

Portrait: Lion Hirth

This is an unofficial English translation of the Tagesspiegel Background's portrait of Lion Hirth, which was written by Boris Messing and published 6 October 2023 ([link](#)).

Lion Hirth is considered one of the most renowned experts on the European electricity market. He is a Professor at the Hertie School in Berlin and the founder of energy consulting company, Neon. In his view, the problems of the energy transition are primarily of a political-legal nature.

When Lion Hirth organized a private study trip with fellow students and thus got to know the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), his eyes opened. He was impressed by the work of the scientists. They were operating "with real data," he tells Tagesspiegel Background. Data that showed concrete things. In contrast, he felt his economics studies were too theoretical and "very far away from how politics and markets work in practice."

Hirth earned his diploma at PIK and from then, concentrated entirely on energy issues. Today, the 38-year-old is one of the most renowned experts on electricity market design and renewable energies. He is a Professor at the Hertie School, founder of an energy consulting company and a Research Fellow at the Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change (MCC).

Teaching and consulting

Lion Hirth grew up in Munich. Even as a child, he says, environmental protection and animal welfare were "a big concern" for him. At the same time, he was interested in economics, wanting to know "what holds the world together." He decided against studying physics and chose economics instead, finding his way between theory and practice. After earning his degree, he initially worked for five years for the energy company Vattenfall, where, as an analyst, he thought about the future of electricity market development. During this time, he also learned how a coal-fired power plant worked and gained a general understanding of how electricity gets from the power plant to the end customer, he says.

After earning his doctorate at the Technical University of Berlin, Hirth founded "Neon," an energy management consulting firm based in Berlin, in his late twenties. Meanwhile, he continued his research at the MCC. At the time, he says, he "naturally had doubts" about whether his consulting company would work, since he had no entrepreneurial experience. In the years that followed, however, there was a steady demand. In the meantime, Hirth's small team has been advising the German Federal Ministry of Economics for many years, as well as the International Energy Agency, the European Commission and the think tank Agora Energiewende.

In 2017, Hirth finally became a professor of energy policy at the Hertie School. It's important to him to train people who can later "make good policy," he says. That's why he always takes up

current cases in his teaching, which he discusses with his students. Last semester, for example, they discussed the EU's electricity market design reform, read legislative proposals, discussed positions and the like. Hirth appreciates his teaching work, but on the other hand he likes being able to make tangible suggestions via Neon, which may then be incorporated into a legislative text.

Bureaucracy and lack of political will are the problem

Like many, Hirth sees climate change and the transition of the economy to green energy as the task of the century. The problems, however, are not primarily technical, but political and legal, he says. Areas for wind turbines are now valued like oil fields. There is no lack of investors, but the hurdles lie in the slow approval process. And he makes it clear: the acceptance of the citizens "is and remains the big sticking point."

He accuses some politicians of not wanting to pursue a genuine climate policy. Especially in the area of mobility, Hirth sees the biggest failures of the past years. Basically, he says, nothing has changed, and emissions are as high as ever. Hirth does not name names, but it is clear who is meant.

Although he considers the work of the Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Action on climate protection to be good, he is skeptical that Germany will achieve its stated goal of reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 65 percent by 2030. Germany, Hirth says, is too hesitant and is struggling to tackle the problems seriously.

Boris Messing

Who will save the climate? Politics or the individual?

Politics. The world's climate is a global public good. You can't get very far as an individual. But in democracies, of course, the same applies: Politics, that's all of us.

Which flight would you never give up?

There are few things I dislike as much as sitting around in airports and planes. I would love to do without all flights, even if they were climate-neutral.

Who in the energy and climate world has impressed you?

Ottmar Edenhofer, Rainer Baake and, as much as I hate to admit it: Elon Musk. Without Tesla, electric cars would perhaps still be a purely Chinese phenomenon today.

What idea will give the energy transition new momentum?

An electricity market that, if done well, coordinates millions of generators, consumers and storage facilities every second and over thousands of kilometers like a gigantic nervous system. Only then, will all the wheels of numbers become one system.