



3. Information Centres

Definition and objectives

Information centres provide information on resource efficiency and related topics to actively promote the concept. Their main target group is private companies, including SMEs that often lack access to the latest information and do not have the capacity to keep up to date with every technological development in the market. Information centres thus play an important role for improving the technological competence of enterprises and for providing up-to-date, customer-oriented knowledge of resource efficiency. They sometimes also provide advice and training for company employees, government officials and consultants.

Mode of operation

Each information centre is unique in its nature thanks to the specific needs of local target groups and the national and local context. The following four types of information centres are only the most common ones. The public authority's role, extent of involvement, and necessary capacity and resources depend on the centre's mode of operation. Information centres may also be managed by organisations other than the public sector including NGOs and business associations. However, all types of information centres are generally concerned with making resource efficiency financially rewarding for enterprises.

Type	Features
Centres operated by public authorities	Public authorities can host the centre, providing corporate members and government officials with informational materials on resource efficiency as well as handling technical enquiries. Setting up a well-funded nation-wide centre can demonstrate leadership and commitment by public authorities to promote resource efficiency. To operate such a centre, the public authority needs technical in-house expertise or may subcontract to a professional organisation.
Centres operated by private organisations	Private organisations such as business chambers or private consultants can also run an information centre. Encouraging chambers of commerce or private consultancies to function as information catalysts is an attractive option because of the close relationship between these actors and local businesses. Private centres can often build up technical expertise better than their public counterparts, because salaries are market-oriented.
Public-Private Partnership	Public authorities and industry sometimes jointly set up information centres to complement each other's resources, e.g. finance, knowledge, training, networks. Both actors can contribute to the centre by using their networks to encourage local businesses to participate in resource efficiency activities.
International efforts	Some international agencies also organise information centres on resource efficiency. The Cleaner Production Network of UNEP and UNIDO is one of the most prominent examples with nearly 35 centres operating to date. They are partly funded by bilateral and/or multilateral donors.

Table 1: Types of information centres

An information centre can provide its members and clients with one or a combination of the following types of services. They can be offered either as separate services or incorporated into the other existing information services and media.

Types of services	Features
Reference publications, newsletters	Examples: ■ Introductory guides for awareness raising ■ Case studies and best practice guides ■ Technical notes, datasheets and databases ■ Updates on legislation ■ News bulletins, technical magazines ■ Online information platforms

Helpline/Expert Networks	Serve as the first point of contact for advice. Companies that aim for resource efficiency are given brief advice by experts and guidance for further information. This means that information centres should have a pool of internal and external experts that companies or individuals seeking advice can refer to.
Information clearing-house	The internet can complement other means of information and encourage an exchange of practices between members and others at very low cost.
On-site visit and audit	Companies may obtain further assistance from an on-site visit by experts. The visit is designed to identify potentials to improve resource efficiency and provide hands-on advice on how to improve. Centres might be involved in one-day-checks only and leave more detailed and lengthy audits to external consultancies.
Seminar, workshop, symposium	Best practice seminars and workshops offer an occasion to find out about resource efficiency and to discuss opportunities and methodologies.
Fair and exhibition	Introduce the advantage and examples of resource efficiency in a visual and public way for awareness raising and promotion of resource-efficient products. Fairs can also be used to promote business contacts, e.g. for environmental technologies.
Demonstration	Test and demonstrate resource efficiency measures whose effects are yet to be proven or widely recognised. It is an important task of information centres to encourage pioneer companies to spread their experience.
Fact-finding tour	Companies can visit pioneers practicing resource efficiency (sometimes in foreign countries) and see best practices with their own eyes.
Localisation	Encourage local companies and organisations to set up their own networks, to share best practices and to aim at improving resource efficiency together.

Table 2: Types of services offered by information centres

Strengths & weaknesses

Information centres have certain strengths and weaknesses as an instrument promoting resource efficiency as summarised below:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Provision of information on resource efficiency Information centres can provide access to essential information on resource efficiency to a large number of customers. The provision of information is often a first entry point for customers who wish to familiarise themselves with the services of an organisation before committing themselves to time- or cost-consuming exchanges.</p>	<p>Lack of incentive for implementation The mere sharing of information does not necessarily lead to implementation of resource efficiency measures in companies. Additional incentives and stimulation as well as environmental standards and control may be required.</p>
<p>Promotion of knowledge and technology transfers Information centres often act as knowledge brokers by facilitating linkages between information seekers and knowledge sources. Information and knowledge dissemination often provide an entry point for further training and consultancy work through trainers, advisers, and experts.</p>	<p>Proprietary information Certain information is not freely available especially if private companies are not willing to share it due to its proprietary and competitive nature.</p>
<p>Activate enterprises on resource efficiency issues Under appropriate and supportive framework conditions information centres can be an effective means to raise awareness and establish capacity among a large number of enterprises as well as to ensure long-term support for resource efficiency.</p>	

Table 3: Strengths and weaknesses of information centres

Costs are a crucial issue, especially when the centre is supposed to recover its running costs. The services of the centre have to be attractive to the target group. It should not be a target to offer services at minimal costs but to provide services most attractive to the needs of the target group (this includes quality and type of services as well as costs and other factors). However some services as e.g. raising public awareness can only be provided if there is some financial contribution towards this end. To be able to finance the provision of its services, the centre needs to obtain financial support from governments, larger businesses or donor organisations. In all cases, the costs summarised below have to be covered.

