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The Politics of Sustainable Development in Malta as a Small Island State: A Question of Good Governance for the Common Good versus a Culture of Closeness and Inertia shaped by Political Power and Elite Interests

It is truly a privilege and an honour for me to deliver the graduand’s address. At the outset, I should thank my family for their support, extend my appreciation to my supervisors Prof Paul Pace and Prof Godfrey Pirotta for their guidance, and express my gratitude to the Faculty of Education and the University of Malta, for giving me the opportunity to conduct my Ph.D. research.

In this address, I would like to briefly highlight the outcomes of my Ph.D. My thesis focused on the politics of sustainable development in Malta, as well as, on Education for Sustainable Development for Maltese high-level policy-makers. The study built on critical education to promote reflection and critical thinking in politicians and permanent secretaries.

The study generated insights on the views of policy-makers on sustainable development, the policy-making process, and Education for Sustainable Development. These outcomes emerge from data generated during 2012, when the Nationalist Party was in government and the Labour Party served in Opposition. Nonetheless, it is held that my study is still very relevant today, as it shows that the tribal bipartisan political system and the culture of closeness and inertia have detrimental effects on sustainable development, irrespective of who is in power. I used critical theory to shed light on my interaction with policy-makers. It transpires that the attainment of sustainable development needs a change in the values and attitudes of policy-makers. Such change in behaviour can be promoted through education.

Politicians tend to put their own interests before that of Malta’s long-term benefits. My active stand for sustainable development and good governance led me to develop the interviews into a form of critical reflection, based on Paulo Freire’s problem-posing and on Jurgen Habermas’ communicative action, as pro-active engagement for emancipation and social justice. Thus, through critical knowledge, the interviews sought to promote better understanding in policy-makers of their intrinsic instrumentality and of the systems of diffused power that restrict their actions in favour of social inclusion, just economic redistribution, and environmental protection.

The findings of this study show that to Maltese policy-makers sustainable development is a relative concept whereby its meanings and misinterpretations consolidate their power. This concept remains a relative and subjective process where the environment tends to be sacrificed on the altar of the economy, as the latter remains the dominant concern of elites. There is a struggle over the meaning of sustainable development, with environmental discourse being subordinated, misinterpreted, prejudiced and subjugated. Although policy-makers possess ‘banking knowledge’ about sustainable development, they still tend to pay lip service to this concept to accommodate their needs. Politicians abuse of the complexity surrounding sustainable development decisions, to create a space of ambiguity for manoeuvring, to better justify their decisions.
The priority given to the economy points out the myopic concern of policy-makers for the provision of material human needs. This undermines the fulfilment of the human potential and hegemonises the expectations of citizens. Therefore, factors that cannot be given a monetary value tend to be underestimated. This reflects an instrumental and utilitarian rather than a critical approach to development. A common perspective is needed to adopt a common value position on sustainable development in defiance of regimes of truth and forms of constraints of the dominant culture.

Values, attitudes and responsibilities are of an anthropocentric nature. The values of policy-makers towards sustainable development vary along a ‘dynamic pendulum’ that oscillates between two ends, that is, common good values versus the politicians’ individual power and political party interests. Politicians are prone to courses of action that may not always be sustainable, but that have positive spin-offs to their dominant position and the political party in government. Furthermore, sustainable development is perceived within a dualistic positivist tradition, whereby, due to anthropocentric values, environmental resources are exploited for human wants. This dualism may be crystallised in small islands states due to their lack of resources.

Guiding principles for sustainable development are hindered by partisan interests and intrinsic instrumentality. Loyalty to guiding principles including the common good, ethics and good governance is not cast in stone, but varies as it is shaped by the most pressing concerns and interests of politicians. Hence, while these guiding principles can serve as a beacon to policy-makers, it should be recognised that their importance can be fluid and malleable according to political exigencies.

Thus the need for the convergence of politics and sustainable development through normative socio-cultural critique. Politics and sustainable development, while theoretically sharing the same aims, have not converged due to politicians’ interests for re-election, partisan politics and the wants of elite groups. Thus, the quest for power affects sustainable development as it distorts policy-making. Politicians prefer fire-fighting approaches to holistic policies as this gives them power to make ad hoc decisions on a case by case basis, according to their own exigencies thus consolidating their position of power.

