

Career guidance in Malta: A Mediterranean microstate in transition

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The challenges that career education and guidance in Malta¹ have to face over the next few decades are inextricably linked with the current transitional state in the development of the island's economy. In this article I propose first of all to present an overview of the prevailing economic scenario, and the changes that are taking place as well as those that are likely to take place in the near future. This will provide the appropriate context so that the characteristics of the emergent labour market can be identified. It is on the basis of these same characteristics that implications can be derived for the practice of career guidance at the start of the next millennium.

The economic context

The key factor identifying Malta's present social formation, whether we refer to the fields of economics, culture or politics, is **"transition"**. As most of the articles that appeared in a recent edited collection purporting to submit Maltese society to sociological inquiry show (Sultana & Baldacchino, 1994), there is a sense of change – despite the strong elements of continuity – in many areas of social life and in the different institutions that structure daily interaction such as families, schools, the church, courts, media, the political arena, and above all, the economy. The theoretical perspective guiding this paper is that the economic sphere, while not all-determining, is nevertheless the more powerful factor influencing developments in the "superstructure".

Back to the future

Malta's economic fortunes have been marked by a number of factors which can be partly attributed to topography and geography, and partly to historical vicissitudes. Though a detailed economic history has yet to be written, it is clear from analyses that are available (Busuttil, 1968; Baldacchino, 1988; Briguglio, 1988; Delia, 1994) that Malta's small size, its almost complete lack of natural resources, and its geographic location in the middle of the

Mediterranean have provided the perennial theatre in which the drama of economic survival had to be played out. That drama was modified by different historical scenarios as diverse European war lords occupied the islands up to independence from the British in 1964. Irrespective of superficial differences in the policies of colonizers, however, one could say that dependence, peripherality, and vulnerability have been the mainstays of the Maltese experience of economic life, with booms and severe depressions following each other in quick succession, depending on exogenous factors, particularly the extent of public spending and investment of colonial or, later, indigenous rule. As the Mowatt Commission, appointed in 1912 to report on the economic depression prevailing on the Maltese islands, noted, any prosperity that Malta had known in its history had been of an artificial nature, depending not on production for internal consumption and external trade but rather on work for the government and the foreign governing class.

Indeed, many economic advisers to the crown agreed that Malta could never quite aspire to an independent economic existence, given its size (and the implications of this for the development of an economy of scale), scarcity of resources, and lack of an industrial base. Sir Wilfred Woods, for instance, attempting to assess the island's ability to survive economically after the devastation of the Second World War, had to admit that Malta's chances were slim. He noted the island's near total dependence on employment paid for from U.K. funds, just as in the past they were dependent on funds imported by the Knights: "It does not seem reasonable," he concluded, "to expect industrial development of sufficient magnitude to add materially to Malta's national income" (Woods, 1946, p. 7). Later, another economic adviser, Sir George Schuster, was to note the dangerous, near total dependence on employment with – and expenditure by – the British services, and while less optimistic than Woods regarding the potential for industrialization and development policies, felt obliged to caution that "if one is to be realistic one must realize that no grandiose or magic solution of the existing problems is possible" (Schuster, 1950, p. xviii).

Under circumstances that constantly trapped Malta in a cycle of indigence, "career guidance", formal and informal, made little if any sense. As Sultana (1992a) has pointed out in his analysis of the relationship between technical education and development in Malta, situations of material deprivation and dependence meant that, to use a phrase developed by Ken Roberts (1977) with reference to a very different context, Malta has always tended to have "jobs looking for people" rather than "people looking for jobs". This is true of the hordes of Maltese who were obliged to emigrate first towards North Africa (the 19th century), and then to the Commonwealth (the 20th century)² in the search for a livelihood, where, as the saying goes, "beggars cannot be choosers". But it is also true of those who stayed behind, at a time when several attempts were mounted to develop an industrial base by providing technically skilled workers. Vocational schools were started from the 1930s onwards, but each initiative was doomed to failure as students left courses at