Category	Description	Covered by
Set-up	Identify local priorities and opportunities as well as resources available to run the centre Set up the centre together with the partners and provide initial funding Agree on a mission and the strategic focus of the centre	Government
Running of centre	Fixed costs including personnel, office space, maintenance, etc.	Centre
Knowledge acquisition	Acquire information on best practices Provide adequate training to the centre's staff Collect, adapt and where necessary develop information and training materials	Centre
Knowledge management	Identify areas and targets of knowledge and set up the necessary instruments such as internet, library, databases, etc.	Centre
Promotion	Make the centre publicly known and promote and advertise its services as well as special events and trainings Establish links with business associations, continuously improve services according to the needs of the customers	Centre

Table 4: Costs associated to information centres

Experience shows that most centres do not work without public support. Average financial support/ subsidies is/are in the range of 50-60% of the centre's costs (examples: CITET Tunisia, APCTT India, Cleaner Production Centre Chile). The exception are centres that offer services for which financial instruments exist, e.g. Brazil: companies, when demanding services from the cleaner production centre, can cover the costs by retrieving a part of previously paid taxes. This example highlights the importance of an intelligent policy mix when initiating measures to support resource efficiency.

Success factors

The following factors for the success of information centres are drawn from experiences of existing centres:

Success factor	Issues to consider
Adaptation to local circumstances	The content and level of information and assistance given to the target group should be determined by the knowledge, available infrastructure and equipment in the area where the centre is set up. The needs and interests of local information users need to be thoroughly analysed before the centre's establishment as well as during its operation.

Provision of customised services	The information provided by the centre should be customised to the customer's specific problems and should offer appropriate solutions instead of ready-made advice, which in many cases might not prove to have been very helpful.
Quality management	Clients expect good services without exaggerations or empty promises. The service has to fulfil the clients' expectations and requirements. Hence, the services should be provided promptly and without delay. Further, the information should be reliable, comprehensive and take into account the specific challenges of the client. To ensure that information centres fulfil these requirements an efficient quality management is necessary.
Profile development	To maximise its influence and provide high quality and suitable services, the centre should aim to obtain a high and formal recognition from the government and industry for example by joining an established international network.
Educational capacity and R & D	In order for the centre to induce resource efficiency improvements, a good number of high quality experts are needed. Through cooperation and interaction with educational institutions, industrial R&D departments and consultants, the centre can reach and train more experts and direct public R&D in a more practice oriented way.
Continuous development	Becoming self-sustainable is critical for many centres since initial funding will normally run out after some years. They need to keep evolving to sustain income-generating activities by responding to demands from (potential) clients, while becoming more adept at obtaining donor funding for less profitable activities (e.g. helping SMEs, policy dialogue).
External financing and technical assistance	Countries with few financial resources and expertise can utilise opportunities from donor countries to establish a centre and obtain informational materials and technical assistance. However it is advisable to set up a business plan so that they may become independent from international contributions.

Table 5: Success factors for information centres

Key Literature and Case Studies

UNIDO/UNEP Guidance & Training Manual: *How to establish and operate cleaner production centres*
www.unepie.org/pc/cp/library/training/howtoCPC/manual_cdrom/mainmenu.htm

GTZ (2004): Resource efficiency Centres: Problems and prospects, OE 4413 Energy, Transport and Resource efficiency, Internal study

	Case Studies / Examples	Link
Government-led	Envirowise (UK) National Center for Environmental Innovation (USA) Cleaner Production Germany	www.envirowise.org www.epa.gov/innovation www.cleaner-production.de
Business-led	World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM)	www.wbcsd.org www.icmm.com
UN-led	UNIDO/UNEP National Cleaner Production Centres (NCPCs) International Cleaner Production Information Clearinghouse (ICPIC)	www.unep.fr/pc/cp/ncpc www.emcentre.com/unepweb
Regional	North Rhein-Westphalian Efficiency Agency (Germany)	www.efanrw.de
NGO-led	Global Network of Environment and Technology (GNET)	www.gnet.org
National	CITET Tunisia Indonesian Cleaner Production Centre	www.citet.nat.tn n.a