



I focus

michael briguglio

Dr Michael Briguglio is a Sociologist and Senior Lecturer at the University of Malta.



Multi-level environmentalism

Some recent issues can help us understand the challenges, opportunities and constraints faced by Malta's environmental movement.

The Hondoq victory, led by the charismatic Paul Buttigieg, was an inspirational journey. During the past twenty years, he had worked with those who supported the cause he championed. His Labour affiliation and local council position did not stop him from working with others with different political and civil society backgrounds. If anything, he managed to unite different voices together in a local campaign that was at once present in the front stage of politics, erstwhile featuring prominently in the media-sphere, but also, at the same time in the backstage of behind-the-scenes lobbying. He knocked on different institutional doors, from national to European, and, through the skills of lawyer Claire Bonello, ensured victory through Malta's Environment Planning Review Tribunal.

On the other side of Malta's political spectrum, Albert Buttigieg has just filled in the 10th district seat vacated following the passing away of the beloved Robert Arrigo. Let us not forget that Arrigo had played an important role in some local victories charac-

terised by broad political and civil society alliances, this time as under the previous PN administration. I am referring to the Quisi-sana controversies of the time. Incidentally, one of the 'shelved' areas for development in question, the Chalet, has just made a comeback in the treadmill of proposed development.

Albert Buttigieg already has his own fair share of environmental activism, and this was stepped up through his role as Mayor of St Julian's in the recent years. One major development project which he was active against – namely DB's in Pembroke – is still on the cards, but, as Hondoq shows us, one need never say never in environmental activism.

Like Paul, Albert Buttigieg is a living example of a politician with strong local roots who works with all those who share common views on a particular issue, and who seeks unity rather than division. They have collaborated with activists from different political parties, red, blue, or green, NGOs such as *Moviment Graffitti*, *Din l-Art Helwa*, and *Flimkien Chall-Ambjent Ahjar*, as well as other voices from civil society and local communities. Expert advice was

sought when needed, thus broadening the repertoire of environmental activism.

In my reading, environmental movements have better chances of success when broad coalitions are formed, involving local, party-political, and civil society actors. Some other single-issue examples include the recent victory against the Marsaskala yacht marina proposal, the contentious American University proposals, and the *Front Kontra l-Golf Course* back in 2004.

Through his new role, Albert Buttigieg can help us understand the possible impacts of an environmentalist parliamentarian with a major political party. Time will tell, and I wish him all the best.

Thus, there are diverse levels of activism within the environmental movement. At the frontlines, one finds environmental protest as well as voluntary work to protect the environment. Within the institutions, one finds methods such as legal action and education. Behind the scenes, one finds political constituency concerns, expert advice and material interests. Needless to say, the adversaries of the environmental

movement also have their own ways and means to lobby.

Let us also keep in mind the European and global levels of environmentalism. As an EU member-state, Malta shares sovereignty of various environmental policies, thus enhancing the possibilities of the environmental movement in certain areas. This does not affect each area equally. Localised development, for example, is mostly a matter of local and national politics. National politics also intersects strongly with some areas covered by EU directives – as NGOs such as Birdlife, Nature Trust, and Friends of the Earth know very well.

Notwithstanding the plural impacts of the environmental movement, it is also important to keep in mind that there are various environmental challenges at a macro-level, such as Malta's economic model, which is highly dependent on a treadmill of development. If we aspire for a more sustainable society, perhaps the masses – those who elect parties in power – need to be part of the road ahead. Environmentalism thus becomes at once political, social, cultural, and economic.