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The Structure Plan for the Maltese Islands

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Abstract. *The rapid decline in agricultural land area since the late fifties and the environmental decay and landscape deterioration that have ensued thereof has called for a serious evaluation of the physical planning system in Malta. The "Structure Plan" is a necessary instrument to reconcile competing landuses, to preserve the island's rural areas as well as promote and enhance their amenity value. These factors should be placed in the perspective with which the nation presents itself: that of an island with scarce agricultural land, lack of natural resources including potable water and strong population pressures.*

Titre. Le Plan de Structure pour les îles maltaises.

Résumé. La diminution rapide des terres agricoles à la fin des années 1950, entraînant la dégradation de l'environnement et la détérioration paysagère, a contraint à une importante réévaluation des méthodes de planification. Le "Plan de Structure" est un instrument indispensable permettant de réconcilier des utilisations concurrentes des terres et de préserver les zones rurales tout en favorisant et améliorant leur aménagement. Ces contraintes doivent être considérées en fonction des particularités nationales : une île où il y a peu de terres agricoles, peu de ressources naturelles (y compris l'eau potable), et une forte pression démographique.

Keywords. Landscape – Agriculture – Landuse – Ecology – Rural – Structure Plan – Environment – Environmental impact assessment – Conservation.

Malta's landscape is characterised by an interlock among the coast, the rock garrigue, the agricultural land articulated by a footpath and a dry wall construction pattern and the cubistic forms of the settlements which up to this day are constructed by methods which are akin to the historic settlements (and are actually a degeneration of their historic precedents). Variety is afforded in this small island's landscape by the presence of small areas of landscape and ecological value, narrow dry valleys, seasonal springs, rare salt marsh and sand dune habitats, caves, wetlands, pockets of local forest remnants, karstland, sparse maquis areas, cliff habitats and smaller islands.

The post-independence period has been one of rapid growth in the area occupied by settlement on the Maltese Islands, accompanied by a decrease in the number of full-time farmers and of registered cultivated land. The agricultural area has declined by 18% of the total land area of the Maltese Islands, in the period between 1957 and 1983.

Urban sprawl has seriously affected the overall balance between rural and built-up areas, bringing about the loss of identity of the different centres. New developments have often been located and designed without any concern for topographical and landscape features. The continuity of the rural pattern of field features and farm buildings has been completely disregarded by insensitive road networks and building alignments. Major landmarks in the rural landscape such as windmills, churches and urban skylines are now engulfed or mostly hidden by haphazard developments.

Environmental decay and landscape deterioration are also caused by quarrying. Given Malta's dependence on external sources of wealth and food, the abandonment of dry-farmed fields is significant

of long-term food security. It may well be that the risks have to be accepted. However, the fields themselves still constitute an important recreational and amenity resource. Responsibility for the management of the fields in the context of their alternative resource value rests to an important extent with central government (in contrast with the responsibility for the fields as agricultural resources, which lay with individuals).

One of the major landuse problems now facing the Maltese authorities is how to achieve this transformation. Without firm policies, their fields will be lost not only as an agricultural resource but also as recreational and amenity resources.

Malta is now truly a case in which policies promoting sustainable development into the rural areas of the country are strictly controlled, especially, when considering that 16% of the island is already built-up.

On taking office, the present government made, as part of its political commitment, the setting up of a physical planning system and the drawing up of the Structure Plan.

The Building Permits (Temporary Provisions) Act of 1988 provided a statutory framework for the setting up of 'a more organic planning system' to take on board the functions of the present development control system and the drawing up of the structure plan within two years from the coming into effect of the Act.

In addition, surveys were initiated for the inventorying of various aspects of the Maltese landscape namely:

1. A crop cultivation survey¹;
2. A survey of areas of ecological importance²;
3. A survey of coastal landuses³;
4. An inventory of archaeological sites⁴;
5. A quarries survey⁵.

The report of survey preceding the drafting of the final document points out the importance of the surveying and inventorying of natural and man-made resources to be earmarked for protection. This is of use if it is also followed by publicity and educational campaigns as well as having the necessary legal protection enforced.

The need for landuse planning was felt as public awareness of the scarcity of land resources and the effects of uncontrolled building development on the Maltese countryside grew. A rational use of land is thus becoming a concern of the Maltese society coupled by an increase in expectations with respect to higher living standards.

