

Government should support widest use of renewable energy

by Charles Yousif and Edward Scerri

THE Malta Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energies Association (MEEREA) welcomes the recently published Draft Renewable Energy Policy for Malta. While we feel enthusiastic about the future of renewable energies in Malta we also feel disappointed about Government's cautious approach in this respect.

Indeed, Government has to work on several fronts to reach its renewable energy (RE) targets. It is not only a matter of giving some grants or incentives to RE systems but it is also important to assign to an independent entity the duty of certifying installations to ensure that the expected savings are attained and hence assuring maximum benefit of government grants.

If Government is serious about its RE targets, it must not limit its support to the domestic sector only but should open new doors and encourage larger installations of RE systems in public buildings, hospitals, factories, schools, and other commercial establishments.

It must seriously consider the introduction of specific regulations whereby permits for medium and large buildings are given only if specific measures are taken at the design stage to include energy efficient techniques and renewable energy systems. Such measures are not a burden on the investor but could rather be used to boost the value of the building and promote it as offering a better quality of life throughout its lifetime. The Housing Authority's Tal-Ftieh project could be an example.

Awareness campaign

Government has to wake up to the realities of our community: high consumers of energy and low promoters of environmental awareness. Perhaps it is time to kick-start a national campaign that will target the environment, energy use and renewables.

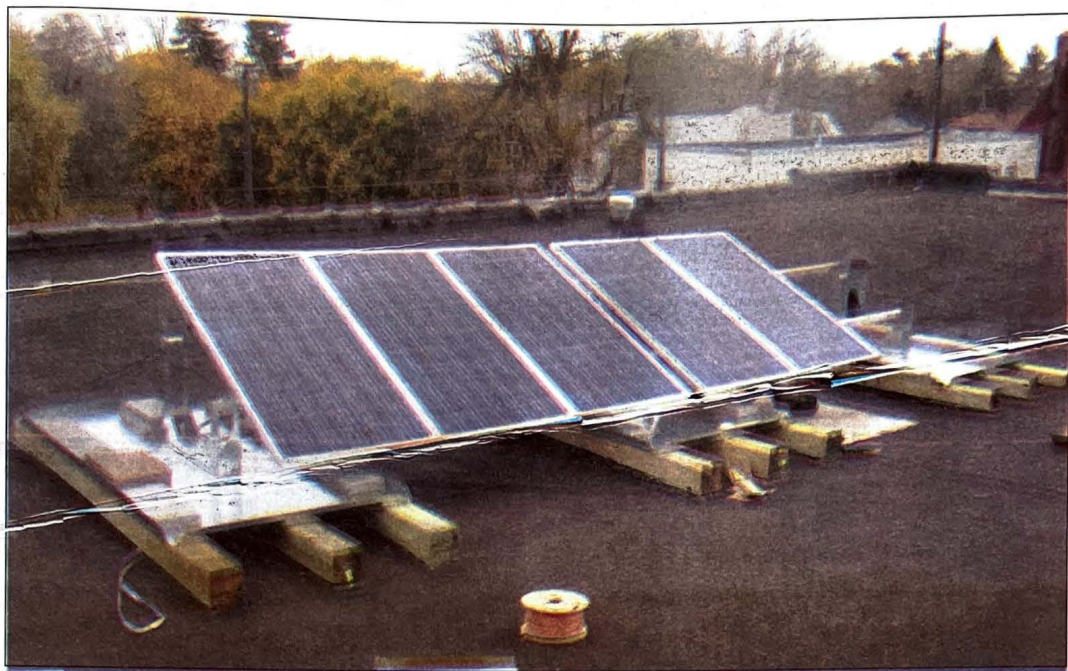
Two years ago, MEEREA had published bilingual leaflets on energy and climate education in schools, sponsored by INFORSE-EUROPE with the support of the European Commission DG Environment - Civil Society Support in 2004 for the project entitled "Energy and Climate Education in Schools". Thousands were distributed to teachers and students all over Malta and Gozo with the support of the Ministry of Education.

These leaflets were highly valued as reported through a sample survey. These are now placed permanently on the association's Website (www.geocities.com/meereamalta).

On a more professional level, one has to target tomorrow's architects and engineers at our University and other related professions taught at MCAST. To our knowledge, there is hardly any material and taught courses offered that specifically deal with energy efficiency and renewable energies.

Energy-efficient cars

On another note, until our public transport system is brought up to a more convenient and satisfactory level, it is high time to provide specific incentives to replace older cars with newer more efficient ones. This will greatly enhance the efficiency



of fuel usage and improve on the quality of our local environment. Some fiscal support should also be given to hybrid cars besides electric cars.

Although the draft RE policy sees renewables as a partial solution to security of supply, one has to note that security of supply does not stop at delivering oil to our power stations but goes further to guarantee the cash flow to buy the required fuel. Hence, the introduction of renewable energy has a double effect, as it first reduces our consumption of fossil fuels and also saves on the hard currency we all labour so hard to get mostly from our dwindling tourism industry. Government should follow the example of the Water Services Corporation and its successful campaign a few years back - "Every drop counts".

Main three technologies

A recent paper published by the Institute for Energy Technology¹ shows that the overall potential of renewable energies in Malta could reach up to 24% of the total electricity generated in 2003 and an additional energy saving of about 5% coming from adopting solar water heating in the domestic sector.

