

Reports galore



The last few months of 2006 witnessed a flurry of reports, all of which clamoured for attention. Here are a few snippets from two reports.

The report Land accounts for Europe 1990-2000 (EEA Report 11/2006) analysed the ebb and flow of various land usages over the 10 years in review and conjured up some interesting statistics. The swathe occupied by 'Artificial Lands' (standing for developed areas) stood at 170,572 km² in 2000, a net increase of 5.4% over the 1990 figure and comprising 4.7% of the total surface area of the 24 European countries under scrutiny in the report.

The report states that the newly developed areas sprouted mostly out of arable land and permanent crops (47% - 1,942 km²) and then out of pastures and mosaics (45% - 1,867 km²). The chief drivers of new urban development were (ranked according to importance): land uptake by housing, services and recreation (ca. 500,000 ha.), land uptake by commercial and industrial sites (ca. 300,000 ha.), land uptake by mines, quarries and waste dumpsites (ca. 150,000 ha.) and land uptake by transport networks and infrastructures (ca. 30,000 ha). Forests still occupy 1,036,079 km² (or ca. 29%) of the European surface area.

The statistics on a regional basis are more sobering, however. Focusing only on the Mediterranean region, for example, artificial areas increased by a staggering 15.9% (with a net increase of over 3,000 km²), while arable land, open spaces and bare soil and wetlands decreased by 0.3%, 2.0% and 1.9%, respectively. A small palliative to all this is the slight increase in the area blanketed by forests (0.5%).

EEA chose to give a second more appealing moniker to the otherwise sullenly named report Urban Sprawl in Europe: the ignored challenge. It is difficult for us Maltese to ignore such a challenge since we effectively inhabit one large urban conurbation, with a few open spaces intermittently peppering the landscape.

The full report can be downloaded at http://reports.eea.europa.eu/eea_report_2006_10

BICC Annual Report

Leafing through the report, my eyes caught the following:

"The percentage contribution to the GDP of the mining and quarrying sector hovered between 0.21% and 0.31%, that of the construction sector hovered between 3.49% and 4.18%, and that of the real estate, renting and ancillary business activities hovered between 10.04% and 12.23%."

Considering that the ca. 100 active quarries effectively use up almost 1% of the country's land resources (SoE report, 2002), besides the footprint of the disused quarries, the economic contribution of the mining and quarrying sector is a desultory one.

The report states that the construction sector has seen a growth rate annually, while the real estate sector, after a decline in 2003, has now recovered to an all-time high. The three sectors combined constituted 12-15% of the total labour force, although one or two sectors witnessed a decline in employment levels from 2002. Prices for flats, maisonettes and terraced houses increased in 2005 (over 2004 prices) by 20.3%, 15.3% and 9.3%, respectively.

A section within the report which raised my eyebrows was titled "Aspects of MEPA Modus Operandi Meriting Review" (Section 2.2). I have mixed feelings about the content of this section:

On the pro side: Composition of boards should also include competent persons who are not architects by profession but who have a good understanding of the construction and property industry; regular audits should be undertaken and published to provide clear and concise information about the consistency of decision-making at all levels; MEPA should be focused on sustainable development; the chief executive should provide top quality management and full accountability of the entire decision-making process at all levels.

I am also four-square with the recommendation that the Planning and Development and the Environment Protection Directorates of MEPA should no longer be espoused. However, my hunch is that the justification in the report for this recommendation is different from mine (which is to avoid the EPD being subjugated by the former directorate).

As to the claim that applications are invalidated on the basis of minor omissions or errors which could be easily corrected by contacting the architect, the same holds for objections which are invalidated on frivolous grounds, such that they did not respect time deadlines, despite the objection time window not always being adhered to.

On the con side: MEPA should apply policy guidelines with flexibility, especially in UCAs, to allow for old buildings on large sites to be redeveloped into major development opportunities (there is a fine thread indeed between flexibility and the introduction of loopholes and precedents); that the degree by which development is slowed down by inappropriate decisions should be a matter of major concern.

This statement jars with the statistics quoted later in the report, which show a skyrocketing in the number of approved dwelling units in 2005, in which a total of 9,081 units were approved, with a growth of 2,374 extra units over the previous year, which is equivalent to almost double the growth in 2003 and 2004 combined (579 and 647 respectively, a total of 1,226 units!)

This also jars with statistics issued by MEPA (Our Achievements... 2005) which show that decisions increased by 3%, approvals by 11% and refusals decreased by a staggering 26%. If this is not red carpet treatment for developers... and they still manage to complain! Forgotten on some shelf somewhere are the NCSD (National Commission for Sustainable Development) and SPR (Structure Plan Review) reports, which estimate that an average of 1,700 new dwelling units per year are needed till 2020. A significant discrepancy from the 9,081 dwelling units approved in 2005!

In a recent interview MEPA chairman Andrew Calleja was quoted as exhorting: "What do you expect us to do? Stop development?" In view of the above, a resounding "Yes" when it comes to ODZ development.

As a silver lining, the number of approved units gained from conversions or redevelopments as a percentage of the total approved units rose from 17% in 2001 to 46% in 2005.

To its credit, the report also has a section for environmental considerations, under which the environmental impact of the construction industry and its ancillary sectors are gauged in terms of land use, solid waste generation and disposal, water production, wastewater generated and power generation, whereby it transpires that the continuous urban fabric takes up 22.2% of the islands, that agricultural land has decreased by 27% over the 1970-2005 period, and that mining and quarrying are responsible for 75% of the waste stream. The report also includes a section on energy efficiency measures in new buildings.

