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**PROPOSED STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR THE PROMOTION OF
SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN MALTA**

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PROPOSED STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR THE PROMOTION OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN MALTA*

Definition and objectives of sustainable tourism

The objective of this document is to propose a set of strategic directions for Malta in the quest for sustainable tourism which is defined by the UN Environment Programme and UN World Tourism Organization as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and the host communities.”

This implies that a strategy for sustainable tourism should address economic, environmental and social concerns for the current and future generations. One cannot therefore ignore issues that will impact future contexts and consequently future societies. This calls for a coordinated approach across policy fields. Given Malta’s sensitivities, the attainment of sustainable tourism is paramount. This necessitates making choices about the type of tourism activity that best suits the country not only in the short term but also in the long term. This implies coordinated decision-making in different policy fields that looks at the whole value chain: commencing from starting up, the investment and the operational cycle, the resulting impacts, as well as the markets and tourist profiles that Malta seeks to attract.

In this document reference is made to the need to attract quality tourists. This term refers to discerning tourists who care for and respect the host community, its culture and its physical environment, and recognise the value of and accept to pay the right price for what is experienced in the host destination.

Pros and cons of tourism

The most beneficial effects of tourism relate to its economic impacts, in that expenditure by visitors generates income and employment in the host destination. However, there are other benefits associated with tourism, which though occurring mainly in the interests of tourists, they are also of benefit to the host community. These include inter linkages with other economic sectors, infrastructural improvements, increase in the provision of transport services, and added entertainment possibilities. Some residents also derive satisfaction from encountering diverse cultures and a feeling of honour and pride in seeing tourists visit their country.

The main downsides of tourism relate to environmental degradation mostly associated with land take-up of prime and environmentally sensitive sites, generation of waste and noise pollution and social discomfort mostly due to overcrowding, traffic congestion and unpleasant behaviour by tourists. In addition, a large tourist inflow can lead to increases in prices of goods and services (including residential rent). In some countries, tourism has also led to precarious employment and human trafficking of foreign workers, predominantly those hailing from developing countries and to gentrification, with the original residents in a tourist area being displaced by wealthier individuals. Excessive dependence on tourism can also lead to an unbalanced economy, leading to

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the country having too many eggs in one basket, and therefore prone to the risk of large unplanned economic fluctuations.

Whilst most of the above may be manageable, what is more challenging to manage is declining social acceptance of tourism activity. For economic reasons, the host population may accept the negative social impacts but at a point residents will detest having to put up with these impacts as the social costs will outweigh the benefits, particularly in locations with a high tourism density.

The current situation in Malta

In the case of the Maltese Islands, the above generalisations regarding the pros and cons of tourism apply, but there are specificities relating to these islands. The inflow of international tourists to Malta has grown rapidly during this century, from about 1.5 million in 2012 to about 2.8 million in 2019, an inflow which could be replicated in 2023, rendering Malta as the country with the most high-tourist density per person in the EU. This increase in visitors was accompanied by an increase in total expenditure, which, as expected, generated income for the operators and their suppliers, although there are indications that real expenditure per tourist has tended to decrease in recent years. In addition, one has to set these figures against the hidden economic costs associated with the use of infrastructure, which in Malta is likely to be relatively high, given that the built area of Malta is relatively high when compared to other countries, the consumption of water, which is a scarce commodity in Malta, the generous subsidies given by the government to some operators and the cost of publicity and promotion by the Malta Tourism Authority. In addition, a large proportion of the income generated from tourism in the Maltese Islands goes to foreign workers and the agencies that recruit these workers or is retained as profit by the tourism operators, thereby introducing leakages in the multiplier effects which are often associated with tourist expenditure.

As a result of the high tourism inflows in the Maltese Islands, relative to the resident population, a larger proportion of residents, compared to less population-dense countries, are subjected to problems associated with overcrowding and congestion including constraints in using public spaces, such as the beaches, difficulties in accessing public transport, and obstructions on pavements and walkways. The situation is made even worse by the chaotic permissive system and lack of enforcement relating to bars and restaurants, allowing them to occupy pavements and to play loud music, even sometimes late at night, to the detriment of resident communities and tourists staying in nearby accommodations.

Strategic directions

A sustainable development strategy should aim at maximising the benefits of tourism and minimising its downsides in the interest of current and future generations. In the case of Malta, given its small size and relatively large population, the strategy should first and foremost address issues relating to the tourism carrying capacity of the Islands. In turn, this requires four interlinked strategic directions, namely (1) assigning major importance to capping or even reducing the quantity of inbound tourists and improving their quality (2) improving the Maltese tourism product, needed to attract quality tourists, (3) directing tourism publicity and promotion funds mainly to attract quality tourists, and (4) further democratizing tourism strategy decisions and their implementation by involving a wider set of stakeholders in decision making.

Strategic direction 1: Assign importance to quality not to quantity

The carrying capacity constraint, though difficult to measure, as stated in the Ministry of Tourism 2021 document, can be felt as a result of overcrowding and congestion, which are highly evident in Malta. Additionally, carrying capacity issues can be assessed from perception surveys on tourism. A survey of this type, administered by University of Malta academics, indicated that in 2019 Malta experienced overtourism, at a time when the number of incoming tourists neared 3 million, which as stated above, is likely to be reached again in 2023, and possibly exceeded in the years that follow, if there is no change in Malta's tourism management. It is therefore being proposed that the tourism strategy should be aimed at setting a cap on, and possibly reducing, tourist inflows. It is to be noted that the strategy of visitation caps is adopted in other tourist destinations.

