

Malta's contribution to climate change policy

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The latest IPCC report on climate change offered the world a stark warning. **Timothy Alden** speaks to academic **Prof. Simone Borg**, Malta's Ambassador for Climate Action and Chairperson of the University of Malta's Climate Platform and the National Climate Action Board. She recently reiterated the Maltese Islands vulnerability to climate change.

Q: Prof. Simone Borg, the climate crisis which humanity is facing is now being felt ever closer to home. However, you have been involved in researching and pushing for action on climate for many years. How did you start working on climate change?

A: In December 1988, Malta asked the United Nations General Assembly to include climate change as a topic on its agenda. Malta's proposal brought the scientific debate on climate change to the attention of the world's politicians. It warned them that this was an existential threat. Back then, I was a student looking for a thesis topic for my dissertation. Prof. David Attard, who today is the university's Chancellor, was my tutor. He also happened to be the advisor to the government at the time, so he was best placed to persuade the Prime Minister to take this issue onto the world stage.

Q: So Malta raised the issue of climate change at the United Nations. As a topic, did it do so in the broadest sense?


A: Yes, and as a common concern for humankind. At first, the larger states were quite skeptical, but Malta found a lot of support from smaller countries. The resolution UNGA 43/53 to this very day is considered to be a

legendary one and is considered the genesis of this whole process. By bringing this topic to the General Assembly, it becomes a global topic for research, discussion, and action. It puts the issue on the global agenda.

Q: So in a way, as regards climate change, you could say that Malta broke the ice?

A: That's right, Malta broke the ice. It alerted the international community about what was being said on the scientific level. The United Nations then decided to set up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It is the entity which gives us all the reports. We have just been presented with the latest one, the IPCC 6th Assessment Report.

Q: Have you seen a change in attitude as regards climate change over the years? Are people taking it more seriously? Are they taking it seriously enough?

A: There definitely has been a change in attitudes. It has been slow because it has taken 30 years to get to this point. But climate change effects are being felt now more than ever before. Even in Malta. With the proposal of having carbon neutrality as an economic pillar and the launch 



Monument commemorating the 1988 Maltese UN initiative which led to the recognition of climate change.
Photo by James Moffett

of the Low Carbon Strategy, we are taking important steps to move towards decarbonisation. One must say achieving it locally is not completely under our control. Malta is an importer of technology, for example. We cannot completely decarbonise as long as exporting countries are producing goods that work with fossil fuels. But of course in Malta, there are other sectors where we as a nation can still do better.

Q: How is Malta going to be affected by climate change?

A: The lack of precipitation is one facet, but so is extreme heat. The impact will be felt mostly in agriculture and food production, for example. Malta imports more than 80% of its food, which creates a trade imbalance and affects our expenditure. Beyond the cost of importing even more food in the future, however, there is the question of food security. In times of crisis, like COVID-19, where the ports and factories are suddenly closed, the importation of food and resources becomes an issue. This is a part of our critical infrastructure which is going to become more vulnerable. Predictions for the Mediterranean indicate more severe weather events.

We will also be affected in other areas, such as tourism. Will tourists want to come here in the summer months? Even if Malta is sought after as a destination throughout the year, it's the summer period which is the most popular and most lucrative.

As regards sea level rise, we can have inundation in the low-lying east coast. Saltwater intrusion into our water table is a real danger. Sea level rise will also affect us in terms of coastal erosion. Saltwater will infiltrate low-lying areas like


Pwales, Burmarrad, Marsa, Qormi, and others. Currently a study on coastal erosion is taking place that will take sea level rise predictions, but we still need more studies and modelling to know what to expect as regards sea level rise.

Q: Then one can expect more of this, as heat waves become more frequent and more intense. Has Malta been able to tackle this subject diplomatically on a European level, too?

A: On the topic of adaptation, Malta had a very important role, as it was a chief actor in putting it on the agenda of the European Union. The European Union has an interesting, interactive website called Climate ADAPT (climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu). It gives one a picture of how climate will affect various countries. Another aspect Malta has focused on in terms of climate change is its impact on oceans. Malta has also worked hard to put the impact of climate change on our oceans on the map. If one looks at the Planetary Boundaries report, it explains the linkages between our natural resources. If one part of the system fails, the rest collapses. It is important we do not work in policy silos. There is also the IPCC SROCC report (www.ipcc.ch/srocc) which examines the climate-oceans nexus.

Q: So, how can Malta actually adapt?

A: The best thing we can do to adapt to climate change is to implement the laws we have that protect the sustainability of resources such as water, habitats, and biodiversity. For example, Malta has been working on holistic water management projects to repolish waste water and has been fixing leakages in our water infrastructure. However, although we can adapt to the problems, this comes at an economic



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price, and the continued drought and desertification will definitely impact the agricultural sector and its community. The agricultural community is a very unique feature of Maltese culture. It is a vulnerable cultural group, characteristic of our nation. While preparedness can help, adaptation may still not be enough for some impacts, and at times, we can only facilitate adaptation. Such as, for example, with natural habitats. Human beings can protect them better but not directly ensure their adaptation. That is in nature's hands.

Q: Will farmers truly be able to adapt or is the sort of desertification we are talking about taking us beyond a point of no return?

A: Supplying water as needed can help. Various nations have deserts which can grow crops due to technology, but desertification will definitely lead to a more vulnerable community, which requires change and a shift from current practices. There are some countries we can look at for inspiration, like Israel, which has successfully lived with aridity and manages to conduct desert agriculture. This comes at a cost, however, and although humans can imitate nature, they can never replace it altogether or replace its beneficial functions.

Q: Would you know how we can adapt in terms of the impact on our biodiversity?

A: That is more difficult because natural biodiversity depends on natural precipitation. We can water natural habitats, but the animals in a natural habitat will find it more difficult to adapt. There is not enough time for species to adapt with the sort of changes we are facing in such a short time. Furthermore,

being a small country, some habitats are completely unique to their location, and species have nowhere else to go especially due to Malta's small size and urbanisation.

We are also witnessing an influx of alien species due to the increased temperatures. This is being felt to an even worse degree in the marine environment.

Q: So it seems Malta has played quite a role in climate change policy, but clearly a lot still needs to be done. Where might readers find more sources of information?

A: The University of Malta is doing a lot of work through the Institute for Climate Change and Sustainable Development, the Institute for Earth Systems, the Institute for Renewable Energy, the Faculty for the Built Environment, the Institute for Small Island States, the Faculty of Engineering, and the Centre for Environmental Education and Research. There are others as well. All these institutes form part of the university's Climate Platform. We are a group of academics who promote research and exchange academic learning on climate change.

The University of Malta gave an honoris causa degree to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon, in 2009. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon had mentioned Malta in his very first address due to its work on climate change. In his visit to Malta, he inaugurated a monument on climate change at the University of Malta. He was instrumental in achieving the Paris Climate Accord. Malta has quite a legacy, and we need to be more ambitious to live up to that legacy. 