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Burning bridges, like Qatar - Alan Deidun

We tend to downplay the importance of maintaining sovereignty over our food supply. Developing even more of our arable land will mean a greater reliance on imports in future.

The Gulf State of Qatar probably has one of the highest trade deficits when it comes to food supplies. Agricultural land there is virtually a mirage due to the harsh environmental conditions in one of the most arid countries on the planet. The 2.5 million strong population is propped up by over one billion dollars' worth of food imports (2015 data) from 130 different countries.

No wonder Qatar has embarked on a number of esoteric solutions, such as the purchase of massive plots of agricultural land in countries like Sudan and Australia. In a recent political spat, its neighbours resorted to stymieing the country's continuous stream of food imports as a means of triggering civil unrest (through the resulting food shortages and food price hikes) in an effort to induce a change in its administration. This paved the way for food airlifts from Turkey and Iran.

If you believe that Malta is far detached from this brinksmanship scenario and that our food supplies are secure and beyond any faltering, think again. According to the World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) database for 2015, globally, Malta ranked 41st in terms of the volume of food imports.

That figure might not sound particularly impressive, even though Malta still trumps arid countries like Morocco and Tunisia, until one makes a different consideration. In terms of the share of the total imports that food comprises, Malta is close to getting a silver spoon. According to the same database, food importation comprised roughly 66 per cent of the total value of Malta's total imports, globally ranking the country fourth and only trailing island States like Fiji, and Gulf States like Qatar.

Malta is skating on thin ice, with a constant flow of food streaming in from countries like Italy and Spain. According to the NSO, last year the cost of food imports totalled a staggering €557 million, 10 per cent higher than in 2013 and more than double the total value of Malta's food exports.

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In 2005, the percentage of agricultural land on the islands (47.8 per cent) was comparable to the EU average (46.7 per cent). This sobering scenario does not seem to cause us much angst, such that we have been steadily hacking away at Malta's agricultural land, which has been on the decline since Independence. In 1955 it was 65.5 per cent. The local presence of forests and other natural areas is considerably less than the EU average as a result of the sprawling built-up areas.

The percentage of Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) has officially risen slightly in recent years, probably due to the reclamation for agricultural purposes of 'wasteland' (art mogħxa) and through the deposition of soil in areas characterised by natural vegetation. The issue of fragmentation of agricultural holdings � a key concern as their small size does not allow the sustenance of their owners � has been partly addressed in recent years with a rise in the average size to nearly one hectare.

According to Eurostat, 46 per cent of Malta’s fields are assigned to fodder crops, which, traditionally, have never acted as a reliable buffer against development, with many describing such land as being of ‘low agricultural value’. Such a mindset is a contradiction in itself given that, despite Malta’s self-sufficiency in the production of pork, poultry, eggs and rabbit meat, this is inherently reliant on importation of feed. The 200 or so local operators involved in bread-making are also heavily dependent on imports.

The National Agricultural Policy for 2016-2025, which is still at consultation stage, commendably entrenches the need to prevent the further loss of farmland to development. The need to retain national sovereignty over strategic assets is currently high on the country’s agenda.

One way of retaining at least a modicum of sovereignty over the supply and cost of food is to prevent the further encroachment of development and the road network footprint on arable land. When planning for new roads and the widening of existing roads, Transport Malta should consider ways to mitigate the further uptake of arable land. The planned roadworks at Attard, which will encroach on hectares of arable land, are a case in point. After all, what could be more strategic as a national asset than food itself?

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