

Malta's tragedy of the commons



Improved land reclamation - Dumped construction debris spills onto the beach and into the sea at St Thomas Bay.

When Garrett Hardin wrote his influential article 'Tragedy of the commons' in 1968, he could not have realised how relevant his theory would be for Malta.

The dilemma he described essentially relates to the depletion of a shared, limited resource (land in the Maltese case) by many individuals each pursuing their own interest even though it is in no one's interest for the resource to be depleted.

Such a tragedy is continuously occurring locally with the squatting over new land parcels, and by owners of land who are convinced they have the right to develop or modify it, irrespective of guiding planning legislation or its ecological sensitivity.

St Thomas Bay is a typical example of such a mindset. The fact that most of the coast along the bay is privately-owned has fuelled indiscriminate squatting and despicable ribbon development over the years, without the slightest hint of a planning application being submitted.

As if the existing sprawl of boathouses and caravans was not enough, someone has decided to deposit tonnes of construction debris on previously uncommitted land at the very edge of the bay verging on the picturesque Munxar promontory.

And the noble reason behind the gesture? The creation of an improvised porch for a caravan and ancillary equipment, such as a barbecue. So great is the arrogance of the individual/s in question that the equipment is left out in the open unsupervised during the day, indicating blind faith in impunity from the law.

To add insult to injury, truckloads of debris are systematically dumped during the night along the coastline in an improvised land reclamation scheme aimed simply at widening the existing coastal stretch for further caravans. Such ruthless dumping is resulting in boulders and quarried material spilling into the sea, reducing the water quality and destroying coastal habitats.

Although those responsible will not care, St Thomas Bay used to be one of the last haunts for the Maltese topshell (*Gibbula nivosa*), while the former fields were one of the last haunts for a sub-endemic cricket (*Myrmecophilus baronii*). So much for the UN's International Year for Biodiversity.

The Malta Environment and Planning Authority (Mepa) has duly slapped the site with an enforcement notice, and one hopes the site will be restored to its former state, though this is a tall order indeed given the tonnes of construction debris dumped on site.

Developers still call the shots

The outcome of a recent meeting between the developers' section of the Chamber for Small and Medium Enterprises - GRTU and the Prime Minister over the GRTU's concerns over slowing economic activity in the construction sector confirms my misgivings at seeing the GRTU so massively represented at the national conference on Mepa reform last year.

The request for a meeting with the Prime Minister is legitimate you might argue, until one skims through the proposals forwarded by the developers during the meeting. For instance,

certain aspects of the Mepa reform don't exactly tickle the developers' fancy.

For example, the developers deem it unacceptable to have to send site notices to all neighbours in the vicinity, and want to cut down on the submission of frivolous objections by obliging objectors to deposit a bank guarantee or a bond.

While one can understand that developers are keen to develop their own patch, it is utterly inconceivable that anyone should attempt to curb the right of third parties to object to a development close by.

Just picture the scene as proposed by the GRTU: an elderly woman, who just makes ends meet through her measly pension, seeking to object to a massive development close by which will disrupt her lifestyle for months on end, is daunted by the need to deposit a hefty bank guarantee. Is she expected to take out bank loan just to exercise her sacrosanct right to submit objection?

So now will only those with financial muscle be entitled to submit an objection? No money, no voice in planning and development?

The Mepa reform is laudably bolstering the site notice system by requiring that neighbours be better informed of a proposed development in their locality by entrenching the need to alert all neighbours actively, rather than passively, through a site notice, which was giving rise to frequent abuses. The developers' proposal to do away with this commendable proposal is completely out of sync with what civil society has long been clamouring for.

Environment awards for business

The European Business Awards for the Environment - awarded by the European Commission every two years - reward eco-innovative companies from the EU and candidate countries that have made an outstanding contribution to sustainable development. Competition within the four categories - process, management, product and international cooperation - was cut-throat, involving 141 applicants.

The winners in the four respective categories were Zenergy Power GmbH from Germany for their energy efficiency; the UK's Findus Group for introducing an environmental fisheries management system which entrenches sustainability policies into its seafood business; Energy ICT from Belgium, for developing a system to cut down on energy use in the retail business, and Spain's Grupo Ferrovial for helping to provide safe drinking water to the people of the Serengeti, Tanzania.

Locally, the Malta Federation of Industry, which is now incorporated in the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry, had set up an environmental committee in 1995 led by Godwin Micallef. Together with the University's Cleaner Technology Centre, the committee aims to foster greater environmental responsibility in local industry.