

Renewable energy sector in Sri Lanka and the presidential election

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We have only seven years more before we trigger potentially irreversible climate change. With a deadline to mitigate, our options are limited. We already have many of the solutions we need. The developed world is already on the track for constructing post fossil fuel era infrastructure mainly in the areas of energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies. New Zealand and Denmark have pledged to convert to 90% and 30% renewable electricity respectively by 2025 while Australia and Germany have pledged 20% and 18% by 2020. Norway and Japan have decided to reduce carbon emissions by 40% and by 25% by 2020.

Even the USA – the main culprit in bringing about the climate catastrophe - has recognized solutions and targets within a firm time frame for action. In July 2008, the former vice president of the US, Al Gore, challenged America to generate 100% of their electricity from sources that do not lead to global warming and to do it within 10 years. President Barack Obama has established a goal to double alternative energy production in three years and included a new 30% investment tax credit for energy saving technologies and renewable energy technologies while signing the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Renewable energy cost trends show on the one hand, that the cost of a unit of renewable energy technologies has reduced drastically since 1980: solar PV by 80%; wind by 90%; and biomass by 65%. On the other, that global renewable energy investment has increased from 15 billion USD to 155 billion USD during the period 2000-08. The ADB is to substantially increase its clean energy investments to \$2 billion a year from a previous target of \$1 billion in a bid to accelerate low carbon growth and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the Asian region.

The renewable energy potential in Sri Lanka could help respond to the threat of energy security but only if policy and finance measures quickly scale-up for proven renewable technologies. For the first time in Sri Lanka, a National Energy Policy was introduced by President Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2006 as a foundation for addressing this issue. This policy clearly highlighted the importance of promoting energy efficiency and conservation and the main thrust of the policy was to promote indigenous energy resources. It states that indigenous energy resources will be developed to optimal levels to minimize dependence on non-indigenous resources.

What are these indigenous resources? Mainly renewable energy technologies such as hydro, biomass (dendro, biogas), wind, wave & Ocean Thermal Energy conversion Technology (OTEC) and possibly off shore oil and gas. Coal is by no means an indigenous energy resource which is the main energy source that emits climate change related gasses. Minimal dependence on non-indigenous resources and optimal development of local energy resources will also minimize the vulnerability of energy supplies to external dependencies such as the international socio-political environment. Renewables also have the added advantage of easing pressure on the country's balance of payments.

The national energy policy came up with the target of 10% of total power from non-conventional renewable energy by 2016 amounting to 300 MW. This is in addition to the 1000 MW of conventional hydro power. It is expected that about 50% of the total power will be generated from renewable energy sources by 2015 in Sri Lanka. In order to implement the national energy policy and to promote energy efficiency and renewable energy the Mahinda Rajapaksa government established the Sri Lanka Sustainable energy Authority (SLSEA) in 2007. Since then Cumulative non-conventional renewable energy capacity has increased to 145 MW. This is a 60% increase during the Mahinda

Rajapaksa regime. Further, construction is underway to add a further 100 MW of renewable energy to the grid and engineer an overall increase of 170%. Additionally, the SEA has already compiled the mandatory Energy Efficiency Building Code as a step towards managing the demand side. Establishment of the Sri Lanka Sustainable Energy Fund and the Sri Lanka Sustainable Guarantee Facility will have a major impact on promoting renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies in Sri Lanka in the future.

In the final analysis it is important to understand the distributed nature of renewable energy sources. Unlike concentrated fossil fuel, renewable energy is scattered as the primary energy source is the sun. Hence it is essential to have a policy framework that allows the general public to harvest sunlight and heat, wind, and biomass from their lands and their surroundings and produce electricity. In order to allow electricity consumers to produce and sell electricity to the national grid the 'net metering' scheme was introduced by the present government for the first time in Sri Lanka in 2009. This is a great step forward towards harnessing renewable energy resources in Sri Lanka.

Another key aspect of energy supply is the quality of energy services. To impose appropriate quality standards and regulatory interventions the present government took steps to establish the Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka (PUCSL) last year. Necessary steps will be taken by the PUCSL to protect the interests of consumers and to ensure fairness and predictability to all energy sector investors.

What will happen to the renewable energy sector initiatives, after 26th of January? On page 44 of President Mahinda Rajapaksa's manifesto, 'A Brighter Future', he states that "Plans have already been completed to start construction work on the 120 MW Uma Oya Hydro Power Station and the 35 MW Broadlands Hydro Power Station within the next 3 months. Further, the Moragolla Hydro Power Station (35 MW) and Gin Ganga Hydro Power Station (45 MW) will be started within the year. The contribution to electricity generation from non-conventional renewable energy sources in Sri Lanka will be raised to 10% of the total electricity production by the year 2016."

It is unfortunate to note that despite world wide development in the climate change and renewable energy fronts the Mahinda Chinthanaya has failed to live up to the expectations of the sustainable energy sector community by not proposing new initiatives to promote renewable indigenous resources in Sri Lanka. Thus, if the present president Mahinda Rajapaksa wins the 2010 presidential election then we can only expect a continuation of activities that have already commenced which is not adequate to achieve time bound targets given to human beings by the nature.

Adding to the frustration of the sustainable energy sector community, General Sarath Fonseka's 'Believable Change' has no reference whatsoever to the energy sector. This implies that he has no idea either on the situation in the energy sector or on world wide development in the renewable energy front. One can only wonder what one has to "believe" in with respect to "change" considering the complete lack of knowledge and vision on the part of the General's manifesto on an issue that is critical not only to Sri Lankan citizens but the entire human race.