

Taking the bull by its horns - MEPA's Direct Action Team

Despite being composed of just six members, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority's team responsible for enforcing the law in ODZ (outside development zones) sites do make their presence felt. And they do have plenty on their plate... an average of 30 complaints are received daily (although only a fraction relate to ODZ sites) and the pending list of cases runs in the thousands.

The paucity in manpower is not the only moray that such a team has to face... existing legislation and the ploys resorted to by the perpetrators of illegalities also pose substantial stumbling blocks.

Land ownership, in particular, throws more than a spanner in the wheels since it is ultimately the landowner who is liable to fork out any costs incurred during the enforcement duties. Hence, any miscreant wishing to construct/build illegally usually resorts to do on any patch of public land or on the land of a third party who has no inkling whatsoever of what is happening to his/her land.

MEPA manages to iron out such kinks. However, some precedents exist whereby the Lands Department was 'chiamato in causa' so that illegal development on public land could be tackled.

Many perpetrators of illegal development on ODZ sites rarely visit the site in question to render their identification by MEPA officials much more difficult. And that's why MEPA usually asks the public to furnish identification or car registration numbers wherever possible, so as to lubricate things.

This is not to speak of the odysseys comprised by court proceedings in the form of countless appeals resorted to by ODZ louts.

Despite the list of pending cases being so extensive, it is those enforcement cases which prima facie guarantee the coverage of financial expenses incurred by MEPA during the direct action that gain precedence - the process must be able to finance itself.

The 'ODZ Team', vaguely reminiscent of 'The Untouchables' for their fortitude in tackling insalubrious characters in the field, would certainly do with an increase in manpower.

The public is also exhorted to refrain from reporting frivolous cases to the complaints section of MEPA, mainly in the form of 'bad neighbourliness' bickering which guzzle MEPA's limited resources.

The author thanks MEPA's PRO and its various enforcement units for the above information.