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Population, Households and Urban Density

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Abstract. *Malta's population is very high particularly when compared to the land area and is expected to increase over the next decades, albeit at a reduced rate. In addition, it is anticipated that the number of households will increase hence dictating a larger number of smaller dwelling units. This population pressure will necessarily have profound implications on the environment. The costs of desalination output are expected to rise whilst crucial decisions will need to be taken on the expansion of existing power stations (or the construction of new ones) and the disposal of their waste products.*

Titre. Population, ménages et densité urbaine.

Résumé. La population maltaise est dense par rapport à la superficie de l'île et elle devrait encore augmenter dans les prochaines décennies, à un taux moins élevé toutefois. On s'attend, de surcroît, à ce que le nombre des ménages augmente entraînant la construction d'un grand nombre de petites unités d'habitation. La pression démographique aura nécessairement des implications profondes sur l'environnement. Le coût de dessalination de l'eau risque d'augmenter alors qu'on sera amené à prendre des décisions très importantes concernant le développement de centrales électriques existantes (ou la construction de nouvelles centrales) et l'utilisation de leurs déchets.

Keywords. Environment – Urban density – Population – Households – Water resources – Energy – Housing.

The Maltese population is very high compared to the Island's land area and this has important implications in terms of impact on available resources, particularly land and its use. The population count in 1985, the year of the last census, was 340,559, while it is now estimated to be 361,706 (September 1992 estimate); the projected population in the year 2000 is estimated to reach 377,253 and that for 2010, 393,984 (Malta, Ministry for Development of Infrastructure, 1990). The figure for 2010 represents an increase of 15.7% over that for 1985. Attendant to this increase will be a much higher population in the older age classes. For Maltese aged 60 and over, an increase from about 48,304 in 1990 to about 75,692 in 2010 is predicted, that is, an increase of about 57%.

With respect to households the trend is for an overall increase in number, however, socio-cultural factors (for example, a shift from extended families to nuclear families and the increasing number of unmarried adults establishing single person households) are dictating larger numbers of smaller units relative to the population; thus the number of households is expected to increase from about 110,498 in 1990 to about 132,355 in 2010, representing an increase of some 20% compared to an increase of only 11% in the population.

It is not difficult to predict possible impact effects of the above projections on the environment. A key impact will be on the production of potable water. In 1990 the Islands depended on desalination plants for 46% of the water supply. Since then, another reverse osmosis (RO) plant at Pembroke has come on stream, raising the proportion of desalinated water to more than 50% of the total production. The remainder is mainly pumped from the Main Sea-level Aquifers. A recently completed study of the

aquifers by the Water Works Department has shown that extraction from underground resources needs to be reduced to maintain a sustainable yield of potable water and to improve water quality, which has deteriorated markedly after many years of indiscriminate extraction. Continued reliance on desalination, however, means that more RO plants will be required to cater for the projected increase in population and number of households, and an assumed increase in the standard of living. RO plants have to be situated close to the coast on low-lying ground to avoid heavy pumping costs and the available technology depends totally on electricity for its power supply. This in turn dictates an increase in power generation capacity. Given that the Islands have no fossil fuel resources at present, and all coal and oil burnt at local power stations have to be imported, the economic costs of increasing desalination output are likely to be very high.

Over and above all this there is the additional problem of constructing new power stations and disposing of their waste products. The present power station at Marsa has been expanded to capacity, and a new power station has been constructed at Delimara. The unavoidable negative impact on the environment has been high, particularly since Delimara was a relatively undeveloped area. While phase 1 and phase 2 of the new power station are projected to cater for all Malta's energy needs until at least the year 2005, higher power requirements will necessitate expansion of the Delimara station (a decision about expanding this will be taken in 1994) or building new ones, resulting in further environmental disruption. The problem of disposing of ash from the Marsa power station has yet to be solved.

It has already been stated that Malta has one of the highest population densities in the world. Although true, this statement can be misleading and needs some qualification. Many countries are mostly rural, which reduces the gross population density. Therefore it is more meaningful to compare urban densities, that is, the number of persons per developed hectare (p/ha). The Maltese Islands' overall urban density is 75 p/ha while that of the most densely populated area, the Inner Harbour Region, where there is a very low proportion of unbuilt space, is 134 p/ha.

A number of socio-economic factors contribute to this situation of relatively low urban densities. During the 1980s development schemes were greatly extended and the Government of the day had a very active policy of Home Ownership Schemes (HOS). The aim was to provide cheap plots of land on which the new owners would build their own dwelling. This policy did not address the problem of social or substandard housing. The location of these new housing estates left much to be desired. Many were situated away from existing urban areas and outside the old development schemes, largely because of low expropriation prices and probably also for socio-political reasons, for example, increasing the size of constituencies. To make matters worse, the size of most plots was large, having an average of around 300 m² of floor space.

Another contributing factor is the existing rent legislation which gives total security of tenure to the tenant. This has practically frozen the rental market, and together with explicit Government encouragement, has made for a large number of home owners; c. 60% of all households were occupier-owned in 1990. This state of affairs has created a situation where there is reduced mobility; rather than renting accommodation tailored to the size of the family unit and then moving to new, larger (or smaller) accommodation as family size increases (or decreases), dwellings are constructed for the largest size eventually required during a person's life. An obvious result is lack of proper utilization of resources and uneconomical use of land.

Reference

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