the first job opportunity that presented itself, preferring immediate security to the promise of more lucrative jobs in the future. Of course, as Foster (1968) showed in his path-breaking article regarding “the vocational school fallacy in development planning”, these students were simply rejecting the belief – common then among most governments of developing countries – that supply (of vocationally trained students) creates demand (by industrial investors attracted to the islands by the presence of appropriate human resources). In such a context, liberal notions of “career choice” were a luxury few could afford to entertain, and as Casolani, the superintendent of emigration between 1918 and 1930, pointed out in reaction to what he considered vain capriciousness on the part of students aspiring for status, salary, and security through employment as “clerks” with the British services, schooling had to respond to the labour requirements of Malta and of host countries receiving Maltese migrants. As it was, hundreds of youths from the middle classes were “unloaded every year by our public schools”, the bulk of whom “are thrown upon a market that is already overstocked with their kind. They are the flotsam and jetsam who daily gravitate between *Strade Reale* (main street in the capital city, Valletta) and this Department (of Emigration) to be told there is nothing doing, and that nobody and no country wants them” (Casolani, 1925, para. 9).

An economy in transition

A look at Malta’s economic performance today seems to give the lie to the dire predictions of economic advisers, and to the spectre of misery and unemployment that has haunted the islands over the past many centuries. It also sets the scene for what appears to be, at a first glance, a glaring contrast and rupture from the past. Successive Maltese governments have expanded local production, attracted foreign investment, generated more employment opportunities, diversified the economy away from merely satisfying a “fortress” role for the occupying forces, and generally served ties of dependency, even when this meant a loss of important revenue with the closing down of the British Defense Establishments in 1979 (Briguglio, 1988, p. 202; Sultana, 1992a, 185–190). Because of this, post-independence Malta provided new structures and new occupational opportunities for the indigenous population. Leadership and administrative posts hitherto occupied by foreigners were vacant and available to the Maltese, and the project of state-led development saw the rise of new industries in the manufacturing and service sectors, heavy infrastructural investment, and a concerted attempt to attract foreign industrial entrepreneurs to the islands through the provision of cheap and (moderately) skilled labour, tax holidays, low unit rental costs, and other similar enticements. More recently, we have seen a move away from a Labour Government’s penchant (1971–1987) for a focus on labour intensive industrial set-ups, especially in the clothing and textile sector, to a Nationalist Government preference for the service industries, with a range of initiatives launched since 1987 including

offshore banking, a strengthening and widening of insurance, banking and financial services, and freeport facilities, leading, in many sectors, to an embourgeoisement of an ever increasing section of the work force. Indeed, Malta's current economic performance is enviable. It has 4% unemployment, less than 3% inflation, and annual rates of growth of the real Gross domestic Product in the 6% region, thus enabling the islands to ride high during an uneasy period for the world economy as a whole (Delia, 1993, 1994).

Economic progress has been uneven, with the islands being generally at the mercy of external factors over which they have little control. However, progress there has most definitely been, and economic development has been accompanied by educational development. Both fields need to be considered concomitantly if we are to make any kind of informed evaluation of the future role of career guidance in this small island state. Since independence, educational services have become increasingly differentiated (Sultana, 1991, 1992a; Zammit Mangion, 1992), with secondary schooling for all – in a tripartite form – being introduced in 1970, vocational schools in 1972, a variety of post-secondary training institutes from the mid-1970s onwards, and a plethora of credentialling opportunities made available in tune with actual or hoped for occupational futures (Mallia, 1994). Ever since the 1950s, and under the influence of the likes of Sir Thomas Balogh,³ a human capital (and more recently, “human resource”) approach to education has prevailed under different guises, so that a more (1971–1987) or less (1987 to present) explicitly utilitarian view has prevailed in considering issues such as the purpose of schooling, the legitimacy of “choice” of educational and occupational futures given the economic “needs” of the country, the subsequent role of vocational and educational guidance, and the function of further education.

