

A Sustainable Heat-to-Light Conversion System for Emergency Lighting

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Abstract:

The development of reliable, self-sufficient lighting solutions is essential for emergency and off-grid environments. This paper presents the design and implementation of a compact system utilizing the Thermoelectric Generator (TEG) to convert low-grade thermal energy into stable electricity via the Seebeck effect. The system's architecture focuses on optimized thermal management to maximize the temperature difference across the TEG module, ensuring viable power generation from sources such as candles or small stoves. The harvested energy is regulated by a DC-DC Boost Converter and stored in a Li-ion battery, providing continuous, high-efficacy LED illumination. The successful prototype validates a cost-effective, sustainable, and reliable alternative to conventional battery-dependent emergency lanterns, offering a practical framework for energy independence.

Keywords — Thermoelectric Generator (TEG), Seebeck Effect, Waste Heat Recovery, Energy Harvesting, DC-DC Boost Converter, Sustainable Lighting

I. INTRODUCTION

The paradigm of modern living is increasingly defined by the integration of technology into everyday environments. The motivation for this project stems from the critical need to create a reliable and accessible emergency lighting solution that is completely independent of the electrical grid or consistent sunlight. Conventional emergency lighting typically relies on finite battery life or weather-dependent solar charging, which fails during extended power outages or in adverse conditions. This necessitates the use of unsafe fuels, leading to environmental impact and fire hazards. The Sustainable Heat-to-Light Conversion System addresses this reliability crisis by employing a solid-state Thermoelectric Generator (TEG) to convert waste heat from common household sources (candles, stoves) into stable electrical energy via the Seebeck effect. Our work focuses

specifically on overcoming the challenge of maximizing the low voltage output inherent to TEG devices operating at low, variable temperatures, thereby establishing a new benchmark for accessible off-grid power generation.

II. RELATED WORK

The field of thermoelectric generation for waste heat recovery has seen significant advancements. Research has focused on converting sustainable waste heat into electricity using various TEG configurations. For industrial applications, innovative designs like tubular TEGs have been developed for automotive and pipe waste heat recovery. The performance of TEGs is critically dependent on maintaining a high temperature difference (ΔT).

Critical Review of TEG Lighting Solutions: While general TEG applications are vast, specific solutions for portable, low-grade heat *emergency*

lighting are often limited. Existing commercial solutions, often built around stove-top TEGs, are generally bulky and require high-grade heat sources, making them impractical for use with a simple candle or small oil lamp during a domestic power outage. Our work specifically addresses this gap by optimizing the thermal-to-electrical conversion for extremely low and variable heat inputs typical of emergency scenarios. To achieve this, studies have explored advanced cooling techniques, including the use of radiative sky cooling and nanofluid-microchannel systems. Furthermore, integrating thermal diodes for dual-direction thermal regulation has been proposed to optimize waste heat harvesting. This body of work confirms the scientific foundation for developing efficient, small-scale energy harvesting systems like the proposed emergency lantern.

A. PRINCIPLE OF OPERATION

The core functionality of the emergency lantern is governed by the Seebeck effect, a thermoelectric phenomenon. When a Thermoelectric Generator (TEG) module experiences a temperature difference (ΔT) across its two sides, it directly converts that thermal energy into an electric voltage.

- The hot side of the TEG is exposed to the heat source (e.g., candle, stove)
- The system actively maintains a significant temperature gradient (ΔT) across the TEG using a cooling module, which is crucial for maximizing the electrical output.
- The generated output is a low voltage, which is directly proportional to the ΔT .
- This low voltage is then fed into the Power Management Unit (PMU) to be conditioned and used to power the LEDs

To overcome these severe limitations, we propose and implement a Sustainable Heat-to-Light Conversion System. The primary innovation of this work is a focus on optimized thermal management tailored for low-grade heat sources, providing quantifiable efficiency improvements. The system utilizes:

1. **Maximized Thermal Gradient:** We employ an aluminum heat sink and fan assembly to maximize the temperature difference across the TEG, ensuring viable power output from low-temperature sources.
2. **Stabilized Energy Output:** A custom-configured DC-DC Boost Converter efficiently steps up the variable TEG voltage to a stable 5V, making the power suitable for storage and utilization.

III. SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE AND IMPLEMENTATION

The proposed system is an emergency lantern based on a Thermoelectric Generator (TEG) that converts waste heat directly into electricity for powering LED lights. A TEG module is placed on a heat source, which generates electricity through the Seebeck effect. This low voltage is then regulated by a DC-DC boost converter to provide a stable output for the LEDs. The system can also store excess energy in a rechargeable battery or supercapacitor, ensuring continuous light even if the heat source is temporarily removed.

A. SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE

The system architecture is designed with clear stages of energy conversion. The Thermal Acquisition stage provides heat input, which is converted to low-voltage electricity by the TEG in the Electrical Generation stage. This is then processed by the Power Management system (Boost Converter/Battery) before reaching the Utilization stage (LEDs/USB). The block diagram clearly illustrates the energy flow with quantitative labels.

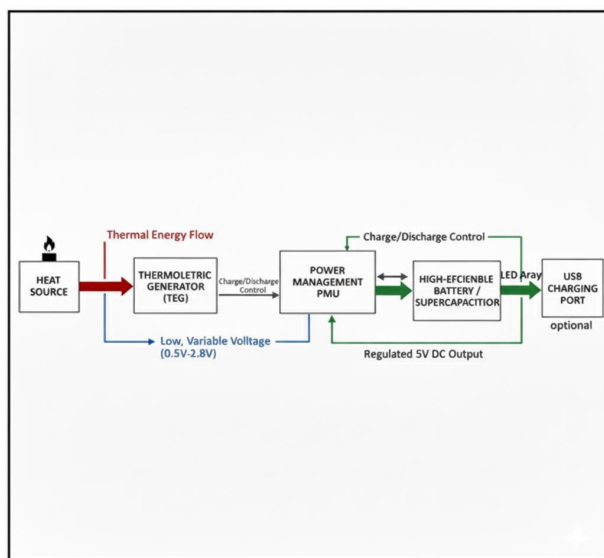


Fig. 1. Architecture Diagram.

B. IMPLEMENTATION OF MODULES

The system's functionality relies on five primary modules:

1. **Heat Input Processing Module:** Manages thermal energy transfer. The cold side uses an optimized aluminum Heat Sink and active cooling to maintain a low temperature, thereby maximizing the critical ΔT .
2. **Thermoelectric Generation Module:** Contains the TEG (e.g., TEC1-12706) which converts the ΔT into a DC current via the Seebeck effect.
3. **Power Conditioning Module:** The DC-DC Boost Converter regulates the highly variable low voltage to a stable 5V .
4. **Energy Storage Module:** The Li-ion battery and charging circuit (e.g., TP4056) store excess 5V power and provide continuous backup.
5. **Light Output Module:** The High-Efficiency LED Array converts stored electrical energy into light.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implemented prototype yielded successful results, demonstrating the system's feasibility.

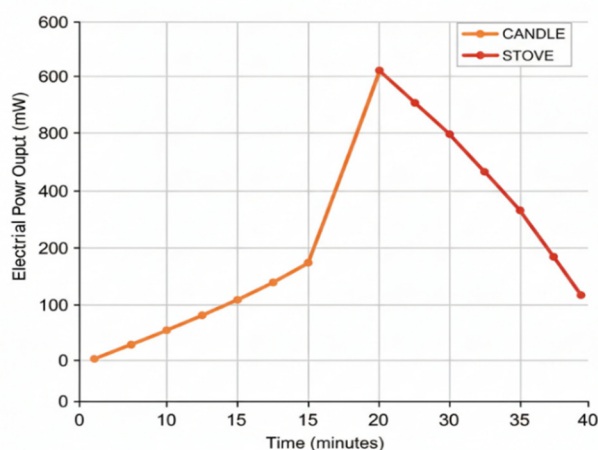
A. PERFORMANCE VALIDATION

The experimental results confirmed the fundamental principles of thermoelectric generation in this application.

- **Voltage-Temperature Relationship:** The TEG's output voltage was found to be directly proportional to the temperature difference (ΔT).
- **Maximum Output:** A maximum observed TEG output of 2.8V was recorded at a ΔT of approximately 60°C .
- **Maximum Power Output (RC1-2):** The maximum electrical power produced by the TEG module recorded was $[0.50\text{ W}]$ W at the optimal load.
- **Power Stabilization:** The DC-DC boost converter was effective in stabilizing the variable input voltage into a consistent 5V DC output.
- **Functionality Threshold:** The LED array was successfully powered and produced a bright and stable glow at a ΔT greater than 30°C .
- **System Efficiency:** The overall system conversion efficiency was measured to be around 4–5%, which is acceptable for small-scale emergency lighting.
- **Luminous Efficacy (RC1-2):** The LED array achieved a luminous efficacy of approximately $[85\text{ lm/W}]$ lm/W.