Modern schools of planning are linking landuse and landscape planning into disciplines that are very much interrelated. This results from the importance being given to the stewardship of the environment in the international scene especially in the European Community. The Structure Plan for the Maltese Islands will be a necessary instrument for the control of development in a country which aspires to become a member of this Community. This plan has to deal with the conciliation of competing landuses and the limitations of an increasingly fragile ecology of the landscape.

It identified a number of objectives namely :

1. To provide a strategic direction and context to guide both government and private sector in matters concerning Malta's development over the next twenty years.
2. To provide a context for policies to be applied in evaluating proposals for development.
3. To provide a strategic context for the preparation of site-specific local plans and subject plans.

4. To encourage further social and economic development and to ensure as far as possible that sufficient land and support infrastructure are available to accommodate it.
5. To use land and buildings efficiently and consequently to channel development activity into existing and committed urban areas, particularly through a renovation and upgrading of the existing fabric and infrastructure, thus constraining further development inroads into rural land and generally resulting in higher density development than at present.

The conservation of rural areas has been given top priority in the structure plan document as can be seen by the relatively high number of policies relating to this field: out of 320 policies 42 refer directly to rural conservation.

Additionally, there are references pointing towards rural conservation in other policy areas. Not only figures suggest this, but also necessity arising from the reality of the present state of affairs in Malta's context, the world context, and the future that land use planning has to follow for the benefit of the local community.

The aspect of agriculture, horticulture and fisheries is treated in a section of the Structure Plan related to it. When compared to other land uses, agriculture is seen as a major land use of the Maltese Islands. A reference is also made to the conservation of agricultural land of high value in policies on rural conservation. This policy is being cited below.

"Policy RCO 1: Rural conservation areas are designated as illustrated in the key diagram. Within such areas, the following subareas will be designated, World Conservation Union definitions and criteria where relevant.

1. Areas of agricultural value: areas comprised of high-grade agricultural land including irrigated and partially irrigated areas..."

Apart from the aspect of protection of agriculture land as a policy, there are various problems with respect to agriculture and fisheries which are being treated at strategic level as stated in policy AHF 1:

"Major improvements in agriculture, horticulture and fisheries will be encouraged so that:

1. The sector assists the overall economy of the country through reduced imports and increased exports.
2. Better quality products are available to domestic consumers.
3. The countryside land resource is used efficiently and does not become derelict.
4. Food supplies are safeguarded for the benefit of future generations.
5. The countryside is safeguarded for the benefit of future generations."

Tighter assessment is being proposed for the granting of development permits for agricultural buildings which have been locked by development in urbanised areas.

In this respect it is envisaged that detailed guidelines will be developed to control the standard of design and layout of such buildings so that the rural environment and landscape are not marred unnecessarily.

Agricultural activity is itself an important part of the landscape of the Maltese Islands which should be conserved both for its cultural/associational value and for its visual qualities that enrich landscape. Particular attention is being given to the continuation of the dry wall construction so typical of the Maltese Island's landscape especially enriching the hillside terraced fields, which are progressively being degraded due to abandonment of agricultural activity in hill areas. Within this context incentive schemes are to be drawn up to assist in such maintenance work.

The new planning bill delegates the responsibility for reviewing the Structure Plan, preparing detailed plans and the co-ordination of their implementation to a planning authority as an agency responsible for development planning matters. The authority would be supported by a planning directorate providing all administrative and technical services.

The Authority would be composed of representatives from the ministries of environment, social policy, economic affairs, agriculture and infrastructure. Other members would represent private interests including commercial and industrial activities, social and community affairs and environment. Two of them would be members of parliament. Central to the new planning process is a process for decision-making which is open to public scrutiny and involves as much as possible a wide spectrum of public opinion. The proposed legislation provides for this in various ways. The meetings of the Authority would be open to the public when matters regarding development permits are under discussion. A planning consultative committee, composed of members from organisations representative of various aspects of life in Malta, will also be set up. The functions of this committee would be to advise government and the authority on any policy or proposal contained in the development plans.

In order not to saddle the authority with discussions, it would be assisted by a development control commission replacing the current functions of the Planning Area Permits Board (PAPB) and the Aesthetics Board. These are at present the only two institutional structures statutorily responsible for the issue of development permits.