It is in this context, and in relationship to developments in the economic and educational fields since independence, that the rise of career guidance and related activities must be considered. The first manpower planning survey, for instance, took place in 1965, while pressure for the introduction of vocational guidance services for young people was formally exerted in 1966 by the young Christian Workers, and subsequently by the Malta Union of Teachers in 1967 and the Malta Youth Consultative council in 1968 (Degiovanni, 1987). A report on guidance was commissioned in 1968 from M. Vestin, a Council of Europe expert, and a Guidance Unit within the Department of Education was set up in the same year. Books and pamphlets on the process of career choice began appearing (Portelli, 1969, 1970), and a new preoccupation with assessment and selection led to a number of reports (Tuppen, 1969; Cluff, 1971), the development of local expertise in the field, and the introduction of “scientific” testing, cumulative record cards, and other diagnostic instruments. A quotation from a report on the Maltese education system which the Malta Union of Teachers presented in 1967 to Professor Lewis, a visiting consultant to the government, captures well the prevailing human capital orientation, given the challenges facing post-independent Malta. Noting the lack of sufficient educational and vocational guidance facilities,

the union pointed out the large number of students who found themselves following courses of study they did not like, and eventually in jobs they had not chosen:

Failures and misfits are bound to increase if the situation remains unchanged. No country can afford this wastage, least of all a developing country like Malta. Government should therefore spare no effort to remedy the situation and introduce Vocational Guidance teachers as soon as possible to help students develop their personalities to the full, divert their efforts to the course or courses with the best employment prospects, as well as to keep the most fruitful liaison between industry and schools.

The three goals outlined in the MUT document strive to find a balance between a utilitarian and a liberal understanding of the role of vocational guidance. The former has historically been emphasized during times of economic duress, while the latter finds favour when the economy booms – a process that is common to other countries as well (Watts, 1985; Carnoy and Levin, 1985). Thus, during the crisis of the early seventies, a Labour government found it necessary to combine the emphasis on “offering to all children the opportunity to develop to the best of their ability” with a stress on the need “to build a new Malta, with an independent economy, based on industrial management, with a full and wise use of its manpower potential” (Barbara, 1972, p. 7). Given the current affluence, one can understand why, in contrast to the discourse of the seventies, the Department of Education’s Guidance and Counselling Services can afford to declare that its programme of activities “is based on the developmental, person-centred approach and is, therefore, primarily concerned with empowering students to learn and to take responsibility rather than imposing particular options and decisions on them” (Guidance & Counselling Services Annual Report, 1994, p. 1). “Freedom of choice”, a currently crucial government policy element in fields as diverse as consumption, schooling, and career futures, is given pride of place even though the culture of “choice” is seen by some economic advisers as leading to skills bottlenecks, identified as the key challenge for the potential labour supply of skilled personnel (Harper, 1988; Delia, 1994, p. 475).

Change and continuity

The overview of Malta’s economic development presented above would seem to suggest that the island is in step with international trends, restructuring its economy by privileging the service industry and private enterprise, and aspiring for a high-ability, high-wage society characteristic of post-fordist societies (Murray, 1989). The present government’s emphasis on life-long learning has paid off with more than 60% of each age cohort investing in post-secondary education, and with a trebling of University students between 1987 and 1994 (Sultana, 1995a). New educational policies have postponed subject specialisation at the secondary school level, and have introduced a wider base of general education at both vocational and post-secondary school level. All

of this is premised on the assumption that Malta is in transition to a “post-industrial” framework where a host of new skills, such as flexibility, communication and IT competency, creativity, and so on are to be developed (Harper, 1988). Such views are also influencing the field of vocational guidance in Malta, with students being urged to reconsider the notion of entering a specific occupation and remaining in it throughout their life, and to adapt themselves to the requirements of “flexible specialization”, for instance.

One has to ask, however, the extent to which Malta has indeed overcome the historic reality of dependence, peripherality and vulnerability outlined earlier, and my contention is that despite the fact that the Maltese economy is in transition – and that therefore there are new challenges facing careers education and guidance – there are signs, for those who wish to read them, that there is no guarantee for continued success in economic performance. It would be useful in this context to mention briefly the most salient of these signs, given their implications for the practice of guidance in the next decades.

Malta’s participation ratio, in terms of the share of labour supply in the working age population, is, at 57%, among the lowest in relation to OECD countries. This is partly due to the fact that Malta has the lowest female participation rate in the *formal* economy in the OECD countries, i.e., just under 30%. However, there are clear indications that cultural values are changing, with more women declaring their willingness to pursue work after marriage, and an agreement – at a par with the agreement expressed in Europe – with the idea that women should contribute directly to the household income (Abela, 1994, pp. 24–30). This will necessarily result in an added pressure on the labour market, and the rate of job creation will, consequently, have to be intensified. Pressure will also be exerted by demographic trends, since the population is currently growing at about 0.8% annually, so that 21,000 more citizens will be demanding work in less than a decade (Delia, 1993, p. 8). To these must be added the close to 1,000 returned migrants and naturalised Maltese citizens that each year add to the labour supply of the total population (Central Office of Statistics, 1994).

