

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN GOZO

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Pursuing sustainable development goals is important for the Maltese Islands given their high population densities, which lead to heavy pressure on the environment. This is especially so in the case of the island of Gozo, which is more dependent on the environment than Malta, due to its reliance on agriculture and tourism.

The Conference on sustainable development in Gozo, which was held at Hotel Ta Cenc on 26 November 2004, highlighted the main sustainable development issues in this small island with a land area of 67 square kilometres and a population of about 30,000. The conference was organised by the National Commission for Sustainable Development, together with the Ministry for Gozo and the University Gozo Centre, with the support of the EC Representation in Malta. It was attended by about 90 participants.

In his introductory remarks, HE Ronald Gallimore, who heads the EC Representation in Malta, said that the meeting was an important one in view of the fact that it dealt with sustainable development, which encompasses economic, social and environmental dimensions. He referred to the EU Lisbon Agenda, which sets out a ten-year strategy to make the EU the world's most dynamic and competitive economy. He said that this strategy should lead to a stronger economy based on sound environmental policies and social includes, which are at the basis of sustainable development. He praised the National Commission for Sustainable Development for taking the initiative to draw up a sustainable development strategy for the Maltese Islands.



The speakers during the opening session, from left to right: Hon Giovanna Debono, Prof Lino Briguglio, who chaired the session, Hon. George Pullicino and HE Ronald Gallimore

The Ethical Dimension

Hon Giovanna Debono, Minister for Gozo, spoke about the meaning of sustainable development, and emphasised the point that such development has, at its roots, an ethical dimension in that thinking long term for future generations is an ethical issue. She dwelt at some length on the special development constraints faced by Gozo in view of its double insularity, small domestic market and ecological fragility. She gave a brief account of the actions undertaken by the Ministry for Gozo to promote sustainable development on the island.

Hon George Pullicino, Minister for Rural Affairs and the Environment, who represents the Prime Minister as chairman of the National Commission for Sustainable Development, also referred to the ethical dimension of sustainable development and emphasised that need that every one of us feels the need to act responsibly to improve the quality of life of the population as a whole and not just to a section of it. He said that sustainable development is multifaceted and it is therefore necessary to consider its many dimensions in the strategy. He said that economic development is necessary to create sound environmental management, and that the quality of life of the people is intimately tied with economic and environmental concerns. He explained the role of the National Commission for Sustainable Development in promoting awareness of the need for a holistic approach in attempting to improve the quality of life of the Maltese population.



Sustainable Development and Quality of Life

Professor Briguglio spoke next. He said that ultimately sustainable development is intended to improve the quality of life. He said that economic development is very important in this regard, and efficiency is at the core of such development. However, environmental and social concerns require that economic development should not be short sighted, and should have a long run dimension, so that the changes will be durable and will benefit current and future generations.

He explained that the process of drawing and implementing the strategy itself should be conducive towards the creation of participatory schemes and educational experiences. Professor Briguglio also explained the role of the National Council for Sustainable Development in the drawing up the strategy, and said that the Commission was set up in terms of the Environment Protection Act (2001) to raise awareness on the need for sustainable development.

The Special Needs of Gozo

The participants then divided themselves into three groups, respectively focussing on economic, environmental and social issues respectively. Each group was asked to review the draft strategy document and to suggest improvements to the text.

The main outcomes of the sessions, in so far as Gozo is concerned were the following:

- The sustainable development strategy is likely to include more reference to Gozo. In its present form, the draft strategy does not give appropriate importance to the special needs of the island

- Issues of direct relevance to the sustainable development of Gozo were discussed at length during the break-out sessions. The most important constraints identified by participants related to
 - (1) Gozo's heavy dependence on transport for economic development. There was a call for improvements in the inter-island transport connections
 - (2) Gozo has a fragile ecosystem, and tourism and agriculture, which are Gozo's most important economic sectors, exert heavy pressure on the system. There was a call for better environmental management on the island
 - (3) There are various threats to Gozo's social cohesion, arising from the rapid changes that were taking place. There was a call for policies to take account of these threats.

Educational Outcomes

The conference offered an opportunity for an educative experience arising from the informative introductory speeches, video on sustainability indicators and presentation on the purpose of a sustainable development strategy. The conference helped to foster greater awareness that the development challenge in Gozo needs to be tackled in a holistic way, with economic, social and environmental concerns integrated in development strategies and plans for implementation.

In addition the participants from the different walks of life and with different interests, had the opportunity to share their views and express their opinions on what needs to be done to promote sustainable development in Gozo and in the Maltese Islands as a whole. As expected there were contrasting views, but in general, participants agreed that a one sided approach to development is no development at all.