Decisions are interest-laden, and can benefit certain sectors close to government rather than the national interest. Therefore, the need for reaching bipartisan agreements on the bigger issues for the wellbeing of society. Some sectors could be released from the political grip by placing them under the responsibility of critical, democratic and pluralistic bodies. On the contrary, short-term unsustainable measures mostly focusing on easy economic returns are put into place to secure votes.

Politics needs to be reconstructed on the basis of critical theory and sustainable development as an ethical and mediating force that leads towards sustainability. Hence, it is being suggested that sustainable development should be enshrined in the Constitution of Malta as the goal of politics and all sectors of society.

Policy-making for sustainable development emerges as a complex process of power-based negotiations affected by the normalisation of power that leads to a culture of inertia. Maltese culture can be interpreted as a system of power relations, and interrogated in a post-modern critical fashion in terms of Foucault’s effect of power.

Maltese politics is characterised by a culture of inertia disciplined by the effect of the power of closeness resulting from our smallness and islandness. Complementarity among political actors is overtaken by dualism through complex games of self-interest preservation. In Malta, one notes a
trend of subordination of the civil service by its political masters as politicians are radically transformed by politics in order to get re-elected. Complex intra-ministry, inter-ministerial and civil society power struggles, based on ritualistic consultations, have an impact upon policy-making. There is the need for stronger institutions to counter-act political power by securing a level-playing field among sectoral groups to ensure equitable and socially just sustainable outcomes. However, issues of power and institutional contradictions are evident as institutions are strong with the weak and weak with the strong.

The affinity and intimacy between successive governments and the business community in Malta both creates and is a product of a culture that disciplines individual expectations. This permeation of power is normalised by smallness that acts as a barrier to critique of the status quo. Moreover, the traditional parochial system of political clientelism, which is reinforced by our electoral system, is detrimental to sustainable development. Such issues could be taken up by the debate on the reform of the Constitution of Malta.

Policy-making in Malta emerges as an opaque, elusive, centralised and complicated process. This lack of clarity and tangibility serves the interest of dominant groups as it camouflages instrumental reason. What is marketed as a new policy can turn out to be a case of non-decision-making or running-on-the-spot. It transpires that policy-making in Malta is constrained by political, psychological, ideological and institutional challenges that lead to a culture of inertia.

Given the overarching nature of sustainable development, its status within government could be raised to the highest level by decoupling it from the environment ministry, and placing it within the OPM portfolio. Apart from political will and public empowerment, strengthened institutional frameworks for good governance would provide the third prerequisite for the promotion of sustainable development. It follows that improving the policy-making process requires a new way of doing politics for sustainable development.

Taking into account the outcomes of this study, in view of the strong majority in parliament, the very favourable polls, and the unprecedented trust shown in the prime minister, I hold that this government can succeed in taking the bull by its horns and place sustainable development at the top of the political and national agenda.

This scenario highlights the need for Education for Sustainable Development. Education for Sustainable Development is relevant to policy-makers as it can promote critical thinking, by asking the ‘right’ questions and seeking the ‘right’ answers, for another possible world characterised by social justice. Critical-reflective interviewing can enhance in policy-makers Freire’s ‘intransitive consciousness’, as well as, Giroux’s ‘language of possibility’ through critical conversations, by reflecting on assumptions as a feature of culture open to challenge.

Critical-reflective interviewing can promote an intra-personal counter-narrative in policy-makers. Interviewing can reinforce an aspect of identity that values sustainable development in the knowledge that, this can resist, as an internalised counter-narrative, other contradictory aspects of the same individual’s identity supporting the status quo. This new critical slant for Education for Sustainable Development can be considered as a contribution to the body of knowledge on post-modern perspectives of critical education and Education for Sustainable Development.

In conclusion, my study contributed to knowledge by creating an innovative Critical Education for Sustainable Development learning space based on Freirean constructive dialogue and Habermasian
emancipative reasoning, which promotes critical thinking and awareness in high-level policy-makers for a sustainable life-role.

This thesis fills the gap in critical pedagogy by indicating Education for Sustainable Development as a form of critical pedagogy for policy-makers based on dialogical encounters aimed at perspective transformational change.

This research proved to be a learning experience for me as a citizen, researcher and senior civil servant. My initial hunch that policy-makers tend to pay lip service to sustainable development persists. However, I came to recognise that policy-makers are both shaped and shapers of a culture of closeness that leads to inertia, which has not as yet fully understood the benefits of sustainable development. As this study has shown, Education for Sustainable Development for Maltese high-level policy-makers is not an option, but a requisite to promote political will and a culture of sustainability.

I thank you for your attention.

References