

The pressures of population growth on Urban Areas

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Sustainable development challenges largely emanate from an increase in populations or correlated spin offs and can be mostly highlighted within the urban areas where the majority of the population resides. In 30 years time, urban areas would be denser and would have continued to expand at the expense of rural areas causing unfavourable pressures on the built and natural environment.

To further delve into the more specific sustainable development challenges originating from population growth, the country of Malta is being taken as a case study. Malta is a small island state in the heart of the Mediterranean and features in the eight place of the most densely populated countries' list in the world. With just 315 km² and a population of 417,400 (2011 population census), the country needs to find space to cater for the population's everyday needs; whilst allocating or safeguarding sufficient space which is required to sustain social wellbeing.

There are a number of concerns which Malta could have addressed differently over the past 30 years. The concerns and lessons learnt could be extrapolated to other countries with a view of pre-empting similar situations and hence addressing these in a timely manner prior to 2050. An increase in population numbers and densities exerts pressure on urban areas as these encourage sprawl onto adjacent rural areas; villages and urban areas risk losing identities as these conglomerate. Pressure to develop more open spaces and redevelop existing buildings into more compact high density residential areas increases. Urban fabric starts to change and historical buildings are lost. Commercial premises are on the increase to meet the increase in demand. Whilst traffic increases, the road network can be upgraded only in a very limited way. Public transport which is limited to the use of buses cannot improve because of the everyday traffic congestion. Vehicular parking also adds up to traffic congestion due to the narrow streets and the number of vehicles circling around in search of adequate parking.

Nevertheless, it is only 68.2% of Malta's total dwelling stock which is occupied at any point in time; 13.3% is categorised as secondary use and 18.4% are completely vacant.

The 1988 development boundary was too relaxed and this unnecessarily created new areas available for development. In parallel to this, the spatial planning system was flexible such that development planning applications were not seen within a context, but were assessed in a piecemeal fashion. The population had become very development oriented with little interest in urban open spaces. All this development and associated infrastructure on a small island resulted in the country with the highest percentage (33%) of built up area in the European Union. Environment resource depletion was on the increase particularly local stone used in the building industry; and loss of soil through soil sealing and through the abandonment of agricultural land. Soil sealing in parallel to the lack of adequate sustainable urban drainage systems had its toll on water conservation.

Addressing these issues in a timely manner would have prevented the negative impact of population growth on the country.