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Careers

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THE TIMES

Friday, December 11, 2009, by Michael Briguglio

Copenhagen is calling

So, December 12 shall be a big day for the world's efforts to combat climate change. Or shall it? Speculation is rife that no big deal shall be achieved, certainly not enough to really attain what is necessary to avoid the big threats humanity is facing.

If one looks at the findings of the Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC), one would immediately notice how small islands have much to lose with climate change in terms of sea-level rise and coastal hazards, which threaten vital infrastructures, settlements and facilities that support people's livelihoods.

For example, with half a metre sea-level rise, Malta would lose a considerable proportion of beaches and this would, in turn, adversely affect the tourist industry, with a ripple effect on income and employment. Agriculture could also be adversely impacted with climate change, given that this industry is so dependent on weather conditions.

In the case of Malta, global warming is also likely to lead to other problems such as those associated with health. One example in this regard is the influx of insects that survive in the tropics, which could find it possible to live in new temperature zones, resulting in new health problems.

In preparation for the Copenhagen summit, the UK-based Green Economics Institute held a conference in Oxford, discussing various dimensions of climate change and proposals for mitigation (such as reduction of greenhouse gases) and adaptation (including shifting towards more sustainable lifestyles).

One of the speakers, Graciela Chichilnisky, well-known in climate change circles for her expertise, explained that solar power is the energy of the future if we are truly to confront climate change.

She explained that a properly-functioning carbon market will basically mean that fossil fuels - which are major polluters - have to become expensive (reflecting the damage they cause) whereas clean solar energy has to become cheaper.

As things stand now, she explained, the technology associated with the use of solar energy is not developed enough to economically meet the world's needs but its usage should be accelerated so that, in the long run, more and more of this energy is used. This is particularly important when one notes that global demand for energy is likely to increase in the coming years, especially in developing countries such as China and India. It is, therefore, imperative that energy investment in such countries, as well as in Africa and South America, is as clean as possible because, otherwise, the impact on climate change will be catastrophic.

Ms Chichilnisky added that countries such as Japan are making great success out of feed-in tariff systems, where producers of solar energy - including households - make economic gains out of transferring their surplus energy to energy providers.

As a small island state with a voice in the European Union, Malta should really speak up for bold policies against climate change. Our emissions are minimal but, as a small island, the impact on climate change will be one of the highest, given our relatively large coastal area in comparison to the land mass.

If we expect other countries to take bold measures against climate change, we surely must set an example. There is much to say on Malta's need to synthesise ecological, economic and social factors. I shall refer to solar energy by way of example.

The government's incentives on solar water heaters are too restrictive and have been further restricted in the last Budget. This is surely a far-cry from the need to install 50,000 solar water heaters, as recently concluded by Maltese scientists speaking at a Friends of the Earth conference.

Our planning laws and regulations do not help matters, either. As things stand, people living in apartments with penthouses are being denied the right to install solar water heaters. Others are being discouraged from installing such heaters particularly due to Mepa's poor track record on building height policy. Why install a solar water heater when the building next door can go up higher than permitted by local plans?

In addition, Enemalta lacks credibility and government policy regarding energy generation is, to say the least, baffling. The choice of "dirty" energy at the Delimara power station is a case in

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point. The same can be said for the lack of action to introduce a feed-in-tariff system. Yet again, sustainable development is being used mainly as a buzzword and not as the basis for a clear policy framework.

Shall Malta hear the call of Copenhagen and, small as it is, set an example in addressing climate change issues? Fortunately, we form part of the EU, which is taking a lead in this regard, and, as a group, EU members states will be in the forefront of mitigation and adaptation measures. But as a single country, I fear we often pay lip-service to these issues and, when it comes to implementation and enforcement, we, as a nation, falter.

Unfortunately, our bigger political parties often have a short-term horizon and climate change issues have longer-term aspect impacts. This may be one reason why such issues are often put on the back-burner in Maltese politics.

If we seriously wish to address these issues, we should mainstream sustainable development and climate change in our national plans and policies and take all the steps necessary to implement and enforce measures that are conducive to a better and more sustainable quality of life.

The author is chairman of Alternattiva Demokratika - the Green party.

