

Beyond funding

by John Ebejer

OVER THESE past few weeks, there has been debate on the need to improve our tourism product. The discussion was triggered by a proposal made by Frank Salt (as chairman of the Product Planning and Development Directorate of the Malta Tourism Authority) for Government to invest some Lm30 million in tourism areas.

This call was quickly followed by MHTA president Winston Zahra's claim that unless there is such investment tourism in Malta would decline.

Clearly, funding of projects to upgrade tourist areas is an important issue and Mr Salt and Mr Zahra were right to highlight the need for more investment in the tourism product.

Beyond funding, however, there are problems related to governance. In other words, public authorities are sometimes unable to implement projects or initiatives because of various constraints, some of which they may not have control over.

Combating shabbiness

Despite various efforts, problems in tourist areas persist. It seems that local councils handling tourist areas have been less successful in resolving problems than councils of other areas.

The reason may be that the local council gives greater priority to the residential parts of the locality. Alternatively, it may be that there are greater difficulties involved because of a higher concentration of commercial activities.

One way forward could be the appointment of town centre managers. Their role would be to identify what needs to be done to improve the town centre and work with the residents and the business community to resolve problems. If councils team up, one full-time manager could handle three of four localities.

One particular problem which we have not come to grips with is litter. The introduction of plainclothes wardens has been suggested. These are more likely to be effective since people will think twice before littering the street because anyone watching them could be a warden.

There may be some technical problems with the introduction of plainclothes wardens (particularly relating to the possibility of abuse). I am sure, however, that with some effort from all involved, these technicalities could be resolved.

Other sources of shabbiness are empty properties, including vacant buildings and undeveloped plots. Planning legislation provides for enforcement action to be taken on properties that are unsightly or generally cause a nuisance.

As far as I know, no such en-

forcement has ever been issued by MEPA. If such an instrument has not been successful, we need to identify alternative legal instruments that require owners to maintain properties so that they do not cause nuisance. Political will and commitment is required to find the means to combat the perennial shabbiness caused by littering and vacant properties.

Resistance to development proposals

I remember that there was a proposal to pedestrianise Tower Road, Sliema, from the Ferries to Joinwell, some years back. The proposal met with stiff opposition and was eventually shelved.

Had it been implemented, we would now have a thriving shopping street full of people and tourists, similar to Republic Street in Valletta. Instead, we have, among others, some poor mother being engulfed in clouds of diesel exhaust while struggling uphill with a pushchair along a potholed, narrow pavement.

City Gate is one area crying out for action. As a Maltese, it hurts my pride to see a third world environment at the entrance to Malta's capital.

There is a need for the various taxis, *karozzini* and stalls to be relocated to nearby sites where they are less obtrusive. Having said that, I can understand the difficulties that any public authority will face to carry out such a task.

Any measure which could affect a person's livelihood will meet with strong resistance. This is where political will and commitment comes in. For any action to be taken on City Gate, a political decision needs to be taken at the highest government level.

Public sector efficiency

Ministries have a crucial role in developing strategy and giving a sense of direction to the departments and agencies falling under their responsibility. This role could be seriously undermined if ministry staff spend significant time and effort doing favours for individual voters.

Unfortunately, parts of the electorate perceive their elected representative as the person to turn to when they need some favour. Politicians who give overwhelming importance to dishing out favours are unlikely to make good Cabinet ministers.

Implementation of projects and initiatives depends on the level of efficiency of government departments and agencies. Over the years, the situation has improved but more needs to be done. Greater efforts have to be made to ensure that people give a full day's work.

Politicians should refrain from intervening in purely administrative matters, which are such as appointments, promotions and disciplinary actions.

Public sector management should be allowed to take the best possible decisions in the interest of the organisation and of the services it provides to the public.

On the other hand, there may be situations where a lack of management skills hinders progress. Some managers are unable to get themselves and their staff properly organised.

There may be a reluctance to delegate duties and responsibilities to junior staff. New ideas and innovative solutions are blocked. Some senior management personnel are more interested in protecting their area of control than pro-actively bringing about improvements.

Having the wrong people in the wrong posts can effectively block initiatives. Strong action from senior management is required to 'unblock' situations conducive to procrastination and delays. There may be instances where the relevant ministry would have to intervene.

Managing facilities

Another difficulty is unclear responsibilities. If we take the historic gardens in and around Valletta and Floriana, for example, a number of agencies have a claim to responsibility.

These include the local council, the VRP, the Agricultural Department and the Lands Department (the latter as the legal owner of all Government property).

If I want to organise an activity in one of these gardens, whom do I go to? Who should be held responsible for the state of neglect of some of these gardens?

There should be a single agency responsible for all matters relating to each garden, be it management, upkeep, leasing for functions, opening hours, refuse collection, cleanliness, security, enforcement, etc. (which agency this should be is beyond the scope of this discussion).

The agency should allocate adequate resources and personnel to ensure that the gardens are properly kept and managed. If anything goes wrong, it is that agency that should be held accountable. The same argument applies to other facilities, such as beaches.

There is the perception that once a facility is provided, it will "run itself". This misconception is at the heart of many of the problems that facilities such as gardens, promenades and beaches face.

The cost of managing facilities can be quite significant. A beach, for example, requires several thousand liri each year if it is to be maintained to the required standards.

The issue of management should be seen in conjunction with generating funds. It is standard practice for any income generated by a government department to go to central government coffers.

With the setting up of Heritage Malta, one hopes that the agency will be able to retain and reinvest the funds it generates from sale of tickets and other sources.

This is crucial since it provides an incentive to management to generate increased visitors and provide revenue by generating uses such as souvenir shops and cafeterias.

Similar principles could be applied to heritage gardens and beaches, although in the latter case the current leases of beach establishments may be a constraint in generating additional revenue.

To conclude, people from the private sector often cannot comprehend how something that may seem fairly simple and straightforward does not get done. The reason, or reasons, may be found in any of the observations made above.

Although funding is important, other matters too need to be addressed. Ministries need to provide a stronger sense of direction to the executive.

There needs to be greater focus and more resources dedicated to management of facilities. We need to identify new solutions to old problems.

Finally, on a positive note, there have been innumerable public sector projects which have brought about improvements to our tourism product over the years.

It may be that we were in the middle of a heatwave, or it could just be our Mediterranean temperament, but I felt the discussion on the tourism product was excessively negative. Yes, there is immense potential that could be tapped with increased investment. On the whole, however, in spite of the problems, the vast majority of tourists are satisfied with their holiday.

The writer has worked and/or dealt with a number of ministries, government departments and agencies over the past 11 years. The article is based on his observations and those of friends and colleagues. Comments on the public sector are generic in nature and do not refer to any specific department or agency.