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Local solutions sought

During the period from the beginning of 1991 to the end of 1994 the Federal Office for Environmental Protection is carrying out an information campaign on waste management throughout Switzerland. This campaign has two main aims. It is intended that the attention of the population should be drawn to the links which exist between production, consumption and waste elimination in industrial products.

Swiss society is strongly oriented towards consumption, and the prevailing high standard of living has led to acute problems of waste management. In consequence, the Federal Council has decided to carry out a four-year information campaign on the subject. This is intended to support the efforts being undertaken by cantonal and municipal authorities to reduce amounts of waste. A national survey undertaken in early 1991 showed that there exists a widespread consciousness of the importance of the problems of waste management throughout the population. Over two-thirds of those approached were aware that a solution to the problems of waste management cannot be reached without the personal commitment of each individual. However, many people think that the problems of waste management are limited to packaging.

Aim 1: informing the public about wastes throughout the production process

This is by no means the complete picture, however. The extent of the problem can be

seen only by considering the complete life cycle of a product. Wastes are produced at every production stage, from obtaining the necessary raw materials through the whole manufacturing process. A travelling exhibition which has been criss-crossing Switzerland since February 1992 visiting trade fairs and municipalities throughout the country has been providing much-needed knowledge and tips on this subject. In addition, a series of short TV advertisements have been informing the Swiss population about how wastes can be managed in an environment-friendly manner and about how people can change their purchasing habits in favour of articles which produce less waste. A wider publicity campaign is planned for mid-1992 to provide the population with additional information on this subject.

The best information has the personal touch

The most credible type of information is that which affects the immediate environment of

the individual. The best way to inform is to dwell on the individual waste management problems of each town and village – and Switzerland's federal structure makes this relatively easy. Every canton receives a basic federal subsidy of Sfr. 30,000, plus a sum of between 20 and 40 centimes per inhabitant according to the financial means available. As a general rule about one-third of the cost of local information campaigns is provided by the federal government, while the remaining funding must come from other sources, usually from municipal authorities. Those responsible for the project at the centre provide information for participants in the information campaign through a bulletin entitled "Abfälle-Inside" ("Wastes for Insiders"), as well as a series of information seminars.

Aim 2: discussions with the private economic sector

An attempt is also being made to extend discussions with private firms. It is of course impossible to find a uniform solution to the various problems which exist in the field of industrial waste management. Every branch, and in particular Switzerland's many small and medium-sized enterprises, must be approached separately. This procedure is one which takes up an enormous amount of time, but in a relatively small country like Switzerland with its federal structure and the traditionally very high degree of interweaving between politics and the economy it is feasible and indeed the only possible way. It must be emphasised, however, that the level of government support which has been described in no way discharges either the population or private enterprise from their responsibilities. The absolute reverse is true. The solution of Switzerland's waste management problems is entirely dependent on the full commitment of all those involved.



In everyday shopping the consumer always has a choice between more or less environment-friendly packages. Weight plays an important role in this: very light plastic packages are better than those made of paper and cardboard (Photo: Istvan Akos).

Thomas Schärer, adviser in public relations of the National Waste Management Campaign at present being carried out by the federal government.