

The black swan

Beyond the economy

The local context

The road ahead

Economic sentiment

Concluding remarks

Agile

Perspectives on Malta's economy
post **COVID-19**.

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Post COVID-19 environmental scenarios

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic can be defined as the archetypal litmus test or crucible, given the fundamental changes in collective behaviour and trends that it has imposed on human societies. So much so, that time will be tracked, for a long time, in two major eras: the pre- and the post-pandemic ones. Nowhere is this more evident than in the environmental domain, where the pandemic has

*“The pandemic has managed to achieve what countless multilateral agreements, foremost amongst these the 2015 UNFCCC Paris agreement, have been signed to curb **greenhouse gas emissions.**”*

managed to achieve what countless multilateral agreements, foremost amongst these the 2015 UNFCCC Paris agreement, have been signed to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

Putative post-COVID scenarios will be explored for the following five environmental thematics, generally considered to be amongst the most pressing of priorities on a national scale:

- (i) Greenhouse emissions
- (ii) Air quality standards
- (iii) Land-use and biodiversity conservation
- (iv) Waste management
- (v) Water resources

Approximately one-fifth of national greenhouse emissions is attributable to traffic, which is also responsible for the generation of considerable volumes of nitrogen oxides, particulate matter and ozone. The near-stalling of air traffic has also slashed greenhouse emissions from this sector, responsible for a whopping 2% of all global greenhouse

emissions. The urge to rebound economically in the short-term once the pandemic is behind us will invariably result in a restoration of pre-pandemic seasonal traffic flows, even though a predicted gradual relaxation of lockdown measures will probably not result in an abrupt surge in greenhouse and traffic-associated emissions. The unexpected amelioration of urban air quality and the slump in greenhouse emissions has spurred come to call for the establishment of a new 'normal', to pre-empt the reinstatement of the 'business-as-usual' scenario once the pandemic is over. This new 'normal' would involve a greater investment in sustainable travel modes and in more efficient public transport, and will eventually materialise, albeit not in the short-term given the quantum leap in infrastructure and in collective behaviour that these represent.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic came in the midst of a number of air quality threshold exceedances registered through local air quality monitoring stations, which in turn has triggered the mechanism leading to a national air quality programme and an air quality management zone. One probable future scenario contemplates the continuation of such efforts, whilst another less probable scenario foresees a slow-down in such efforts given the improved air quality prescribed by the pandemic.

An inherent hallmark of all forecasting exercises is uncertainty. Coupled with this is the variance in uncertainty levels expected for different sectoral forecasting exercises. For instance, whilst the COVID-19 impacts on emissions and air quality standards are somewhat predictable given the direct cause-effect between vehicular flows and emissions, future trends in the land-use and waste management domains are more elusive to predict. The most likely related impacts of the current

economic slowdown are Janus-faced in nature: on the one hand, a lower degree of liquidity, if sustained long enough, will result in lower land-use pressures given that the property market is generally depicted as a judicious investment opportunity. This might result even at the hands of more pragmatic considerations: social distancing has also slowed down the planning and development decision-making infrastructure. On the other hand, the urge to bounce back economically might suppress the general presumption against further development in Outside Development Zones (ODZs), with major government-mandated construction and infrastructural works seen as a panacea to tease up economic growth. Dampened government revenue might translate in a smaller cornucopia to be dedicated to the burgeoning costs associated with environmental management, including the running of the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) and Wasteserv.

The extirpation of all but any tourist flow to our islands as a result of the pandemic has mellowed our national freshwater consumption rates, which also translates into lower greenhouse emissions (as a result of the energy-guzzling desalination process). If the current lockdown extends into and beyond the peak summer tourist season, then the positive environmental impact will also extend to the overall status of the marine environment given the subdued cruise liner and recreational vessel traffic flows as well as discharged treated sewage flows. The current pandemic has had another, unexpected impact – that of enhancing the status of subsistence farming in Malta, as the reality of our dependence on daily food shipments from abroad dawned on many. Such a rise in status might result in an agricultural renewal on the islands.