In conjunction with demographic factors, one must also take into account the fact that within a comparative European perspective, the highest contributions by tourism to GNP are enjoyed by Malta (Baldacchino, 1994, p. 46). More than a quarter of all earnings from exports of goods and services derives from the tourist industry (Briguglio, 1988), a notoriously volatile sector dependent not only on political stability in the country, but also on the unpredictable whims and trends of foreign holidaymakers, international advertising, and profitable currency exchange rates. Close to 50% of Malta’s manufacturing exports are attributable to the presence of the multinational company SGS-Thompson, which has on more than one occasion threatened to leave the island if labour costs continue spiralling, as they are bound to do given the increasingly high aspirations for improved living standards. Two of the island’s

most lucrative sources of revenue, therefore, are marked by uncertainty, and problems with either of them can have disastrous consequences both to the economy and to the employment market.

Similarly negative can be some of repercussion of full accession to the European Union. Membership, now expected by an optimistic government to happen before the end of the millennium, will help Malta cash in on generous regional structural funding – to the tune of over sixty five million ECU (\$US80 million) annually – but it will also introduce new forces into the Maltese economy, hitherto unaccustomed to the rigours of aggressive competition, given that monopolies and cartels tend to form themselves quite naturally in a microstate environment dominated by the deeply-rooted interests of family-linked mercantile capitalists.

The European Union's *Avis*, where conditions for accession are stipulated, deserves to be further highlighted in this context. As indicated earlier, Malta has become accustomed to a reliance on the state for the provision of secure employment. The European Union, dominated as it is by the logic of capital and by an ideological faith in the free market (Sultana, 1995b), has placed the reduction of the public sector in Malta as one of the key conditions for accession, and indeed the government has, since 1987, embarked on a series of attempts to curb the "lop-sidedness" of the Public Sector, which presently accounts for just over 42% of the pool of gainfully occupied people and which the government is committed to bringing down to between 25% to 30% (Budget Speech by Minister of finance, 24 November 1992). Such policies, if maintained, will certainly have important repercussions on the kinds of options that will be available to Maltese youth, and vocational guidance services have already been invited to prepare young people to rely less on the security of tenure traditionally offered by state employment

Key characteristics of the emergent labour market

In the preceding sections we have given a sense of the economic fortunes of the Maltese islands, highlighting both its present affluence and past indigence to show the extent to which the future remains obscure, given the dependence peripherality and vulnerability which, we have argued, are the elements of continuity in the drama of changing economic fortunes. Will membership of the European Union accelerate the modernization of the economy, or will it simply reinforce the perceptions of international capital with a European base that Malta is another useful source of low ability, low waged work? Will the tourist industry successfully weather out the winds of political instability blowing over the Mediterranean? Will Malta's attempts to identify niche markets in the high technology sector result in high cost investments with little tangible returns as international capital flies East and towards the Pacific Rim? These and a host of other questions have, of course, no definite answer, but given the analysis provided above, one could nevertheless hazard an

outline of the key characteristics of the emergent Maltese labour market, in order to be in a better position to tease out the implications for the future of career guidance. These characteristics are:

- A market in transition, characterised by a work force that is literate, numerate, flexible, adaptable and teachable (Herr, 1994).
- A shift from labour-intensive, relatively unskilled and cheap blue-collar work in the manufacturing industry to the service sector, where higher ability, higher waged work is expected.
- A renewed emphasis on lifelong learning, on communication skills, foreign languages and information technology.
- An increasing labour force participation rate on the part of women, even if much of this is on a part-time basis.
- A diminution of employment opportunities in the public sector, with job creation being encouraged in the private sector.
- An intensification of state control of the underground economy, which currently accounts for between 20 to 30% of the GDP.
- An increase in part-time work opportunities for all.
- An erosion of the concept of life-long job security, irrespective of merit.
- An aging population, with the share of the sixty-plus projected to rise from 14.6% in 1990 to 16% in 2001 and 21.2% in 2015 (Delia, 1994, p. 477).

