

The future we would rather have

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I was recently invited to address a debate on the future of today's youth organized by *Freehour*. I confess that I only realised how influential this medium is, when my teenage daughter uttered a rare sound of approval in reaction to my work. Describing itself as Malta's "definitive Gen Z digital brand" does not appear to be far from the truth. The room at the newly built Campus Hub was packed with what *Freehour* described as the "most objective yet influential change-makers" and no-one was wasting any time in proposing how best to move forward as a nation, many also acknowledging where Malta excels.

Asked what we should *stop* doing in order for young people to have a better future, I posited three dilemmas faced by individuals, enterprises, policy-makers/movers/shakers.

The first is whether to benefit the present or the future. The automatic tendency is to favour quick wins, instant gratification and policies that return immediate visible benefits. Yet favouring the present often comes at the expense of our own future selves. Tonight's wild partying offers a hang-over tomorrow; road-widening gives temporary relief from traffic today, only to encourage more cars tomorrow; cashing in today reduces investment potential tomorrow...

The second is whether to aim for having more or having less. The default tendency is to favour having more - for surely, rationally, "less" is just an inferior sub-set of "more". We therefore strive for more money, consumption, construction, cars, roads, and all manner of material goods - even though the added joy they provide quickly diminishes, and costs us precious time and space. Time is the ultimate scarce resource, a daily allowance of a few hours that once lost are never restituted. Space is the ultimate scarce resource in a country as densely populated as Malta.

The third is our tendency to think of the "me" rather than the "we". Self-interest is not only innate, it is also promoted. A free-for-all comes at the expense of cooperation, togetherness, and a potentially superior resolution of social dilemmas which favour the greater good.

But a shift in focus away from "more", "now" "for me" will not happen automatically and is unlikely to happen sufficiently by the voluntary actions of the committed few. Even these few often find themselves wondering "Why should I, if no-one else bothers?", "What difference can I make?" and "Isn't it too late anyway?"

Moving away from the status quo requires firstly a vision of what a better future could look like. Such a future could be one where people can look for purpose besides pleasure from material goods, where mental and physical health is high, where time is spent not only earning money, but also connecting with people and with nature, being creative, engaging in sport, in voluntary work, in civic life.

Such a future requires measurement and management of these goals. It requires new laws and revision of loopholes in existing laws. It needs stronger institutions and boards staffed to achieve results not reward loyalty. It needs proper and speedy enforcement without fear or favour. It needs a plan for life-long education to impart critical thinking skills among the old and the young. It requires taxes, grants, fiscal instruments and public funds to be leveraged to obtain this kind of future as opposed to a future that sees more of the things we need less of. It requires us to learn from the examples of others worldwide and indeed from other areas (and eras) where Malta has done well.

A future of this nature requires vision, governance, mentorship, leadership. It requires mobilization of a sufficiently large group of influential individuals (in politics, in voluntary groups, in business, in policy, in education, in the media and elsewhere) of all ages to be vigilant, vocal and to vote with their every decision. It needs people to offer their limited time and spending power. For every euro spent, every minute used, and every decision made that emphasizes the status quo takes us further away from the future we would rather have.