

Two sides of the construction industry



The Malta Independent last Tuesday reported that "a spokesman for the Resources and Infrastructure Ministry (said) yesterday that extreme care was being taken so that building material does not end up in the sea". This photo taken during the works suggests otherwise, with some of the ministry workers deliberately throwing debris into the sea. More emphasis should be placed on worker education.

Janus-like (two-faced) situations appeal to me and the oft-mentioned economic input of the construction industry is a good example. On one hand, people who blow the industry's trumpet say that 20 per cent of the country's output comes from real estate and construction, that 9,000 permits were issued for property developments last year and that the industry directly or indirectly injects Lm200 million into the economy.

Such short-sighted calculations do not include the environmental impact into the equation, contrary to the emerging field of environmental economics. Fortunately, the pro-construction mould is periodically broken, as testified in the recently published Third Draft of the Sustainable Development Strategy for the Maltese Islands (2006-2016), which candidly state:

"Contrary to what is often thought, construction and quarrying are relatively small sectors in the Maltese economy, directly generating about five per cent to GDP"...although "these industries have considerable inter-industry linkages and therefore generate income and employment in other sectors of the economy".

An interesting suggestion forwarded in the same draft is to "impose short deadlines for finishing the building so as not to leave structures in 'shell form' for more than a specified number of months" - such a measure would possibly help to mitigate the vacant dwellings problem.

The construction industry's overblown bearing on the economy hogged the limelight recently when the MEPA Board approved a quarry covering 13,786 m² in an ODZ area near Wied Merrill and Wied Ghorof, the proposed Dwejra Heritage Park and San Lawrenz village.

What one finds irksome is that MEPA's directorate chose to ignore the minerals directorate recommendation for an outright refusal, given the national park's candidacy as a World Heritage Site and the Malta.

Resources Authority objection on account of the resulting impact on the surface water course, and that the same site has been under an enforcement notice since 1998.

Especially galling is the fact that the case officer's report warns that if permission is not granted for the site, the operator would have no other option but to close it and leave it in a derelict state - so the major incentive for quarry operators to rehabilitate areas they have exploited is to grant them quarry extensions, rather than the need for rehabilitation being mandatory in local legislation in view of the environmental impacts of quarrying.

The economic (and political) clout wielded by the construction industry locally transpires from the same case officer's report, who states that the major problem with construction and quarrying is that these activities are associated with environmental damage and undesirable practices.

"The building industry is essential to the economy of our sister island," reads a report from the MEPA directorate, which is recommending the sanctioning and extension of an illegal quarry next to a candidate World Heritage Site - the Dwejra national park in Gozo.

The case officer report, in very clear terms, underlines the power of the construction industry. "The principal justification for the sanctioning and extension of this quarry lies in the need to ensure an adequate and steady supply of dimension stone to the construction industry in Gozo" and from the fact that that the MEPA board wasted two hours discussing the developer's objections to the bank guarantees and mitigation measures proposed by MEPA. At the end of the day, the quarry developer was allowed to have his cake and eat it, having to deposit a puny bank guarantee of Lm8,000, and exonerated from presenting a bank guarantee to restore a field room identified for protection by the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage.

Through such spineless decisions, the MEPA Board is ensuring that developers in general feel free to shirk their civic/social responsibility and that, even though presenting MEPA with a fait accompli (i.e. flouting the law) may result in an innocuous enforcement notice and later in development permission.

Bishop's sound political guidelines

In a meeting with AD chairman Harry Vassallo and as reported by The Times of April 4, Gozo Bishop Mario Grech said the work of Christian politicians should be guided by the Gospel and the Church's teachings. This is a sound guideline indeed since, among others things, it bodes well for the environment since the Gospel, as repeatedly expounded by the Church's Green Commission, places the mantle of stewardship around man, to take care of God's creation - hence, a practicing Christian politician should also be a green one.

Mgr Grech was quoted by The Times as saying that "Christian politicians should always place man as the centre of their attention" - "the individual" would have been more amenable in the context than "man", so as not to misconstrue the message into meaning that man should have preferential treatment over the rest of creation.

GRTU opposition

Everyone in this country pays lip service to the environment - so the GRTU would be no exception. However, although, as Dr Chris Ciantar, director of Environmental Policy and Initiatives within the MRAE, aptly stated, Malta must recover a minimum of 51 per cent of waste and recycle 45 per cent of it and that the obligation for this was on the producer or the importer, the GRTU protested vehemently earlier this month against the 'imposed' deposit scheme through which all beverage containers - including plastic bottles, cans and carton packs - will be collected by shop owners.

The GRTU has also ruled out a compensation system, effectively sounding the death knell for the possible increase in product recovery in this country, a cornerstone of the 3R system; the same association has gone a step further in expressing its disapproval of the current, operational deposits scheme for refillable glass bottles.

It seems that while waste reduction and management systems are run of the mill in other EU countries, they are still hindered by the tantrums of some interested party. Where's our civic sense?

Aquilina's tribute to the Works Ministry

Hats off to Annalise Falzon of Nature Trust for highlighting the following intriguing coincidence: the entry in Aquilina's English-Maltese dictionary under the word 'approach' gives this example: "We must approach the Minister of Works about the damage to the countryside", with the appropriate Maltese translation.

Silver linings

Urban regeneration scheme - a new urban regeneration scheme intended to boost the supply of affordable housing was launched at the end of last month by the Housing Authority together with the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, for a total fund allocation of Lm3 million.

Such a scheme is to be commended as it aims to buy existing and older housing, preferably in urban core areas, which can then be redeveloped and eventually allocated under shared ownership, sheltered housing, or social housing for rent. As a result, the problem of having 23 per cent of our properties vacant (60 per cent of which are new or in a relatively good state) could be mitigated.

Blue Flag launch by NTM - the Blue Flag environment programme for beaches and marinas in Malta was launched by Nature Trust in collaboration with the Malta Tourism Authority on April 21. The aim is for the island to join other countries accredited to the international eco-label within two years and making it onto the Blue Flag beach map would also help promote Malta and its tourism industry.

The Blue Flag is one of the environmental education programmes of the Foundation for Environmental Education in Europe (FEEE), which aims to promote sustainable development.

The exclusive eco-label is awarded to beaches and marinas that meet strict criteria on water quality, environmental education and information, environmental management, safety and other related services. Some of the issues involved include cleanliness, provisions for waste, and recycling and zoning of activities. Developed in France, the Blue Flag concept is now 20 years old and has since developed on a European level and beyond.

In 2005, the eco-label was awarded to around 3,100 beaches and marinas in 35 countries across Europe, South Africa, New Zealand, Canada and the Caribbean. A possible lacuna in the Blue Flag programme is that it could fuel the 'cleaning' of our beaches from seagrass

debris (banquettes), which, despite its ecological and geomorphological importance, are often denigrated as simple waste.

MEPA wins more funds for marine protection - the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) has obtained 64,000 euros from the European Union (EU) Interreg 3C programme to participate in a network of agencies involved in designating and managing of marine protected areas (MPAs) in the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean Coastal and Marine Protected Areas Network (MEDPAN), led by the World Wildlife Fund of France (WWF France) was officially launched in 2005. It aimed to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experience among the managers of coastal and marine protected areas.