The full report can be downloaded at www.bicc.gov.mt/

Unhealthy conflict of interest

Accusations levelled at MEPA and our top political brass that they are hobnobbing with development tycoons have been vehemently rebutted by the concerned parties, sometimes to the tune of lengthy libel suits.

But in view of recently published development applications, it seems that these parties are soliciting the public to ask dreaded questions - is it healthy for the deputy chairman of a country's planning agency to act as architect for a prominent developer? (this point was recently raised by an environmentalist at the recent, bruising Sant'Antnin plant board meeting, who, in response, had his microphone silenced).

Is it healthy for the ex-chairman of the DCC Board A (i.e. the board which deliberated on ODZ applications) to submit ODZ applications on behalf of her client? Why isn't the maxim that politicians in office must be aloof of any commercial/professional activities not applied to MEPA top brass as well? Sitting on both sides of the planning fence is tantamount to a conflict of interest.

Keeping a lid on information

The Aarhus Convention might have been transposed into local legislation - in fact, The 'Freedom of Access to Information on the Environment Regulations, 2005' which came into force on May 17, 2005, allows the public to request environmental information from the competent authority.

However, MEPA (the competent authority) appears to have second thoughts in certain instances on its adherence to the convention.

In what could be branded a landmark decision, the Ombudsman (Chief Justice Emeritus Joseph Said Pullicino) declared that MEPA's Audit Officer was right to communicate his reports to interested parties, including complainants. MEPA had objected to this practice, claiming that the Development Planning Act precluded him from doing so.

In his justification for the decision, the Ombudsman riled MEPA by stating that "... the authority was bound to refrain from any act that seeks to undermine and weaken the audit officer's authority". The Ombudsman followed by stating that there was no doubt that the investigation carried out by the audit officer into a complaint made by a citizen directly affected one's rights or interests and there was no doubt that a complainant submitting a case before the audit officer had the right to be informed whether his rights and interests were correctly evaluated and determined by MEPA.

In addition, as a conscientious citizen, I lodge planning queries regularly with MEPA. Such a practice, which is around three years long in the tooth, has resulted in a fruitful collaboration with MEPA. However, my latest three queries, referring to two sites in Mellieha and one in Ikin have gone unanswered, despite being lodged around 40 days ago.

While appreciating that MEPA's resources are guzzled by daunting workloads, MEPA must also appreciate that it can only solicit the public's help in addressing illegal development when it answers queries in reasonable timeframes.

One also hopes that, against payment, all case officer reports are made available by MEPA to dispel claims that some reports are withheld by the authority.

'The environment is not that important'

We all acknowledge the current hue and cry about the environment. We all acknowledge that Malta is not exactly a beacon for the safeguarding of the environment and we all acknowledge that environmental degradation is one of the issues keeping tourists away - as stated by tourists themselves.

Against this backdrop of tautologies, one's jaw drops on hearing (quoting from an interview with backbencher and hotelier Robert Arrigo in Maltatoday of November 12) that "The environment is not as important as we make it out to be. Cyprus this year had more construction than we have and still had more clients. I've been around for 33 years in the industry. We have improved our product and people like us how we are."

Mr Arrigo should repeat his ludicrous all-embracing statements to the retinues of tourists who publicly state that they will not return to our islands because of the over-development, the exhaust, the dust, etc. He should repeat his statement to the crowds who marched in Valletta against over-development. He should also repeat it to the countless ecotourism and rambling associations around the globe, because ecotourism is on the increase (at a much higher rate than the overall tourism growth rate) but not in development-addicted Malta, where the echoes of the International Ecotourism Year (2002) have long been smothered. Can Mr Arrigo elaborate on his vague "Cyprus this year had more construction"? Is he basing himself on spatio-density statistics - i.e. based on the surface area of Cyprus? The island (the third largest in the Mediterranean) is, after all, 29 times the size of Malta.

Mr Arrigo should also look to the current work being embarked on by the Church Green Commission and by Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Holy See's permanent observer to the United Nations, who recently spoke of the need of ecological conversion. He believes is essential if we need to have truly sustainable development, and the latter is what each and every one of us is morally obliged to strive for if we want to obey God's command to be good stewards of creation.

"The world needs an ecological conversion so as to examine critically current models of thought, as well as those of production and consumption," Archbishop Migliore said.

Parole sante.

The Times' editorial of December 23 ("Joy to the world") deserves an accolade for this statement: "Environmental degradation, injustice and poverty, in whatever degree, are an affront to our egoism, indifference and complacency."

Silver linings

Xrobb I-Ghagin tree planting by HSBC staff - staff of HSBC Bank Malta and their families recently planted some 400 trees and shrubs at Xrobb I-Ghagin in Marsaxlokk as part of the afforestation project under way in the area, being piloted by the Parks Department under the 3U4 campaign. The site will be used for environmental education and as a public recreational area, to be managed by MRAE and Nature Trust. A marine research centre will also be set up, to be managed by IOI (Malta) centre from the University of Malta.

Road contractors face disqualification - Government intends to issue clear directives to regulate all road contractors involved in national tender projects, warning them of the introduction of a point-deduction system for every shortcoming encountered on jobs entrusted to them, and that will eventually be increasing their risk to be excluded from subsequent tenders.

Such a laudable scheme should also be extended to include environmental criteria too (e.g. to safeguard against dumping of inert waste along the wayside once the job is completed, as has occurred at Mgarr and near Saqqajja Hill, against smothering of protected flora, etc.)

GreenPak Website for children - To increase awareness about the recovery and recycling of packaging waste, GreenPak Ltd has launched a new section aimed at children at www.greenpak.com.mt/kids Children can find useful information for their school projects such as tips on how to reduce, reuse and recycle materials at home and school as well as information about environmental issues through games and quizzes online. They can also try out crafts and learn how to create toys from rubbish.

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