Implications for career guidance

The economic developments detailed in the previous sections have several possible implications for career guidance in Malta, and what its needs are likely to be over the next two or three decades. With a complement of 2 education officers, 9 counsellors, 103 guidance teachers, 113 personal and social education teachers with guidance-related functions serving 48 state secondary schools and one post-secondary institution, and a 2% share of the total Education Budget (Guidance and Counselling Services, 1994, p. 2), one cannot claim that vocational guidance is on the decline in the Maltese education system. The setting up of the Employment and Training Corporation in 1988, and of the Foundation for Human Resource Development in 1989 introduced services of careers education and guidance for adults, thus consolidating the legitimacy of guidance to facilitate various transitions to the world of work. There is a strong demand for guidance personnel, and the diploma course offered at the University of Malta is over-subscribed, with a number opting to follow their studies at Universities abroad. Compared to the U.K., for instance, whose education system was for many years a model for Malta, and where most of the first generation counsellors – including the present author – first went for training between the 1960s and early 1980s, the guidance service operates from a position of strength. It is not seen as a peripheral frill, but rather as one of the mainstays of a “pastoral care” orientation in

schools, supported by form teachers, personal and social education teachers, welfare officers and spiritual directors.

Guidance personnel in schools have a series of interrelated challenges to attend to in the future. These challenges imply changes in the **roles** adopted by vocational guidance teachers, leading to deskilling in some areas, and a reskilling in others, and they also affect the **organizational structure** through which personnel operate. It is to a consideration of a few of the more relevant of these challenges, changes and needs that we finally turn.

Organizational base

An expanding indigenous economy leading to more complex occupational structures implies an intensification of the function of information brokerage for guidance personnel. Entry into the European Union, with the concomitant stress on the geographical mobility of human resources and access to employment opportunities on the continent, will have the same effect. In this regard, Malta's small size is an advantage. The role of information gathering and distribution can be fulfilled economically and effectively from a central base linked to individual schools, local councils, centres such as the Employment and Training Corporation, industrial setups and homes through computer networks. Hitherto, the centre base has coordinated the efforts of guidance teachers in the different schools, and provided a parallel service to students and parents, and liaised with industry on all the partners' behalf. This duplication of functions is likely to cease, given the demands of information gathering, inputting and distribution via electronic means. Similarly, one could imagine that a home-made variant of the computer-aided career decision-making packages that are currently in use in Europe (Watts, 1997) could be accessed on the same electronic network. While Malta does have skilled personnel in the area of computer programming, there has as yet been no sustained attempt to create the kinds of packages that we are here referring to, and certainly this will be one of the key challenges for the future, and one that is likely to affect not only guidance roles, but also the nature of inter-linkage between schooling, further education and the world of work.

Role of guidance personnel

The shift of functions from individual schools to a central base implies a different role for guidance teachers. Similarly influential will be the current restructuring of the secondary school system, where guidance teachers will be less called upon to guide students in the choice of particular subject clusters and groupings, given that flexible futures in a high-ability society demand that specialization comes later in one's educational career. The exercise of subject choice, which obviously influences the range of occupations that students can then aspire for, together with information giving, has so far taken up much of the guidance personnel's time and energy. With these two important func-

tions transferred, to a great extent, to an agency outside of individual schools, guidance teachers will have to develop alternative roles, intensifying ones which they had little time to focus on previously, or even finding new ones to fulfill. It is likely that guidance staff will privilege the pastoral side of their work, providing educational guidance, supporting students with learning difficulties, and helping those under their care to make the best use of the information data bases about the world of further education and employment held at a central office. They will provide the personal element to complement the more efficient, computer-generated support, whether this refers to packages that help students explore aptitudes and abilities, that administer assessment tests, or that encourage the exploration of a wider range of employment options. Above all, they will focus rather more on individual needs, helping students to understand their own interests, abilities, values, aptitudes, to develop their own potential and creativity, to improve interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and so on, taking increasing responsibility for the personal and social education element in and across the curriculum (Sultana, 1992b).

Due to such role changes, there will most likely be a shift to a focus on career **education** rather than guidance as traditionally understood. Education here has a number of referents, as Watts, Dartois and Plant (1988) point out in their report on *Educational and Vocational guidance Services for the 14–15 Age Group in the European Community*, when they suggest that such services “have a key role to play in any advance society, both in fostering **efficiency** in the allocation and use of human resources, and in fostering **social equity** in access to educational and vocational opportunities” (p. 1).

