

Poor interest in solar energy

The Times (April 26) reported that the government is trying to boost the take-up of solar applications, roof insulation and small wind energy systems, by offering incentives. It is clear that the response on solar water heating grants for two consecutive years was disappointing, in total amounting to about 0.5 per cent of the domestic homes in Malta. I would have expected queues of applications rather than an average of three applications a day in the first quarter of 2006.

Clearly, the financial aspect was not the only barrier.

Although it was high time that such incentives were given, these were neither sustained with proper legislation nor with technical supervision of installations. The same may be said for the Enemalta offer to waive electricity meter installation fees of Lm70, for new homes having a solar heating system. It is well known that the uptake of these incentives is still low. One would have expected legislation together with motivation and certification.

In Malta, the private sector plays an important role and as long as marketing of solar heating systems is not taken seriously, no major breakthroughs are envisaged. Definitely, there is no media coverage about the subject and perhaps such issues are lightly covered in the school curriculum. Marketing should not only aim at economic benefit but also at security of supply. Adverts must aim at convincing people that solar heating is a necessity rather than a commodity.

Another major contributor to low interest in solar applications is awareness and strong disbelief in the technology. I have even come across professionals who are completely against buying a solar system. It is evident in Malta that there is scepticism if not a phobia against solar applications, caused by little knowledge about the subject and more importantly

negative experiences of friends and neighbours that have a solar heater.

As for building regulations, a solar water heating system is not considered an essential commodity such as water tanks and television antennas and therefore they do not have the right to be installed on rooftops belonging to other residents in blocks of flats. Moreover, the present trend of demolishing old terraced houses and building apartments with a penthouse on top has become the norm, with the result that little or no roof space is left to instal a solar heating system.

Legislation should impose on the developer to include such appliances at the design stage, before granting building permits. It is indeed a pity that one cannot practice "democracy" when it comes to buying a home, because there is no choice. For example, it is rare to find large building projects offering a variety of apartments with solar heating systems, insulation, double glazing, etc.... Rather, they are all built with the same "poor" specifications.

In conclusion, it is clear that we have to seriously reflect on the present and future situation of renewable energy in Malta, drawing on innovative ideas from our own experiences rather than copying or assigning foreign experts to it. There is a lot that can be remedied today and as time passes one may gradually get closer to a holistic approach and a long-term policy, that so far remains a myth.

As for photovoltaics and wind energy, I will have to leave it for another day but I remain puzzled: Given all this enthusiasm, why did Malta report to the EU in October 2005, a reduction in its indicative renewable energy target from five per cent to 0.31 per cent by 2010 (Europa website)?

CHARLES YOUSIF,
Sta Venera.