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Social Wellbeing

THE FACULTY FOR SOCIAL WELLBEING RESEARCH MAGAZINE FOR ACADEMICS, STUDENTS, ALUMNI,
STAKEHOLDERS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC IN COLLABORATION WITH CORPORATE DISPATCH

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ECONOMICS, END-GAMES & ENGAGEMENT

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I grew up surrounded by activists: in the seventies, my mother hosted conversations with other feminists and artists and my father would take me to lengthy meetings where bearded men in bell-bottoms talked about the economy, socialism and democracy. At University, I became deeply involved in student politics myself, as a founder member of the Association of Students of Commercial Studies, and as part of the student council (KSU). I had also embarked on writing satirical scripts for theatre and television, focusing on themes of social justice and the environment. Concurrently, I completed an Economics degree with first class honours - but could not shake off a terrible feeling that maximizing GDP and minimizing inflation rates were not the end-game I wanted to pursue in my career.

In an attempt to reconcile my worlds, I pursued a MSc in Environmental Economics in London under the tutelage of Professor David Pearce and supported by a Chevening scholarship. I realized that I had found a discipline that would help structure much of my thinking going forward: the end-game for economies was not GDP after all, but a kind of development that endures, that brings the greatest possible wellbeing beyond material wealth.

Motivated by the possibility of a better balance between free market economic outcomes and social and environmental considerations, I joined what was then a new organization - the Planning Authority. At the time, it constituted a strong pro-environmental body within the public sector. I also worked on joint projects with the Commonwealth Secretariat, the EU commission, UNEP, Friends on the Earth, various Unions and represented Malta at EU and UNFCCC levels. I started to write occasional research papers (Briguglio, 1999a, 1996b; Briguglio & Briguglio, 1997, 2002; Briguglio & Mercieca, 1998). The rest of my time was dedicated to producing, writing and presenting television series (e.g. Bir-Rispett Kollu/With all due respect, Viva Malta, Tikka/Dotting the Is) spanning social, economic, environmental and political topics.

Several papers, reports and television hours later, I found myself asking: Is any of this making a difference? I was not sure. Reports seemed to remain unread and policy proposals unimplemented. Political whims seemed to matter more than evidence-based policy. Television had a wide reach, yet it too was ephemeral. For fifteen years, I had split my time between policy, broadcasting and academia, straddling the disciplines of economics, environmental science and communication. I wondered whether there was a way to bring these worlds together more effectively.

By this time, Behavioural Science had emerged as a strong force in shaping Economics and, in 2010, I started a Phd in Economics at Stirling University. I wanted to understand: How can the promise of evidence-based policy be reconciled with poor political will? How can behaviour be stimulated to reach environmental goals? How can economic tools be powered by communication? Meanwhile, at the University of Malta, I found support in setting up new units covering topics like Applied Economics Research, Economics of Environmental Policy and Behavioural Economics. These applications were appetizing to several inter-disciplinary institutes and to faculties like the Faculty of laws and the Faculty of Social Wellbeing.

Proposals for research on the interface of economics, the environment and politics were also well met by various research funding bodies, including the EU's Horizon 2020 programme and the University of Malta

Research Excellence Grant. With the help of the Project Support Office at the University of Malta, I seeded collaboration agreements with various public sector organisations aimed at linking research to policy.

Academia demands publications and I became increasingly keen to write papers that took elegant textbook economic theory to the rugged zone of interdisciplinary empirical application. From the economics of Malta's environmental challenges generally (Briguglio & Moncada, 2015), I turned my research focus to waste management (Briguglio 2016; Briguglio et al., 2016), renewable energy (Briguglio & Formosa, 2017) and climatic emissions (Camilleri et al., 2020).

Together with other authors, I extended the scope of my research to the environmental economics in small states (Moncada et al., 2018), developing countries (Bambrick et al., 2015; Moncada et al., 2019), and across the European Union (Briguglio et al. 2018). Insights from behavioural economics also stimulated me to examine links between environmental behaviour and partisanship (Briguglio, Delaney & Wood, 2018) as well as those between environmental behaviour and religion (Briguglio, Garcia Munoz, & Neuman, 2020).

My fascination with the economics of non-market activity gradually broadened beyond environmental protection to other domains, including the economics of art and culture (Briguglio & Debattista, 2017; Briguglio, 2017a, 2019a; Briguglio, Camilleri & Vella, 2020), social preferences (Briguglio & Spiteri, 2018), media (Briguglio & Spiteri, 2019) and trust in government (Spiteri & Briguglio, 2018; Batrancea et al. 2019).

It started to become increasingly clear to me that both market and non-market activities were essential to the achievement of an over-arching social goal - that of wellbeing. The literature on the economics of happiness was fascinating and I embarked on research the determinants of wellbeing itself (Briguglio, 2015, 2019b), conducting several empirical studies on life satisfaction in Malta (Briguglio & Sultana, 2015, 2018; Briguglio, Camilleri & Vella, 2020). This academic research underpinned much of my work as the Chairperson of the Forum for Community Engagement at the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society much as the environmental research nourished collaborations with the Environmental and Resources Authority and the Committee for Sustainability at the University of Malta.

As an academic keen on community engagement, I have found myself in conversation with diverse stakeholders: CEOs in executive lounges, elderly people in day-care centres, room-full of children, bishops at the Vatican, curators in Iceland, scouts, young couples, activists, parish priests, gamers, civil servants, diplomats, volunteers and artists. I may well have been invited to give the talks, but the transfer of knowledge often happens in reverse. In some instances, outreach initiatives themselves seeded academic publications (e.g. Briguglio et al., 2020; Briguglio & Brown, 2020).

I have also found media houses, print, tv, radio, as well as social media platforms, to be keen to share the results of research, if this is communicated accessibly. In a recent experiment I collaborated with artist Steve Bonello to do that in a non-fiction publication which combined environmental economics with cartoons (Briguglio & Bonello, 2018). The Open Access Repository at the University of Malta also has a lot of promise in this regard.

I continue to be driven by that fundamental notion in economics that we should use the resources we have been endowed with - our limited land, our water, our sea, our heritage, our culture - as best we can. The end-game is an economy that is greener, more circular, more human, one that goes beyond short-term material gain to generate wellbeing for all (Briguglio, 2020; Briguglio 2017b). Some consider it immature to still be chasing this ideal. Some interpret outreach as attention seeking. Some positions, requiring the arduous job of silent nodding, are unlikely to ever be on the table. None of this matters as much as the prospect of having failed to engage in the quest of making the world a better place.

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