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Joseph Ellul - Sydney

Dec 11th 2009, 21:19

If the politicians were serious about this issue, then they should have organized an internet meeting with public access. Australia sent almost 200 people to the other side of the world. Imagine the carbon footprint. I will have to scrap my car, give up my job and not use electricity, gas and the lawn mower to balance their excesses. The world is warming, but with politicians hot air and belching.

D.Calleja

Dec 11th 2009, 18:50

@Sadhana Vornberger You must have missed my point. The reality of the matter is that if Malta had to set an example by reverting to a stone age scenario by taking all vehicles off the streets, shut down its airport, shutdown its power stations and ban the importation of all fuels, the end result on the global level would not be noticeable. On the other hand, if any one of the big developed countries contributes by reducing by a small fraction its emissions the effect would be very relevant in achieving the required targets and would set a much better example. One cannot forget that small Island nations are most at risk if climate change and the rising levels of the oceans does become a reality. The nations who have contributed greatly towards this situation have a moral obligation and the resources to rectify the problem if they do have a conscience. How can one possibly suggest that the onus should fall squarely on everybody's shoulders without taking into consideration the valid constraints that some countries are burdened with?

Sadhana Vornberger

Dec 11th 2009, 16:55

Dear D.Calleja! You cannot be serious about your proposal! It would be irresponsible for Malta not to act but instead expect anyone else to reduce emissions! And for Malta to be able to put forth the claim that the global emissions should be reduced (because climate change will affect it as an island very much) it has to act itself and set an example! M.Briguglio is, in my opinion, totally right about this. And, the game of CO2 emission reductions is a prisoners' dilemma: If everyone wants the others to make the first step (you mentioned Germany, which is itself not willing to reduce anymore emissions before the U.S. is willing to reduce more), nothing will happen, which is by far the worst that could happen. And, the climate being a "democratic" issue, climate change will strike everyone in the end!

Alex Ellul

Dec 11th 2009, 16:36

COP 15 in disarray, read here: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/dec/08/copenhagen-climate-summit-disarray-danish-text>

Climate Change politics is not about science or saving the planet but it is about politics, plain and simple, nothing else. The thousands of politicians and their groupies are in Copenhagen to get the best financial deals on carbon trading/capping and gravy and cream cakes thereof.

D.Calleja

Dec 11th 2009, 15:36

Do you realise that all of Malta's emissions amount to just about 0.1% those of Germany?!

What can even a 20% reduction in Malta's emissions achieve on the global scale? Don't rush for your calculator; I will relieve you of the hassle of working it out. - the answer is zich!!

To effectively reduce CO2 emissions in the short to medium term, the big polluters have to want to play ball. It is a waste of time involving small developing nations in the formula – this will only play into the hands of the big boys who want to procrastinate and minimize as much as possible their share of the burden.

Concentrate on the real culprits and leave Malta alone! We should only implement what we can realistically achieve within the constraints of our size, visual impacts on scenic areas and urban fabric, and ultimately our limited finances.

Muscat Pat

Dec 11th 2009, 15:03

Not only the "dirty" Delimara Power Station but the Bahrija development - Outside the Development Scheme - are Gonzi's green credentials!

Alex Ellul

Dec 11th 2009, 13:58

While CO2 levels have increased from 250ppm to 350ppm, sea levels have refused to rise. Temperatures have gone down and scientists worldwide have been asking why? Meanwhile the global warming theory foundations have been found to be doctored, cooked, temperatures picked and chosen, so as to give the scientific impression that the planet is warming while actually it is cooling. The hyped-up news that we had been reading these last weeks were just to prop up the failing Cop15 meeting which is the last call of the global warming scam. Should there be no agreement on CO2 reduction, then there will never be, since by the next meeting every world citizen and his brother would know for sure that CO2 is not warming the planet. It's the sun that warms the planet and nothing else. The solar cycle has many variations, decadal, millenary and others, cycles that have induced warmings and coolings such as the great ice age, the little ice age, the Roman warming, the Medieval Warming Period and the 20th century warming which has ended and has now entered, since 2003, a cooling down due to the current solar minimum.

William P Flynn

Dec 11th 2009, 11:10

Wonderful! Wonderful...Hope - nhagen....