However, the Government in its draft policy is sceptical about photovoltaics (PV) due to its high capital costs, is almost ruling out land-based wind farms and near-shore installations, is slow to utilise waste as an energy source and is claiming that the penetration of renewables in Malta would reach a mere 0.31% by 2010.

MEEREA is calling on Government to reconsider its position and make a serious effort to increase the RE share in electricity generation to at least 3% by 2010, by supporting the main three RE technologies, i.e. photovoltaics, wind and conversion of waste to energy, through financing from the Structural Fund budget, to support these new technologies and build new large facilities around Malta and Gozo.

During these past two years, one can see that Government's fiscal incentives for solar water heating, solar photovoltaics, small wind and roof insulation did not yield the anticipated interest from the public. One can see that the fiscal ben-

efit for the solar water heating scheme yielded about three new applicants every day. At this rate, one would need at least 35 years to cover only one-third of domestic homes.

Clearly, there is a flow and this should be the first priority job to be assigned to the regulation and monitoring unit that Government intends to set up, as mentioned in the RE policy. The present feed-in tariff of 3c/kWh for PV and wind electricity generation can hardly be described as an incentive. MEEREA feels that this is actually a disincentive and has to be remedied immediately.

Another IET paper² states: "With current market prices of PV systems and the existing Government grant, a decent payback period of 10 years may be achieved only if the selling price of PV electricity to Enemalta is set at 50 euro cents/kWh or the Government's subsidy is increased to 70% of capital".

Can this ever be considered by Government? Other European countries have done so. As far as wind energy is concerned, it is not clear what Government is supporting. Is it micro-wind small turbines installed on rooftops?

Is it three-metre diameter windmills installed on the few farms remaining in Malta? Is it scattered medium turbines installed on windy sites along the coast? Is it offshore turbines stationed within 2 km from the coast or only turbines placed in deep waters where no single demonstration project has been made so far?

MEEREA queries the significance of the present Lm100 grant when compared to the capital cost of the smallest wind-turbine that one can install. This grant would hardly cover the costs of engaging an architect and applying for a MEPA permit.

On another note, Government has to be clear and decisive. While most of the draft Renewable Energy Policy for Malta rules out large wind and PV installations, one finds out in the same document that: "Permitting of large scale RSE projects will be facilitated, with public-private partnership schemes encouraged". MEEREA supports all forms of renewable energy applications, provided that they are carried out professionally and sensitively. There is nothing that one uses that has no implications. Solar water heating systems have their own negative impact on the aesthetics of the building and on taking up space on the roof.

Similar arguments may be attributed to solar photovoltaics and wind turbines. Government seems to be accepting energy-consuming building towers all over the island but is not ready to accept few energy-saving wind towers that could save us millions.

Some statements cannot be overlooked as they seem to have been dumped in the draft policy just to fill up space. For example, Government will promote studies on the external or social costs of electricity generation in Malta. There are books on the subject and the externalities of electricity generation using fossil fuels are well established and defined.

What difference would it make if Government finds out that the cost of externalities is say 4c5 per kWh rather than 4c4? Does this justify waiting for this study to be made before giving renewables their due?

Another statement that has well passed its validity period is Government's interest in Clean Development Mechanism projects of the Kyoto Protocol. It is already too late to consider any project for the first round up to 2012 and the new definitions for the following period are still not clear. Moreover, Malta has so far not identified a national focal point, a crucial requirement for implementing CDM projects.

Past studies

Last but not least, the draft RE policy gives the impression that Government will undertake all the studies necessary in all sectors. One would ask what happened to all the past studies carried out at the University of Malta and elsewhere? Isn't it more efficient to dig out all past information before reinvesting to carry out the same or similar studies again?

As there is not one minister or MP well versed in the intricacies of energy and as most of the advisers or consultants are either appointed on a short-term basis or hired from abroad for one reason or another, it is opportune to set up a National Energy Commission with knowledgeable people having no political interest to really address the issues and put the national long-term interest, as their first and foremost target.

Mr Yousif is secretary-general of MEEREA and Mr Scerri is president.

Discussion seminar on Wednesday

A DISCUSSION SEMINAR on the National Energy Policy Proposal is being organised by the Institute for Energy Technology and the Cleaner Technology Centre on Wednesday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Francis Ebejer Hall (LT2), University Campus, Msida.

Presentations will be made by Professor Robert Ghirlando, Mario Fsadni, Ing. Robert Farrugia, Professor Edward Mallia and Charles Yousif.

Applications for attendance are to be addressed to Cleaner Technology Centre, University Campus, Msida, tel. 2131-3416/7; fax: 2134-4879; e-mail: cic@mus.com.mt

References

- "The Renewable Energy Potential of Malta" by R.N. Farrugia, M. Fsadni, E.A. Mallia and C. Yousif, *Proceedings of the IX World Renewable Energy Congress, August 19-25, Florence, Italy.*
- "Barriers and Incentives for the Widespread Application of Renewable Energy in Malta" by R.N. Farrugia, M. Fsadni, E.A. Mallia and C. Yousif, *Proceedings of the IX World Renewable Energy Congress, August 19-25, Florence, Italy.*