, said Bianca Jagger, Chair of the World Future Council.

"Promoting renewables must now become a global and universal priority, and IRENA is a necessary condition for that goal. If we intend to embark on the renewable energy revolution, we cannot do it without IRENA," said Jagger in a speech.

"IRENA will work toward improved regulatory frameworks for renewable energy through enhanced policy advice, improvements in the transfer of renewable energy technology; progress on skills and know-how for renewable energy; it will be able to offer a scientifically sound information basis through applied policy research; and better financing of renewable energy," she continued.

Although the International Energy Agency (IEA) established an advisory board on renewables in 1982, the world has yet to see a breakthrough in renewable energy adoption. This proves the need for an exclusive focus on creating the structural changes needed to ensure widespread adoption of renewable energy, said Hermann Scheer, founder of the European Association for Renewable Energies and member of the German parliament.

"The IEA will have to compensate for all of the current energy problems and won't have time to push for new forms of energy," said Scheer.

The IEA deals with questions of supply security and the needs of energy markets. This is reflected in its allocation of votes, which are based mainly on the oil consumption of different countries. As a result, it doesn't cover in great detail the economic, political, and social

aspects of renewable energy. In its in-depth country reviews, the IEA analyzes the energy policies of member states without fully recognizing the potential renewable energy, say some critics. The agency's focus remains primarily on large-scale energy supply and therefore does not offer much needed advice on how to adapt energy markets towards more decentralized energy sources such as renewables. Further, in contrast to IRENA's proposed global approach and diverse membership, the activities of the IEA are largely limited to countries involved with the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD).

According to conference organizers, IRENA will work alongside the IEA and other international bodies in areas of renewable energy research, similar to the relationship between the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the IEA. One of the major reasons for the foundation of the IAEA in the 1950s was the desire to exploit the opportunities offered by what was then a new energy source. The same attention needs to be given to renewables, said Jose Etcheverry, a chair of the World Council on Renewable Energy.

"The world sorely lacks innovative economic, social and political institutional frameworks to provide strong support for renewable energy development worldwide," said Etcheverry. "Conventional energy sources such as fossil fuels and nuclear power have incredibly powerful lobbyists to ensure that their interests are provided with preferential treatment over the more socially desirable options of renewable energy and efficiency."

IRENA will address several critical barriers that are preventing the full-scale adoption of renewable energy. It will provide informed policy advice and assistance to national governments that are currently lacking the means and capacity to develop effective regulatory frameworks for renewable energy adoption.

To strengthen technology transfer, IRENA will combine the various independent projects and optimise synergies between them, focus on knowledge exchange, integrate technical, administrative and financial actions, and create suitable incentives for industry to engage in developing countries. Of course, none of these tasks can be fully accomplished without adequate human capacity. IRENA will provide an inventory of current training activities and provide courses for policy-makers and regulators on how to overcome administrative barriers to renewable energy adoption.

The time to create IRENA is now, said supporters. Indeed, as organizers learn from the decades of experience of other international agencies, they believe they can create of the most innovative, streamlined agencies in the world while helping usher in a new era of clean, sustainable energies.

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