

THE CASE FOR A SPARSELY CARRIED ISLAND



*As the call for a cleaner, more sustainable future becomes louder, what impact do our individual choices make? **Nika Levikov** writes.*

The alarm blares for the millionth time. You drag yourself into the waking world. You need a shower. You need coffee. Cereal? A weary glance at the clock and suddenly there is no time for breakfast, let alone a packed lunch. I'll grab a *pastizz* and go to the shop later, you think as you jump into your car. Actually it will have to be the supermarket; the green grocer is too far, and you're behind on your latest 'big report'.

The morning rush is a bane shared by most in contemporary society. Multiply that routine by a few hundred thousand, and the impact adds up fast.

Our hectic lifestyle is just one cog in a huge wheel leading to increased waste, pollution, and poor health. What's more, behavioural economist Dr Marie Briguglio (University of Malta), asserts that, 'the main environmental concerns of citizens in Malta today pertain to declining quality of life in urban areas.'

FACTORS BEHIND ENVIRONMENTAL SHIFTS AND PRESSURES

It can be difficult to imagine certain forms of consumption, especially basic needs like food and water, as detrimental. But Malta's State of the Environment Report by the Environment & Resources Authority (ERA) ranks agriculture and the electricity-guzzling osmosis plants high among environmental pressures on the Maltese Islands.

Transport is another indispensable need. Car ownership is a big culprit but the situation is


more complicated according to economist Dr Jonathan Spiteri (University of Malta). Older cars emit more harmful pollutants and are often in need of repair. Transporting goods and services around the Islands is key for the Maltese economy, but this contributes to a lot more than just Gross Domestic Product. The environmental stresses caused by cars and lorries are clear.

Malta faces maddening traffic and the degradation of green areas all over the island, met by subsequent demands for wider roads and more parking. There are also more insidious implications for citizens since polluting vehicles lead to higher respiratory illnesses—Malta has a high asthma rate.

MALTA'S CLIMATE CHANGE

Green technologies are booming. Both Iceland and Tokelau have hit 100% renewable energy production, while China invests hundreds of billions in renewable energy. But what has been happening locally?

'It's not all doom and gloom,' Spiteri notes. 'Since 2008, the proportion of total energy generated from renewables has increased from 0.2% to 7.2% in 2017.' There has also been an increase in the purchase of electric and hybrid vehicles. In 2015, 246 electric cars and approximately 439 hybrid vehicles were registered.

Nonetheless, regular cars are omnipresent. Between 2012 and 2015, the number of vehicles on the Islands grew from 293,498 to 346,918, from one vehicle per 1.4 people to one vehicle 

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per 1.24 people. These numbers are staggering considering that Malta is the most densely populated country in the EU. In 2011, Malta was home to 1325 people per square kilometer, more than tenfold the EU average of 116.9 people. Looking at ERA's report, Malta's population is expected to exceed half a million by 2060. Will the increase in cars be proportional? Malta needs innovative public transport systems to reduce the addiction to cars.

Speaking about local climate change mitigation, meteorologist Dr Charles Galdies (University of Malta) believes that addressing gas emissions from cars is a priority. However, he also mentions that, according to ERA's report, greenhouse gas emissions decreased 31% from 2012 to 2015. Other positive steps forward include Malta's National Strategy for Policy and Abatement Measures and the Climate Adaptation Strategy enacted in 2012, which are addressing vulnerable areas, including coastal zones and freshwater resources. But

Galdies believes we can do more. 'The emphasis on further investment in traditional modes of transport can be problematic,' he says. 'This also applies for maritime and aviation transport.'

The urban heat island effect is another issue. Highly built up areas with few green spaces and large numbers of people see heat getting trapped, raising temperatures fast. Galdies notes the danger this can pose for young children and the elderly, especially during summer. Towns and cities can be up to 6°C hotter than rural areas due to heat being absorbed by roads and buildings during the day and emitted into the atmosphere at night. Green roofs, as proposed by the team behind the LifeMedGreenRoof project (see Issue 21), can be a solution, adding much needed green spaces.

LET OUR VOICES BE HEARD

Alongside political and technological solutions to the environmental problems we're facing as a modern society, we

must also tackle how institutions communicate about climate change. We need to speak 'directly to the community,' says Galdies.

Researchers need to work with citizens to better our natural world; they play a crucial role in providing their own visions and ideas. According to Briguglio, 'Contrary to popular belief, repeatedly, our surveys show a willingness by Maltese people to behave pro-environmentally—where infrastructure, institutions, and intervention enable it.'

And this is what ERA is doing now. As they work on a National Strategy for the Environment, a forward-looking plan from 2020 to 2050, they're inviting citizens to contribute in shaping Malta's future. Perhaps there is no better time to make our voices heard, to support an environment that provides for a better quality of life and contribute to a National Strategy that seeks to nourish the lives of all individuals. After all, don't we deserve a breath of fresh air? 