

## The Environment, beyond perception

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A recent article on this newspaper reported the results of a representative (InsightPolls) survey as to what the Maltese consider to be the major issues facing Malta right now. What emerged should come as no surprise.

For many Maltese people, pollution is the main issue facing Malta, right after immigration. 25% of adults in Malta mentioned "the environment" as the key issue that Malta faces today (chiefly air quality and building in the countryside) and a further 20% mentioned traffic (itself an environmental issue) is Malta's biggest problem. By comparison, economic issues trail far behind among a plethora of other concerns: only 3% think the economy is the main issue. Only 2% worry about unemployment as their main concern.

I say that this should come as no surprise for two reasons. The first is that these reported concerns faithfully echo those reported by the Maltese in a recent Eurobarometer study dedicated to the environment across the EU. In this study, the majority of the Maltese stated they considered the environment in Malta to be worse than the European average, and worsening over time. They reported traffic jams, pollution and lack of green spaces as their main worries. The Maltese were twice as likely as the average European to want "stronger enforcement of existing environmental legislation". The staggering turnout at the (Front Harsien ODZ) environmental protest held a few weeks ago bears further testimony to this concern.

The second is that these worries are, actually, well-rooted in the reality of pollution in Malta. Our environmental statistics are, in many aspects, not only of concern, but quite frankly, jaw-dropping.

exposing more people to pollution and generating more traffic. Data from the Ministry of Health also reveals considerable problems with respiratory and lung disease in Malta.

Vacant property in Malta stands at a staggering one-third of our built fabric. And, as we continue to build and hoard property, limestone resources hit (literally) rock bottom, open spaces disappear and we endure the polluting consequences of a hyper-active construction sector. The European Environmental Agency also recently flagged Malta as one of the noisiest places to live in Europe - with health risks ranging from sleepless nights to heart disease. Needless to say, we still abstract too much ground water (which also continues to be contaminated with nitrates) and our climatic emissions continue to be among the fastest growing per capita in the EU.

There is a clear call by the (not so silent) majority for better environmental and planning governance, a call that is underpinned not only by statistics but also by the real life consequences that ordinary people are facing day-to-day. Things could get better if this call for action is heeded through stronger, integrated and better enforced environmental regulation with the government leading by example. But they can also get worse, irreversibly so, if development is unshackled from environmental constraints. The public should be given the opportunity to understand the environmental implications of the new planning bill. Otherwise, there is no choice but to simply wait and experience the effects - first hand - in a few years' time.