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Treadmill of land development

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The same Maltese society which frequently protests and criticizes overdevelopment, is the same Maltese society in which investment in property is widespread. I find this contradiction one of the greatest challenges facing our society today.

open Malta's landscape is visibly impacted by development is so obvious that it has almost bec

destruction, dirt, and shabbiness, in the areas under construction.

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Judging by the number of protests and anger in the media and social media, one would not be blamed for assuming the Maltese public to be hellbent on voting for change. Yet, one election after the other, this has proven not to be the case. With all their differences, both major political parties swear allegiance to an economic model which is highly dependent on the development of land. And both parties represent the vast majority of voters. True, in this year's general election, voting turnout decreased to 85%, but this is still very high, and it would be foolish to assume that such non-voters all had the same motivation for their non-turnout.

The Maltese public is also heavily invested in industries related to the development of land, both directly and indirectly. Many people prefer to invest their money in property than in other sectors, and I believe that Labour's liberalisation of development permits partly explains its electoral successes. For whilst the PN Government extended development boundaries in 2006, the Labour government from 2013 onwards merely permitted everyone to participate in the development frenzy. It is now not only big business names who are involved in such development, but even working class and middle-class people who, for example, build an extra storey or two to rent out, buy property as investment, and so forth. In no way am I judging the Maltese public for making such choices, but I believe that the same economic model, which is subject to so much criticism, is the same model which many of us invest in and vote for. This, while, a substantial amount of people are finding it difficult to cope with inflation in the sector.

open tantly, there is a symbiotic relationship between the state and the land development industry. On one hand, government depends on the development of land for economic growth, and

the seminal environmental sociological concept of 'treadmill of production' by Allan Schnaiberg, which was further developed together with Kenneth Alan Gould and David Nauib Pellow. Our economic model requires more and more growth in the form of development of land. The obvious question one can ask in this regard is, but how can we keep developing so much? Won't there be a lot of empty properties, and eventually an economic crash?

Well, the Labour Government found an answer to this question in the form of massive population increases through foreign workers. Indeed, official statistics show how Malta's population witnessed unprecedented growth in the past decade, now reaching a population of around half a million people, twenty percent of whom are foreigners.

Hence, the symbiotic relationship between State and developers was sustained by the growth of population, and henceforth consumers, within Malta's limited land area. As things stand, despite the protests and criticism of Malta's overdevelopment, there is no prevailing ideological shift towards another type of economy. If we keep this economic model going, we are going to need further population increases, and the maths cannot add up only through higher longevity rates (people living longer lives). To feed the land development complex, Malta is either going to need more immigrants, or else have massive population growth through an increase in births (something which goes contrary to our current fertility rate, which is one of the lowest in Europe).

Failing this, with the same economic model we risk having many empty properties and a corresponding economic crash involving all those who are directly or indirectly dependent on construction, development, real estate and related industries.

I wonder how much more overdevelopment we will manage before we realise that the treadmill of land development is unsustainable. Economic, social and environmental evidence should be warning enough, yet we seem content to keep building, lament about it while continuing our support for the treadmill of land development.

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