

Small states and money



Rose Marie Azzopardi: Social Policies in Malta, Commonwealth Secretariat and United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2011, 82 pp.

The book in question forms part of a series of papers commissioned by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat.

The objective of this series was to explore the social and economic development issues faced by small states. This comparative study of 14 small states helps to delineate how each country's particular social and economic policies and strategies affect the socio-economic development of each country in question.

The focus of this series is on the way social policies affect economic development, and vice-versa. The foreword says that this series will be useful for scholars and policy-makers studying the economic and social development of small states.

It is also useful to those who want a short historical delineation of the main stages involved in the socio-economic development of Malta, a small state considered as a 'miracle economy' by Lino Briguglio.

To write about the economic, political and social development of the country from independence to date, Rose Marie Azzopardi relied mainly on state documents and official statistics, coupled with data compiled and reports conducted by international agencies on the socio-economic and financial status of Malta in particular stages in time, as well as on studies conducted by local economists.

The book starts with a chapter outlining the main socio-demographic and historic details concerning Malta. The rest is devoted to the political and economic decisions taken pre-independence to date. She used these milestones to show how these affected local social environment and social policies.

Azzopardi argues that although certain social policy measures were introduced in the 1920s, the Maltese welfare state policies were mainly implemented during the 1970s and 1980s. The 1990s saw the orientation in social policy shift from a welfare state to a welfare society.

In this decade the promotion of social justice through financial handouts, was replaced by one where the community became more involved in the caring and support of individuals in need.

Although the objective of governments is still to take care of its citizens, the focus now is on delineating those who need this help in order to curb government spending in social policy, with the aim of rendering this sector more sustainable.

Azzopardi questions whether there is the political will or the cultural propensity to ensure this takes place in the face of a dependency culture inherent among the Maltese as a nation.

This cycle of dependence on external entities has not ended, according to Azzopardi.

In the colonial and early post-independence period the Maltese economy depended on fulfilling the needs of the British forces stationed on the island.

The industrialising period was characterised by a dependence on foreign investors and the handouts offered by countries with whom Malta had bilateral agreements.

The newest entity the Maltese look to for handouts is the European Union, which according to Azzopardi was sold to the Maltese electorate on this ticket.

Azzopardi speaks about three main stages within the Maltese economy and delineates their impact on the social policies undertaken at the time.

These policies were later accompanied by in a drastic investment in human capital with the implementation of various social policies and services such as free education for all until graduate level, housing, free health system, and a better standard of living for most of the Maltese.

At this stage the economy was controlled by the state, a state which took a protectionist stance for its budding manufacturing and service industries.

The economies of small states, as Azzopardi notes, are more dependent on foreign investment, and this type of investment is affected by the vagaries of a global economy.

In the developing stages of the Maltese economy, Maltese governments drew development plans to delineate the goals they wanted to attain (whether they attained their aims was something else).

These plans were not deemed necessary once the Maltese economy proclaimed a more market-driven economy.

Azzopardi, however, says the Maltese economy is still dependent on state intervention, and she mentioned various state initiated projects carried out with the help of European funds, and therefore questions whether we have a market-driven economy.

Post-independence Malta took action to devise a welfare state which provided its people with an adequate standard of living equivalent to that found in Western European countries.

Azzopardi believes the latest financial crisis did affect the Maltese economy since it has legitimated a certain ideology prevalent in the west which feels that economic sustainability can only be attained by drastic cuts on welfare spending.

This ideology, however, does not take into consideration how the majority of people will be affected, and the effect this would have on the national economy.

Azzopardi is aware that the present welfare society is not sustainable for a number of reasons, and blames it on mismanagement from the top and the abuse of the system by those in power and their clientele, therefore also from the bottom.

I feel this book will be useful both for research and as a teaching tool.

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
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
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
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