



The lessons we've learnt through COVID - Maria Giulia Pace & Marie Briguglio

Opinion Comment COVID-19 Economy Environment

October 15, 2020 | Maria Giulia Pace & Marie Briguglio | 

 3 min read



An empty Tritons Square in Valletta in March 2020. Photo: Mark Zammit Cordina

COVID-19 created multiple shocks in the socio-economic and environmental spheres. The silver lining was the opportunity it created to reflect upon a more sustainable way of life post-COVID, or rather, amidst it.

When looking at the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2019 scoreboard, Malta scored 62.3/100 and ranked 24 out of 28 EU member states. Unfortunately, only one out of the 17 was achieved (namely, SDG 8 - decent work and economic growth). For many of the goals,

challenges remain, with 9 of them being considered to face 'major challenges'. These include climate action, zero hunger and sustainable cities and communities amongst others.

In the social domain, Malta remains challenged by a prevalence of obesity, high early school leaving rates, the low tertiary education rates and the need to enhance the skill-base of the workforce. Gender gaps remain high in various spheres, also due to a degree of inactive females tied by their caring responsibilities.

It is well documented that while Malta's economy has successfully attained growth (hence, the achieved SDG 8), this has come with some collateral damage, including the depletion of natural resources, loss of cultural assets, and higher levels of waste, air, climatic noise and marine emissions among others.

Yet, the lockdown in the first COVID-19 outbreak made it possible to imagine a different Malta – one with fewer private vehicles on the roads, lower pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and congestions. Within just one month of lockdown, nitrogen dioxide readings during morning rush hour had [dropped by 70%](#).

Several of the changes were attributed to the shift to e-learning and working online, shedding light on what our lives could look like. Some of these changes brought hardship, suggesting that they could only be sustained as a short-term solution. But others opened a window onto the opportunities available.

One such opportunity is that of providing remote but safe working options, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions and facilitating social distancing. The crisis highlighted the potential to transform and enhance work from home and the e-services offer. Indeed, much as the advent of the pandemic allowed a vision for a lower environmental footprint, so too did it shed light on the potential of digitization. These needs echo those emphasized by the European Commission, namely the focus on the European Green Deal and on digitalisation to boost jobs and growth, social resilience and environmental health.

In the social domain, education received considerable attention. Remote teaching and assessment were adopted in response to the crisis, but there was concern of deepening inequalities. For children whose guardians cannot afford the time or the technology required to assist, COVID-19 presented an additional hurdle.

The challenge is now to restart the economy without resorting to subsidising pollution and



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while addressing social problems. A post-COVID recovery of this nature could be stimulated by government investment in green infrastructure, in measures that turn a linear economy to a circular economy, in a renewed focus on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion, better quality jobs and education, equality, a digitally empowered society and high-quality research, amongst others.

Above all, it requires the streamlining of the various strategies and action plans in various policy sectors. Integrating the work of the various line ministries has remained a key challenge. These goals should not be ignored in COVID-19 recovery deals.

Marie Giulia Pace is a Senior at EY. Marie Briguglio is an economist and lecturer at the University of Malta.

More on the possibility of sustainable living will be discussed during day four of EY's 'Future Realised' online event to take place on October 23. For more information and to register, visit www.ey.com/mt/futurerealised.

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