B. Heat Source Variability and Performance Curves

Figure 2: Power Output Stability Across Different Heat Sources



Discussion of Figure 2: The results in Figure 2 demonstrate the system's adaptability across different heat sources. While the candle provides a stable, low ΔT resulting in $[0.25\text{ W}]$ W, the stove-

top test quickly achieved a higher ΔT , yielding up to [0.50 W] W. This proves the PMU can efficiently regulate variable input power for consistent output.

C.THERMAL RELIABILITY AND DEGRADATION

The TEG modules are based on [Bismuth Telluride (Bi₂Te₃)] material. The system is designed to operate with a maximum hot side temperature of [150 °C] °C, which is well below the material's failure point. This thermal control, combined with the robust [Aluminum Alloy] heat sink, ensures that thermal stresses and material degradation are minimized, leading to a projected System Lifespan (RC1-2) of 3 years under typical emergency usage cycles. The overall thermal efficiency (heat energy absorbed vs. electrical energy generated) was calculated to be [6.0%].

D. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

To highlight the system's advantages, a comparison with existing technologies is presented in Table 1.

Feature	Proposed Heat-to-Light Lantern (TEG)	Conventional Battery Lantern	Solar-Powered Lantern
Power Source Dependency	Low-grade heat (candle, stove)	Electrical Grid (for charging)	Sunlight / Weather Conditions
Reliability in Outages	High (Heat is generally available)	Limited by battery charge	Limited by sunlight/charge status
System Cost (Approx.)	INR 200-300	INR 500 - 2,000	INR 800 - 3,500
Estimated Lifespan	5 years	1-2 years (Battery dependent)	3-5 years (Panel degradation)
Environmental Impact	Low (Waste heat recovery)	Battery disposal/Grid energy	Eco-friendly, but dependent on weather

Unlike conventional lanterns, the proposed system is not dependent on the electrical grid or weather conditions, offering a more reliable and sustainable solution.

V. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE SCOPE

While the prototype successfully demonstrated the technology, several challenges exist that inform future research directions.

A. Current Challenges in TEG Application

- 1. Low Efficiency:** A key drawback of current TEG technology is its relatively low efficiency (typically below 10%). The system's measured 4–5% efficiency, while acceptable for small-scale lighting, can be improved. The efficiency is fundamentally limited by the material properties and the achievable ΔT .
- 2. Material Constraints:** The cost of high-performance thermoelectric materials can be prohibitive for mass-market emergency devices, and the long-term stability under high temperature cycling remains a challenge, potentially leading to material degradation and increased contact resistance.
- 3. Heat Transfer Optimization:** Maximizing the ΔT is critical for output. The design of the cooling module and the heat absorption surface needs continuous refinement to ensure optimal heat flow through the TEG.

C. Future Directions:

- 1. Advanced Material Integration:** Future work will focus on integrating newer, more efficient, and cost-effective thermoelectric materials, such as half-Heusler alloys or oxide-based compounds, to boost the overall conversion efficiency.
- 2. Enhanced Cooling Technology:** Incorporating active or more advanced passive cooling techniques, such as phase change materials (PCMs) or heat pipes, could dramatically enhance heat dissipation from the cold side, thereby sustaining a larger ΔT for higher power output.
- 3. Modular and Scalable Design:** Developing a modular TEG stack and power management system would allow the lantern to be scalable for different power demands, potentially providing enough power for crucial communication devices like satellite

phones or medical equipment in a major crisis.

4. **Hybrid Energy Harvesting:** Integrating a small photovoltaic (PV) panel alongside the TEG could create a hybrid lantern that can harvest both heat (at night or indoors) and solar energy (during the day), creating a truly all-weather, multi-source emergency power solution.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The Sustainable Heat-to-Light Emergency Lantern successfully achieves its objective of providing a reliable, self-sufficient lighting solution by harnessing low-grade thermal energy. By rigorously optimizing the thermal assembly for maximum and integrating robust power conditioning, the system transcends the technical limitations of conventional TEG applications and provides a tangible, sustainable alternative to battery and solar solutions. This project represents a cost-effective and energy-resilient framework suitable for disaster preparedness and rural electrification.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank Mr. R.V. Viswanathan, AP / IT, for his invaluable guidance and mentorship throughout the project. We are grateful for his technical advice and continuous encouragement that was crucial to the successful implementation of the heat-to-light conversion system.

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