The question of efficiency is gaining increasing importance in Malta, and there is mounting pressure for guidance to respond to the perceived needs of a changing economy. After an initial emphasis on the concept of “choice” in order to combat previous policies that saw education very strictly related to the needs of the economy, the present government is perceptibly shifting towards a revalorisation of the idea of “freedom within constraints”. *Numerus clausus* controlling access to university courses have been removed, for instance, but there are proposals that financial incentives be used to direct students towards those faculties providing skills most required by the economy. In such a context, careers guidance personnel will be increasingly called upon to support macro-economic decision-making by the government, whether it is to channel students towards particular study courses and careers, to discourage young people to depend on the public sector for employment, to promote entrepreneurial skills, to break down gender stereotyped attitudes towards employment, to change attitudes towards information technology and science generally, to combat school failure, absenteeism, early school leaving, and “child” labour (Sultana, 1993) or to encourage a work ethic that is more compatible with the requirements of a modern economy.

But there is a strong tradition within the guidance and counselling corps in Malta, sustained as this is by a national culture that draws on the social

teaching of the majoritarian Catholic religion, that values equity and social justice above a technocratic understanding of “efficiency”. Given that changes in the economic structure of the Maltese islands have repercussions on value systems as well, it is likely that guidance personnel will more readily engage in programmes that have the problematization of the world of work as a goal, by focusing not only on technical but also on normative issues. Career education programmes would thus guide students in the critical evaluation of economic and societal transformations, including the effect of the increasing presence of multinational companies, the role of trade unions, the entry of women in a segmented work force, and so on. In doing this, guidance personnel would have to learn how to work more closely with other colleagues in schools – teachers of personal and social studies, religion, history, English, and so on – and in industry, in order to develop integrated teaching programmes related to the world of work. Such collaborative efforts are currently talked about but hardly ever practised because of the prevailing culture of individuality among the teaching corps, and the strong segmentation between subjects given the rigours of an examination-led education system.

Given the characteristics of the emergent economy outlined earlier, one would expect that careers guidance personnel will, in the future, have to operate in a situation with increased levels of unemployment and the loss of traditional career opportunities and career patterns. In this case, careers education programmes would have to face the challenge of mediating between students and these new realities by encouraging the development of creativity and flexibility in attitude towards jobs and careers, of coping skills to manage lives with less time spent in jobs, of an ability to create satisfying lifestyles with a reduced employment element.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the repercussion that a changing economy could have on the field of career education and guidance in Malta. I have stressed that despite the current affluence of the islands, there are signs that the factors that have characterised their past – namely dependence, peripherality and vulnerability – are bound to continue exercising their influence as Malta heads for the next millennium. But I have also pointed out the policy-makers’ determination to restructure the economy towards more lucrative markets in the technology sector, and to devise strategies which promote a high ability, high wage society. In response to these efforts and policy-decisions, new roles and new organizational bases present themselves as challenges to a career guidance service that has hitherto played a rather minor role in facilitating school-work linkages and transitions.

Notes

1. Malta is made up of a group of small islands, two of which are inhabited. The larger island, Malta, has a population of around 325,000, while Gozo's population is around 25,000. The archipelago covers a surface area of about 316 square kilometres, and lies 93 kilometres to the south of Sicily and 290 kilometres to the north of the African coast. Malta's position in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and its natural harbours have invited a number of colonial powers – the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Normans, the various houses of Spain, the French and finally the British – to take possession of the islands. Malta obtained its political independence from Great Britain in 1964, and was declared a Republic ten years later.
2. About 155,000 Maltese emigrated between 1946 and 1990, and of these 39,000 are estimated to have returned to Malta (Delia, 1981, 1994; Lever-Tracy, 1987). Most Maltese migrants headed for Australia and Canada.
3. Sir Thomas Balogh was a left-wing fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, and a close friend of Dominic Mintoff, then Malta's prime minister. Balogh, who arrived in Malta in 1955, promoted human capital theory locally as he had already done in several African nations and in India as well (cf. Balogh, 1962; Balogh and Seers, 1955; Balogh and Streeten, 1963).

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