

“We had to **stop** nuclear power”



Ursula Sladek is the Managing Director of ElektrizitätsWerke Schönau, founded by a citizens' initiative against nuclear power in South Germany in 1997.

Photo: Goldman Environmental Prize

Chernobyl 25 years ago was the first shocking event emphasizing the call for alternative energy sources. Together with like-minded people, a woman from South Germany took the initiative to fight for a new kind of energy supply. On a small scale Ursula Sladek won and was awarded the 2011 Goldman Environmental Prize.

Nestled amongst rolling hills, the small Black Forest town of Schönau in Germany seems an unlikely setting for environmental activism. Yet in 1986, Germany, like many places in Western Europe, was contaminated by the radioactive cloud produced by the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear plant. For Ursula Sladek, a Schönau resident, school-teacher and mother of five, the contamination was a wake-up call about the dangers of nuclear power – and the start of a 25-year campaign to promote renewable energy. “I’d never thought about nuclear power before,” she says. “But my children were young then and it got me thinking about what it

meant for them: could they still play in the garden? Could they go out?”

Much of Germany’s electricity at the time came from nuclear and coal-fired power plants. Sladek started doing research about nuclear power and she came to the conclusion that crisis management simply wasn’t enough. “We had to stop nuclear power,” she says. Sladek and other concerned citizens in Schönau set up a local action group called “Parents for a Nuclear-Free Future”. Their goal was to promote energy efficiency in a bid to reduce their dependency on grid energy. They also set up a small company to install micro-hydroelectric plants and co-generation plants.

Their activities didn’t go down well with local energy supplier and grid operator KWR, who felt that Sladek and her partners

Schönau is Ursula Sladek’s picturesque home town in the Black Forest, Germany. The about 2,500 residents can be supplied with 100 % of green energy via their electric utility.

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undermined their business. "They wanted to sell not save energy," she says. "Whatever we did, they'd put obstacles in our way." In 1991, KWR offered Schönau's town council to renew its license to operate the local grid four years early. Sladek was keen to take the opportunity to include environmentally-friendly measures in the new license, notably a change in the pricing structure that would reward energy efficiency as well as measures that would support independent power generation from solar panels and co-generation plants.

KWR flatly refused to accommodate these demands so Sladek and her partners decided they would take over the grid themselves. "The council thought it was a crazy idea to buy the grid and claim to run it better when we didn't know anything about how to run a power company," she says. Undaunted, they pressed on; the council organised two citizens' referendums to gauge the town's support for their bid: on both occasions, residents voted in their favour. But KWR wouldn't let go. Sladek had estimated the grid's value to be around DM 4 million (about € 2 million) yet the power company was asking DM 8.7 million (€ 4.45 million).

Production of local solar and co-generation energy

The Schönau activists knew that they couldn't raise all the funds locally so they launched a national fundraising campaign. "What we experienced was incredible: in six weeks, we raised 1 million DM," Sladek recalls. "The media coverage was also very sympathetic. One day, I got a call from the director of KWR. He said: 'You are ruining our reputation'. So I told him: 'You've brought it on yourself. Lower your price and we will stop the campaign immediately.'" KWR dropped its price to DM 6 million (€ 3 million) in November 1996. After a few more months of fundraising, on 1 July 1997, Sladek and her partners finally took over the Schönau grid for DM 5.7 million (€ 2.91 million) and created their cooperative company, Elektrizitäts-Werke Schönau (EWS, Schönau Power Supply). Not content with succeeding in their seven-year battle, EWS successfully sued KWR for illegal price fixing: the courts concluded that the grid's market value was DM 3.5 million (€ 1.79 million); EWS was reimbursed DM 2.2 million (€ 1.12 million) plus interests.

EWS's priority was to encourage the production of local solar and co-generation energy. The cooperative is owned by 1,000 shareholders, who receive small annual dividends; the rest of the company's profits are re-invested in renewable energy in the form of subsidies: right from the start, EWS said it would pay 1 DM per kWh of solar energy (as a result, Schönau now has a peak solar capacity of 500 kWh for a population of just 2,300).

When the energy market was liberalised a year later, EWS also started selling electricity. The cooperative initially had 1,700 customers, mostly in Schönau; it now has more than 110,000 across Ger-

many. "The market liberalisation was a big opportunity for us because it meant every customer could choose who they bought their energy from; it no longer had anything to do with location," says Sladek. "We decided to sell electricity to give people the option of having clean energy. Our customers are people who fight for the same things as we do: clean energy production and a more sustainable future." EWS buys the bulk of the electricity it sells (450 GWh for 2011) but it has strict criteria for its suppliers: no nuclear power and the right energy ethics. EWS also favours electricity supply from new renewable energy facilities to encourage further investments in the field; and it actively supports customers who want to install their own electricity generation facilities.

Sladek says that she hopes EWS will have 500,000 customers by 2015, but it will depend on political developments. In 2000, the German government, led by the SPD and Green Party, reached an agreement with power companies to shut down all 19 nuclear plants by 2020. But in August 2010, Angela Merkel's government decided to extend the lifespan of the remaining 17 plants by another 12 years. The decision was put on hold for three months in March 2011 following the leaks at the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan. Sladek very much hopes that the government will reverse its decision to extend the plants' lifespan and opt for renewable energy instead (nuclear power represents about a quarter of Germany's electricity production). This would create a lot of competition for EWS but Sladek says it would be a price worth paying. "We are not sales people; we are people who want to see change," she says.

The green Nobel

It is for this visionary leadership that Sladek has been awarded the 2011 Goldman Environmental Prize, along with five other winners, one from each continent. Often nicknamed the "green Nobel", the prize rewards environmental grassroots activism. Sladek said she was surprised but pleased to win. "I don't see it as being for me: there have been many people working with me all along," she says. "But it shows that if you can take on big power suppliers who lie through their teeth and cheat, you can achieve anything."

EWS is now playing an active role in encouraging other communities to get involved in energy production. In March, it successfully helped the town of Titisee-Neustadt take control of their grid, another milestone. "Citizen engagement is important because if we are to achieve a nuclear-free future, we need to be in an atmosphere that will accommodate the shift in culture," says Sladek.

The recent incident at the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan was a sober reminder that the debate is more relevant than ever. "We should have known how dangerous nuclear power is since Chernobyl," Sladek says. "I hope we won't need another disaster to draw the right conclusions."

Emilie Filou



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