

Reliving the run-up to 1992

With the raging debate on the Individual Investor Programme scheme monopolising headlines and coffee shop discussions, few might have realised that the Malta Environment and Planning Authority board recently approved the slew of proposed Outside Development Zone policy amendments. This despite the stack of legitimate objections to the amendments on the grounds that they will lead to a proliferation of unjustified developments in ODZ areas. There were only three dissenting voices on the Mepa board to the ushering in of this madness.

The timing of the approval was not judicious, and anomalous, at best, as it comes against the backdrop of a policy vacuum. In fact, there is currently no overarching regulatory plan for the Maltese islands since the 20-year lifespan of the previous Structure Plan expired in 2012, and we are currently in the interim period which should lead to the approval of the next Magna Carta to regulate planning and development – the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development (Sped).

Chapter 504 of the Environment and Development Act stipulates that the Sped must set out policies in relation to the development and use of land and sea, ensuring that plans, policies and programmes issued under the Environment and Development Planning Act are holistic and comprehensive. The chapter also indicates that all subsidiary plans and policies should not extend the scope of, or conflict with the Sped.

So there you have it... by approving policies before the Sped is out, the Mepa board is at loggerheads with one of its cardinal legal Acts.

The first draft of the Sped is close to being issued (the Parliamentary Committee for Environment and Development Planning announced that this should happen towards the end of February or beginning of March). It goes without saying, therefore, that the haste in rushing through the proposed ODZ policy changes, which is tantamount to putting the cart before the horse, is completely unwarranted given that the publication of the Sped is just around the corner.

It might sound like invective and speculation, but this anomalous haste may be interpreted as a scramble to allow through a select number of ODZ planning applications (such as the 51 resurrected ODZ applications mentioned two weeks ago) while the Sped is not yet in place and the current policy vacuum still prevails, with applicants being notified that they can now re-apply under the revised ODZ policy.

Hopefully these are simply conjectures with no foundation, although one must reiterate that four of these 51 ODZ applications have been submitted by the same architect who currently act as advisor on Mepa to parliamentary secretary Michael Farrugia. Was this same architect involved in the drafting the proposed ODZ policy changes? Conflicts of interest don't come as more glaring than this.

An uncanny analogy to the current impasse occurred over 20 years ago in the run-up to 1992 and the unveiling of the Structure Plan, when a number of high-profile developments in ODZ areas, which would have gone contrary to a number of Structure Plan policies, were rushed through so as to be assessed under the more lenient regulatory framework preceding the Structure Plan. A particular prominent school at Żebbiegħ comes to mind.

The public is currently barred from viewing the ODZ policy changes as approved by the Mepa board, allegedly because they are awaiting parliamentary approval.

Although this might be standard protocol it also raises the possibility of last-minute changes being introduced to the amended policies while they were out of public scrutiny such that the final approved policies may be somewhat different from those issued originally for public consultation. What guarantee is there that this will not happen?

Speaking of policy vacuums, land reclamation is also being championed in the absence of a Marine Subject Plan which, again, should be the over-arching regulatory plan for such large-

scale developments at sea. Yet, believe it or not, despite having a disproportionately large marine area that is 14 times that of its area of land, Malta still does not have such a plan.

Meanwhile the rest of the civilised world is making marine spatial planning one of its planning cornerstones in order to promote sustainable 'blue growth'. In

2013, the Commissioner for the Environment and Development David Pace had called for the compilation of the Marine Subject Plan but it is not yet clear whether Mepa has embarked on this as yet.

Against this sobering scenario, Din I-Art Helwa should be commended for engaging the Mepa board, parliamentary secretary Michael Farrugia and the relevant parliamentary committee to call for the approved ODZ policy changes to be re-issued for public consultation and to put on hold the plethora of additional proposed policies and amendments until the Sped has been finalised and approved.

These additional policies and amendments include the revision of the local plans, the hotel heights adjustment policy, the fuel stations policy, the fireworks factories policy, the floor area ratio policy, the solar farms policy, the cemeteries policy and the Inner Harbour Area (Marsaxlokk) development brief.

If Mepa does not wish to sabotage the relevance of the Sped by rushing through controversial policy changes on the eve of its release, then it must definitely put the horse once again before the cart and rewind by re-issuing for public consultation all proposed new policies only once the Sped is out.

If this does not happen, the public may be excused for not taking Mepa seriously when it projects itself as the bulwark of sustainable development on the Maltese islands, and Mepa may simply end up as a scapegoat for government's fait accompli.

Farrugia, as the parliamentary secretary responsible for Mepa, can only avoid becoming a similar scapegoat by asking the authority to go back on its tracks and re-issue the ODZ proposals once the Sped becomes a reality. The public needs access to the latest version of the same proposals too, as approved by the Mepa board.

Innovation to address the jellyfish challenge

A leaflet with information on how to treat the stings of the six most common stinging jellyfish species in local waters has been developed by the International Ocean Institute's Malta Operational Centre at the University as part of the Med-Jellyrisk project, an EU-funded project under the ENPI-CBCMED framework.

Copies of the leaflet, which has been compiled by consulting latest scientific information on the subject, will be distributed on beaches this summer with the assistance of the Malta Tourism Authority.

Other initiatives of the project include the launch of a smartphone app (providing a forecast for the presence of jellyfish on local beaches), the development of a jellyfish dispersion model (on similar lines as an oil spill model) and the deployment of anti-jellyfish nets as pilot studies on certain beaches.

Other partners in the project include the University's Department of Biology and other entities in Italy, Spain and Tunisia.

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