

# Wind or no wind

*Charles Yousif*

**'Like any other energy source, renewable energy sources have environmental, social and economic impacts, which need to be taken into account.'**

I am pleased to see that The Times has proved to be a forum for debate about renewable sources of energy. This is surely a positive step though discussions seemed to converge to address particular aspects of a single application, such as wind energy. One should keep in mind that similar scenarios occurred in other countries and based upon such experiences, one can find today clear guidelines outlining project development methodologies that help avoid unnecessary confrontations (Ref. 1). It is also unfortunate that we unintentionally forget the main issues that should really worry us at this stage, namely:

The fact that Malta has joined the EU with the lowest level of renewable energy penetration in its energy mix when compared to the other new member states. In more detail, it stood at 0.2 per cent from solar water heaters and 0.0005 per cent of savings from grid-connected solar photovoltaic systems, based on 2001 data. The other two obvious indigenous renewable resources of wind energy and biomass/biogas stood at zero (Ref. 2).

The challenge is that Malta has declared it aims to reach five per cent of its electrical generation from renewables by the year 2010. According to the EU Directive 2001/77/EC on the promotion of electricity produced from renewable energy sources in the internal electricity market, Malta will have to publish bi-annual reports, starting from October 2005, that must include an analysis of the success in meeting this national indicative target and the extent to which this will affect the national climate change commitment. In this regard, it is important to realise that solar water heating systems do not qualify as producers of renewable electricity and hence the full burden would fall on solar, wind and biomass/biogas energy systems.

The barriers against renewables are many, but the most important one is the absence of a national energy plan. Other stumbling blocks are already in place such as in the case of solar photovoltaic systems that require a permit from the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (Mepa), based on a full development application, and this is increasing the overhead costs. Moreover, any renewable energy electricity generating system requires a permit from Enemalta for grid-connection; however, to date little has been done in this regard. On the other hand, one cannot but praise Enemalta for setting up an incentive scheme to promote the use of solar water heaters in new households. Could not this be modified to include other customers? Unfortunately, even solar water heaters suffered a setback when their VAT rate was raised from five per cent to 18 per cent as of May, 2004.

Like any other energy source, renewable energy sources have environmental, social and economic impacts, which need to be taken into account. When local authorities assess applications for planning per-

mission they have to take account of both the immediate impact of renewable energy projects on the local environment and their wider contribution to reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. The generally small scale of renewable energy projects and the constraints on where they can be located to take advantage of natural resources means that achieving this balance can present particular challenges, given the limited options available for Malta. Indeed, it will rarely be the case that any individual project will be big enough to be essential in energy terms. Yet, overall, renewable energy sources have a significant contribution to make to achieve global environmental objectives.

Last year, the Malta Resources Authority issued a tender for studying the potential of renewables in Malta. To date no results have been published. However, within the MRA's citations, one could see a number of local references that sufficiently demonstrate the potential for renewable energies. There has also been mounting pressure at Mepa to issue building permits for wind farms but this has seen no results yet, possibly stemming from the responsibility that Mepa has towards the environment itself. These initiatives could be a good starting point towards launching a preliminary renewable energy plan.

The recent national conference on sustainability has called for more renewables in electricity production, especially in view of the externalities linked with conventional fossil fuel generation, such as costs pertaining to health issues that are directly caused by pollution. Minister George Pullicino has indicated that one has still to convince all politicians, not only the government, of the potential of these energies in Malta.

However, it is opportune to point out that there is an urgent need for a change by government authorities to facilitate the right of all Maltese European citizens to produce their own electrical power from renewables. The Housing Authority's initiative to build energy efficient housing projects should not remain a one-off example, but must be used in one way or another as a model of good practice for the benefit of all. It is with great satisfaction to note that Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi, has, recently, underlined the government's determination to put the environment at the heart of its decision-making.

The Archdiocese of Malta's Commission for the Environment has also organised the first national conference on the environment and the Church. This must be another opportunity to stress the importance of clean energy sources for our electricity production mix, since energy is the prime mover of everyday life and the main contributor to pollution at all levels.

The international conference for renewable energies held last June in Bonn, Germany, was also a test to monitor the seriousness of all countries to adopt the declarations of the Johannesburg summit for the global development of renewable energy.

The Malta Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energies Association (MEEREA) aims to become a focal point where all those interested and advocating energy conservation and renewables converge to form one stronghold. At MEEREA we are still striving to achieve this goal while in today's world, scientists, engineers and architects are joining forces and forming groups to act as reference points and pressure force.

MEEREA is urging all Maltese authorities to step up their efforts to produce the energy policy and appropriate guidelines and schemes that will enhance the use of renewable energies. We should not wait until we have perfect legislation because it is only through experience that we can reach perfection. One hopes that when the time comes for Malta to present its milestones and developments in the renewable energy field, we would have gone one step beyond the nation's commitment of a five per cent target for renewables in six years' time. We now urgently need to move from words to deeds.

(Ref. 1: Wind Energy: The Facts, A Plan Action for Europe, The European Communities 1999 in conjunction with the European Wind Energy Association and Altener, ISBN 9282845710.

Ref. 2: Handbook of Renewable Energies in the European Union II: Case Studies of all Accession Countries, Danyel Reiche (Editor), Forward by Günter Verheugen, May 2003, Peter Lang, ISBN 3631511515.)

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