

'EU guidelines not enough for Malta's mental well-being'

One of the most common things that make Maltese people unhappy is traffic

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Electric cars may not solve Malta's traffic problems. File photo: Chris Sant Fournier

The mental well-being of Maltese residents may require a push beyond that of EU regulations, economist Marie Briguglio argued.

Speaking at a conference on the links between the environment and the mental health of people, Briguglio explained that many environmental solutions that can help other EU member states may not be the local answer.

As the European Union pushes electric cars high up its agenda, Briguglio envisioned a future Malta with only electric cars, clearing the air as car exhausts become a thing of the past.

However, as she painted the picture, Briguglio's fantasy also included honking horns and frustrated drivers, still stuck in traffic jams despite the change from engine to motor.

According to a survey conducted by Briguglio, one of the most common things that make Maltese people unhappy is traffic.

While vehicle pollution is a problem that must be tackled, electric vehicles will not be the finish line as commuters will still be stuck in clogged roads during their drive to work, she continued.

"We have to think beyond the European Union," she said.

While the idea of electric cars may be well-intentioned, there may be unforeseen side effects that emerge from such choices.

For example, Briguglio spoke about the BCRS scheme which, on paper, has all the hallmarks of a successful scheme, yet there are still issues that need to be worked out.

“What about those who don't have a car, or don't have space for their plastic bottles,” she asked the room, as storing and transporting the large amounts of plastic can be a hindrance for many in need of the scheme's rebates.

Those with the least resources should be the ones benefitting the most from such schemes, not find it the hardest to work within new guidelines or schemes, she said.

The way forward should see unique environmental impacts integrated within institutional decisions, Briguglio said.

For example, Malta's CO2 levels have gone down over the past few years, Briguglio said, yet the amount of cars on the road keeps increasing.

The reason behind the phenomenon is the interconnector, as Italy is producing more of Malta's power and is therefore also footing the environmental bill, she said.

How happy is Malta?

“We are not doing badly... by all metrics, we are doing reasonably well,” Briguglio said on the mental well-being of Maltese residents.

According to the Human Development Index, which measures a country's social and economic development, Malta is ranked 40 in the world but only 34 in relation to other EU

member states.

Meanwhile, Malta's index on the World Happiness Report has slightly decreased every year since 2019 (from 6.73 to 6.3). Finland is currently the world's happiest country with an index of 7.82.

"There is something wrong when it comes to how we are feeling," Briguglio said.

While these statistics cover the nation, Briguglio emphasised that the reality is far more nuanced.

As part of a survey, Briguglio asked pedestrians what makes them unhappy. The answers ranged from noise complaints to animal droppings to traffic jams, which many of the indexes do not cover in their evaluations.

"Life evaluations are also always lower for those who live in a poor environmental quality," she continued, as anxiety levels were seen to be much higher in those living in neighbourhoods with little access to greenery or consistent sunlight.