In respect of control of development, private developers as well as government departments would be subject to submitting their proposals to control procedures for which the authority would be responsible of putting in place. Review of decisions by the authority would be subject to consideration by an appeals board.

Measures are also being taken to include the environmental impact assessment (EIA) into the development control process. Regulations covering the EIA process will be issued in due course and are in the stage of public consultation. Due to the size of the Maltese islands more stringent measures are to be adopted so that more projects will come under scrutiny from the environment point of view when compared to normal EC procedures. The system would also include what are termed as environmental planning statements.

The environmental planning statement (EPS) is a document in support of a planning application designed to provide the information necessary for planning staff to evaluate the proposal against the approved policies for the type of development in the location proposed and to assess the environmental impacts likely to arise, in particular, any significant environmental effects on the surrounding areas and effects on sensitive environments. Threshold for the different types of statements will be included in the regulations governing environmental impact assessment procedures.

There is a long way forward to be followed so that the planning process in Malta changes from negative legislation to positive measures urging the proper management of the Maltese countryside especially by the encouragement of agricultural activity in acceptable forms of landuse and management practice.

A lot of collaboration has been started with nongovernment organisations (NGOs) but more has to be done so that effective management of rural areas starts to take place with the farming community, the planning, environment and agriculture authorities and NGOs.

The structure would have the function of co-ordinating the effort from various quarters so that a dynamic process for conservation of rural areas is initiated and continued.

The process of collaboration could, in some ways, be increased by the creation of a ministry for the environment to include the department for the protection of the environment, the government estate management agency, the public works department and the various agencies responsible for the

provision of the utilities. However, this superministry concept could in some ways be a hindrance to environmental protection since its clout in influencing the process of particular developments could be suffocated and overwhelmed by stronger influences from agencies responsible for the development of infrastructure and works.

On the other hand, this development could be responsible for the resolution of conflicts that exist between the Environment Protection Act and the Development Planning Act which has a strong environmental slant, assigning the relevant role to each agency. Certainly there is a strong overlap of interests between these functions and this accentuates the need of strong collaboration and co-ordination between both departments. This is especially so in the context of such a confined and minuscule regional context of a small island state.

At the time of preparation of this article, the first structure plan for the Maltese Islands started to be discussed in Parliament, thus undergoing its process of approval making it a legal policy document. This will also be the start of the process of its implementation which would also necessitate the input of considerable resources especially for its implementation and periodic review. The initiation and following up of proposals stated in the form of a strategy in the structure plan augur well for the future of agriculture and rural Malta.

Notes

1. The crop cultivation survey is mainly concerned with the delineation of sites in terms of the type of crops and the number of times the particular land is used during the year. The original survey was based on an eight-tiered classification, but for the purpose of structure planning this classification was too refined and thus an amalgamation of the different classes was used resulting in a four-tiered classification. The original survey was carried out in collaboration with the College of Agriculture and ground survey work was done by students of the college with the help of officials from the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. The Structure Plan is proposing that in future a survey of the potential of agricultural land will be carried out so that it is protected according to potential productivity value.
2. The survey of areas of ecological importance was carried out with the help of a student from the University of Malta and a professor from the Department of Biology of the same university. It was mainly concerned with the delineation of sites for the protection of flora and fauna found within them and the grading of their protection value according to their rarity—high protection is given to endemic species which are found in particular spots on the island and those that are only found in the Maltese Islands.
3. The survey of the coastal landuses consisted of the mapping of existing landuses affecting the coastline starting from the line of wash inland to varying distances. The survey included comparative statistics between the various factors that were being measured, as well as an outline proposal statement for the better use of the coastline resource and its protection.
4. The inventory of archaeological sites consisted of the recording of the location coordinates of each site and a description of the elements to be found within each as well as the degree of protection to be assigned to each. This data was subsequently compiled in collaboration with the University of Malta.
5. The quarries survey consisted in the delineation of boundaries, most of the work being carried out with the help of aerial photographs and site inspections. The delineation included a rough location of disused and reclaimed quarries. This data will help in the establishment of a development planning system for quarrying operations, as well as in the assessment of the amount of quarry reclamation which has to be carried out in the future.