It is acknowledged that no-growth or a reduction of tourist inflows could lead to a reduction in tourist expenditure, unless better quality tourists are attracted. A reduction in tourist expenditure would adversely affect the income of many businesses and households. A sustainable tourism strategy should consider this deficit and calls for careful planning regarding the future of tourism business and tourism accommodation in particular to ensure that this does not cause undue hardship for those affected. However, a change of direction with regard to tourism planning is likely to usher in new business opportunities and new employment prospects, with the overall objective of improving the quality of life of the host community in general.

Strategic direction 2: Improve the tourist product

In order to attract quality tourists, Malta must offer a quality tourism product. A good quality product implies that the country, amongst other things, (a) is clean, (b) possesses natural beauty, (c) is orderly and safe, and (d) suitably enforces laws and regulations.

(a) *Cleanliness*. This requires, amongst other things, organised waste collection, clean air and unpolluted seas and beaches. These are obviously lacking in Malta. Regarding Malta's beaches, it is often said that our bathing waters are among the cleanest in the EU, but with the increased population density and construction projects, our beaches are becoming increasingly polluted with overflowing sewerage and material emitted from various sources, including yacht marinas.

(b) *Natural beauty*. One attribute that adds to the quality tourism product is natural beauty, which in Malta used to be abundant, but is gradually being obliterated by the over-development, particularly by construction. A good quality tourist is likely to assign importance to Malta's natural environmental assets and its cultural heritage, and a sustainable tourism strategy should include the protection of these assets as a major requisite for attracting quality tourists.

(c) *Order and safety*. An orderly system requires the maintenance and upkeep of streets, pavements and lighting, as well as organised traffic, features which Malta does not offer. Law and order, and an efficient police force give a sense of security to the visitor.

(d) *Enforcement*. Although in Malta there is no lack of legislation, enforcement is often weak, with abuse relating to pollution, waste collection and the obstruction of public spaces often going unpunished and it would seem, at times, with the blessing of the authorities.

(e) *Reputation*. Above all, with regard to good quality tourism product, there is the issue of good reputation as a tourist destination, which Malta has been gradually eroding over the years, and is at risk of being eroded further as a result of the policy of increasing numbers at all costs. The massive open-air concerts and parties which attract motley crowds of young revellers, many of

whom are after cheap alcohol, drugs and sexual insensitivities, do not lend a good image of Malta for quality tourists. It is to be noted that Ibiza, which was renowned for similar activities, has changed course and is currently promoting wellness tourism and environmental protection, after the people and the government of the island realised that drunk and bawdy tourists were destroying the peace and the physical environment of the island.

One cannot therefore say that Malta offers a quality product regarding the five issues listed. A sustainable tourism strategy should therefore address these issues if it wants to attract quality tourists and respect the carrying capacity of the Maltese Islands.

Strategic direction 3: Radical change in funding promotion

At present, it appears that a considerable amount of publicity and promotional funds intended to attract more tourists, is being spent without really focussing on the need to attract quality tourists. For example, the funds used to attract festivals and open-air partying are surely not meant to attract quality tourists. Some publicity is intended to positioning Malta as a cultural heritage destination, and to identify its distinctive culture and rich history, but this aspect of tourist promotion would seem to be given secondary importance in large scale funding. There should be a radical change as to what activities to sponsor, focusing more on what Malta has to offer in terms of a unique experience.

It is to be acknowledged that Malta's main attractions are its climate and its surrounding sea, so this should remain a central tourist-puller, however the other attractions of Malta, such as Malta's cultural and archaeological heritage, which a quality tourist would look for, should also be given primary importance in sustainable-tourism promotion. wellness tourism aimed at maintaining or enhancing the visitors' personal wellbeing should also feature prominently in such promotion. Certainly wild parties should not feature in sustainable-tourism promotion, as these have become associated with traffic congestion, noise pollution, garbage creation, and drug taking and lewd behaviour in public.

Strategic direction 4: Further democratise the tourism strategy and its implementation

All tourism stakeholders should be involved in the drawing up of the strategy and its implementation, and not just government bureaucrats. Further democratisation of the process would lead to the inclusiveness of the host community, involving itself in the strategy together with the government and business interests. Conflicting interests will inevitably arise, but that is the purpose of policy-making. As argued above, sustainable tourism means balancing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and the host communities, and such a balancing act would not be possible without effective (and not sham) consultation.

Changing course, and aiming for quality, will not be an easy task to carry out, as there are various conflicting interests and agendas involved in tourism. For example, business interests, often seeking short-term gains rather than social responsibility, are not likely to relish constraints on their freedom of operation. Politicians often try to gain political mileage by boasting about tourism numbers. There is the possibility that business and political interests on their own would work against societal, cultural and environmental benefits. It is admitted, therefore, that sustainable tourism has a long-term dimension, and its benefits are hard to quantify and validate in the short run, rendering the quest for the democratisation process highly challenging. However, instilling the active participation of the host community, leading to inclusive tourism development, should improve the possibility that tourism enhances the quality of life of the

residents. Democratisation of the tourism management process should therefore be assigned major importance in a strategy for sustainable tourism.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Malta tourism model currently being implemented in practice, built on tourist quantity rather than quality, is not conducive and rather detrimental to sustainable tourism. It has led to environmental degradation and social discomfort of many members of the host community.

In this document, a change of direction is proposed, listing four strategic directions aimed at improving the tourist product in order to attract quality tourists.

In all matters relating to future directions, including tourism, cognisance of the potential climate change impacts is imperative. As a destination reliant highly on sun and sea tourism, Malta needs to become proactive and prepared for the challenges that climate change will bring.

It is hoped that the tourism authorities take heed of the proposals put forward in this document, with the main objectives being to upgrade the tourism product, attract quality tourists, and give a positive and memorable experience to the visitors, whilst also contributing to the sustainable development of Malta.