

The Government's golden opportunity



On May 2, the Mepa board will decide on the appeal filed by the applicants regarding the Hondoq ir-Rummien project.

If the land reclamation proposal is to be shelved, the battle to win hearts and minds must revolve around two main points. Firstly, the numerous public myths surrounding the issue must be debunked and, secondly, viable alternatives to dispose of the burgeoning quantity of construction debris must be found.

Public myths concerning land reclamation include the following:

Myth 1: Malta is endowed with an inexhaustible expanse of sea which is there for our taking.

I would be the first to applaud the Government for not keeping its electoral pledge to go for land reclamation

The sea around Malta and Gozo is relatively deep. The only shallow water is along Malta's eastern seaboard, and many activities compete for these 'shallows', including bunkering, diving wrecks, aquaculture, shipping, an Armed Forces shooting range, a site earmarked for the offshore wind farm, and what not.

The dearth of 'shallows' in the Maltese marine area is epitomised by the painstaking search for a congenial site for the proposed offshore wind farm, which had to be sited on a reef (Sikka l-Bajda), which, itself, is of conservation importance.

Myth 2: Since land reclamation takes place all around the globe, with the Netherlands, Hong Kong and the Gulf states being prime examples, why not Malta?

The above-mentioned states are 'blessed' with vast expanses of shallow, sandy seabed, of which there are few in Malta. It is no wonder that while offshore wind farms are increasingly being set up in the relatively shallow North Sea and the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean Sea is struggling to get off the blocks in this regard.

Myth 3: Since Malta's land area is very limited, land reclamation could ease the pressure to build in Outside Development Zone areas.

Malta's development zones (not ODZ areas) can satisfy our hunger for new construction for years to come, as confirmed by a Malta Environment and Planning Authority study conducted in 2005. The figure of 75,000 vacant buildings springs to mind, like a cold blanket on anyone advocating further construction.

In addition, the exorbitant cost of land reclamation will probably need to be compensated for by the sale of real estate, rather than the building of residences for the ordinary public.

Myth 4: State-of-the-art engineering and environmental monitoring nowadays can guarantee a seamless land reclamation process where environmental impacts are minimised.

I do not share such enthusiasm, since our experience with marine projects of a much smaller scale such as the construction of the Ċirkewwa terminal, the Portomaso yacht marina, the Midi project, and so on, teaches us otherwise; permit conditions, such as the deployment of silt curtains were not being adhered to, and plumes of murky water persisting for weeks around the development sites.

There is also the issue of connectivity – on land, environmental impacts are relatively contained to the footprint of the development itself, except for air-borne dust, noise, and so forth, but in the sea, currents will disperse over large distances any impacts in the water column, such as turbidity.

For instance, previous remote sensing studies by satellite concluded that the discharge of raw sewage at the previous Wied Għammieq site was extending for kilometres to the southeast, from Xagħra down to Marsascalea, Marsaxlokk and beyond.

Last week, The Times prominently reported on its front page the plume of murky water generated by 'minor' works on a jetty in Qawra, immortalised through an aerial photograph – just imagine what dumping millions of tons of debris and rubble in the sea would generate!

But my biggest gripe with the land reclamation issue is the flawed process adopted by Government so far. Corners in the planning process are being cut, which will only benefit those private ventures that have hoarded rubble as if it was the new gold.

A local property consortium, including a construction magnate who is certainly not renowned for his environmental credentials, is currently considering proposing extending the shoreline near the Jerma Palace Hotel, Marsascalea, for real estate development, essentially wiping off a prime bathing site off the map.

Contrast this with the proposed offshore wind farm at Sikka il-Bajda. In this case, a comprehensive Environment Impact Assessment (EIA), and even an Appropriate Assessment (AA) study were commissioned; it took years to complete and ran into the thousands of pages, to ensure that the project would be in the national interest (and help Malta reach its 2020 renewables targets).

The new Government has a golden opportunity. Once it actually reads the 2007 Scott Wilson report, and once the planning process is completed (not circumvented) by going through a fully-fledged EIA and AA, it can give due importance to environmental considerations and back-pedal on its initial plans for land reclamation, in the same way that previous governments renounced, for example, on their pledge for a golf course at Xagħra l-Hamra.

I would be the first to applaud the Government for not keeping its electoral pledge to go for land reclamation. In so doing, the Government would be well and truly putting the (marine) environment high up on its priorities list.

Unravelling the planning process

There's no point in repeating the obvious but it seems one can never insist enough on the truth. Many correspondents have written about the current glut of unsold properties on the market.

Others have highlighted the fact that our banking system is overly dependent on loans linked to the purchase of property – in fact, a recent European Commission report indicates that 52 per cent of all bank loans in Malta, particularly those given by domestic banks, are tied to mortgages and property development.

The construction industry's contribution to Malta's GDP has been slowly but surely waning, despite attempts by the development lobby to propagate the perception that the industry is a central pillar of the Maltese economy.

Watering down the planning process, which has been refined over decades to achieve the framework in place today, by fast-tracking 'planning applications which adhere to local plans and planning policies' is paving the way for more development whose real impacts cannot be assessed until the die has been cast (in other words, when the development is in place).

By doing away with competent case officers and decision boards and scrutiny in general, the system is being made susceptible to abuse. Who will be responsible for deciding whether an application fully conforms with all planning policies and to the local plans? Will such decisions be unequivocal or might they lead to endless redress procedures?

The appointment of architect Robert Musumeci casts yet another shadow on the development planning system, which might undo in one fell swoop the appointment of a balanced Mepa board a few weeks ago. Musumeci is certainly very proficient and conversant with Mepa dynamics but, through his private practice, he represents the interests of clients on numerous ODZ applications.

Engaging Musumeci to advise the Parliamentary Secretary Michael Farrugia on issues such as the revision of the local plans, which might envisage an extension of development zones, could open a can of worms. Let's hope this remains just speculation.

D-day for Hondoq ir-Rummien

On May 2, Mepa's Appeals Tribunal is set to decide on whether to accept the revamped Hondoq ir-Rummien proposals, despite a new EIA not having been commissioned.

The developers say the project would not be viable without the proposed yacht marina, in a coastal area with some of the most pristine water quality in Malta. The voices of dissent against the project have stacked up in recent years; these include Mepa's Environment Protection Directorate, Mepa's Natural Heritage Panel, Transport Malta, Nature Trust (Malta) and the Church Environmental Commission.

Let us hope that common sense prevails at Hondoq ir-Rummien and that the site is not one of the 'major projects for Gozo' promised by the Labour Party before the general election.

www.alandeidun.eu