



# Dialogues of Sustainable Urbanisation

Social Science Research and Transitions to Urban Contexts

Edited by  
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DIALOGUES OF SUSTAINABLE URBANISATION:  
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH AND  
TRANSITIONS TO URBAN CONTEXTS

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## CHAPTER 48.

# MALTA'S EU ACCESSION, ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND ENGO ACTIVISM

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Environmental activism in Maltese civil society was already in place prior to Malta's EU accession in 2004.

During the 1960s, Din l-Art Helwa, Malta Ornithological Society (which eventually became Birdlife Malta), and Society for the Study and Conservation of Nature (which eventually became Nature Trust) were established. They mainly emphasised issues related to conservationism and development of land. During the 1980s Żgħażaġh għall-Ambjent (which eventually became Moviment għall-Ambjent – Friends of the Earth Malta) joined the fray, introducing the discourse of sustainable development in Maltese environmental politics.

In 1989, the Malta's Green Party, Alternattiva Demokratika, was born. This party, which was briefly preceded by the Democratic Party (PDM), helped ensure that the environment became a major political issue in Malta. Its presence in a small number of local councils has been another achievement.

During the 1990s, collaboration and cooperation amongst ENGOs increased. Environmental coalitions were formed among the increasingly diversified environmental movement, which, amongst other NGOs, now also included the radical and socially-oriented NGO Moviment Graffiti. Examples of such alliances included the Front against the Hilton redevelopment project in St Julians and the Front Against the Golf Course, the latter comprising a broad coalition made up of diverse environmental, social, cultural, religious and political organisations. The proposed golf course development was refused by MEPA in 2004, but this victory was not connected to Malta's EU accession.

This historic environmental victory was similar to others which were not related to EU accession. These included alliances against a proposed leisure complex in Munxar in the mid-1990s; against the proposed Siggiewi cement plant and against a proposed landfill near Mnajdra temple. Another proposed development – that of an airstrip in Gozo – has been disappearing and resurfacing from one legislature to another.

When Malta joined the EU in 2004, the country introduced legislation related to the environment, in areas which previously had no regulations. This generally led to environmental improvements

and structural upgrading, though there were some notable exceptions, such as Malta's shift to plastic soft-drink bottles.

Upon Malta's EU accession, new ENGOs, such as Flimkien għall-Ambjent Ahjar (FAA) and Ramblers' Association emerged. EU membership was discursively constructed as being beneficial to Malta's environment. New lobbying opportunities were created for ENGOs. In the first years following Malta's EU accession, ENGOs were mainly active in issues such as development of land and hunting and trapping.

They were rather successful in relation to sensitizing and procedural impacts. These relate to processes such as raising public awareness and in being consulted by State authorities, though the latter leaves much to be desired. As regards substantive impacts, ENGOs were generally not successful in environmental issues in which they were active. For example, as regards development projects, Malta's EU accession was not deemed as a sufficient source of ENGO empowerment. Indeed, in most instances – for example in the environmentalist struggle against the so called 'rationalization' process of land development – the discourse of economic growth and neo-liberal ideology prevailed. There were specific exceptions to this however – such as the environmentalist victory over the development of a carpark and shopping centre beneath a popular public garden in Sliema – but this had more to do with local and national political considerations. An area where ENGOs achieved substantive impacts was the climate change, where Malta adopted binding EU targets, which, were subsequently not adhered to.

As regards hunting and trapping, environmentalists pressed for Malta's conformity to the EU birds' directive. Many believed that EU legislation would effectively result in an end of hunting during the Spring season. What actually happened was that ENGOs like Birdlife Malta experienced institutionalisation and had considerable access to European institutions, but hunting in Spring remained largely in place. The ambivalent decision of the European Court of Justice on the Maltese case resulted in plural interpretations. This resulted in further antagonism from the environmental movement, which has collected enough signatures for an abrogative referendum on hunting. The historic referendum took place on 11 April 2015, but the 'Yes' camp, which supports hunting of Birds in Spring, emerged victorious by a razor-thin 50.4% majority.

Hence, as far as the case of Birdlife shows, institutionalisation of ENGOs does not always render an organisation docile to the State. Yet the hunting issue shows that even Europeanized issues are very much subjected to national political antagonisms. In short, though empowerment of ENGOs was generally enhanced through EU accession, this was an uneven process.

In the meantime, the environmental movement kept up its activism, and a newly-established citizens' movement, 'Front Harsien ODZ' (Front for the protection of outside development zones) organised Malta's biggest ever environmental protest in June 2015, with over 3,000 participants and widespread support from Maltese civil society. The protest was directed against a proposal for development at Zonqor (an outside development zone), and was held a few months after the historic hunting referendum.

## Author Biography



Dr Michael Briguglio lectures in Sociology at the University of Malta. His main research interests are social movements, environment, politics, social policy and culture. He is a Green Local Councillor in Sliema and has been active in various movement organisations since the mid-1990s. He also chaired Malta's Green Party, Alternattiva Demokratika between 2009 and 2013.

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