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DOES OUR ENVIRONMENT HAVE TO ENDURE THIS MUCH?

STATEMENT BY THE CHURCH ENVIRONMENT COMMISSION

The Interdiocesan Environment Commission (KA) cannot understand why some are surprised that our country is facing a crisis when it comes to construction waste. What has long been crystal clear to people with a strategic vision, does not seem to have been so obvious to whoever was or is responsible for generating such waste and to the authorities who should have devised plans to avoid ending up in the situation we are in today long ago.

The authorities have for many years shirked their responsibility to plan long term, and have allowed some enterprises in the economic sector to become rich beyond the dream of avarice, to the detriment of all and sundry. And now that those who have been having it so good are feeling the pinch, they are expecting Malta to shoulder the brunt of their excesses.

The KA feels that before thinking of a solution, one needs to reflect on where the roots of the problem exactly lie, i.e. (a) the economic policies that have never taken into account waste and its impact on the environment, and (b) the bad practice in the construction industry where shortsightedness betrays a complete lack of interest in a sustainable future. According to the polluter pays principle, the onus should fall on those, who for years on end irrespective of whoever was governing the country at the time, have used unsustainable means of construction to generate wealth, sending a great quantity of Maltese stone to the landfills. When it comes to spaces available for dumping waste, it is being said that “the demand is far greater than the supply”. If this were true, we have a clear admission that the current development is anything but sustainable, and that we have gone beyond the carrying capacity of our country.

These unsustainable practices have carried on in spite of:

- a) the repeated warnings from various sectors on the need to exercise some form of control in this industry;

- b) the vain promises that we will have a completely sustainable construction industry;
- c) the fact that the craving for more building has continued without a thorough study on where such practice is taking the country; and
- d) the efforts to suppress the true impact of the building industry on waste generation, and the negative impact on the social, architectural and environmental fabric of our islands, and on public health.

And now that the problem has grown disproportionately, (it is being branded as urgent because the interests of those who have stood to gain from the very creation of this problem are under threat), we, the common citizens, are expected, without any consideration, to cast it aside by literally dumping it into the sea, so construction can continue unabated. Since it is being assumed that land reclamation is the only way forward for our islands to continue to prosper (although this is highly debatable), the KA feels that the following points are to be taken into account:

- a) the marine biodiversity in our islands should be protected. The sea is a great natural resource and it contributes highly to our economic, environmental and social well being. If we are to treat it as a new dumping site to cover up what we wouldn't like to see, we would once again be deluding ourselves into thinking that we have found a solution to the problem of excessive waste resulting from the unsustainable activity of the building industry, and gradually induce a localised or total collapse in our marine ecosystem.
- b) an Environmental Impact Assessment and other relevant studies, satisfying the Strategic Environmental Assessment directive should be mandatory and made public. Moreover, due consideration should be given to studies which have already been carried out. This would help one establish whether reclamation is actually needed, and also where and what alternatives exist, so that environmental consequences are kept to the barest minimum.
- c) the dimensions of the reclamation (if this is found to be really necessary) has to be meticulously calculated and should not be determined simply by the quantity of rubble which needs to be disposed of.
- d) the criteria for the choice of the site should not be dictated by the commercial interests of whoever would like to develop reclaimed land; of whoever stands to gain from reclamation in a particular zone thanks to any right s/he may have on it, or by anyone who may have a personal interest of whatever nature; and

- e) we should not be misled into thinking that once land is reclaimed there will more open spaces and consequently more natural parks, gardens and/or similar green expanses offering an oasis of rest and relaxation. In any case, common sense dictates that we should preserve the open spaces we already have. Destroying these to create new ones would be utterly absurd! Moreover, one would do well to remember the plans for the land earmarked for reclamation in the Paceville masterplan. No natural open spaces were mentioned then!

The problem related to construction waste has been with us for many years, but it seems that nobody has ever shown any real interest to address it thoroughly and in the long term. Along the years we have failed to find a way whereby developers are made to shoulder more responsibility for the waste they are generating, and consequently, there was no awareness about the issue at the outset of new projects. This led to the creation of Magħtab – a mountain of construction and excavation waste! We have never looked into a long term plan of sustainable management, with the result that with the number of projects underway and massive ones in the pipeline, we are grasping at straws! Hence the pressing need of a long term plan that does not rely on a single solution.

Construction waste should primarily be reduced. On the other hand, it should not be seen as a problem to be tackled by someone else, sooner or later, but as a responsibility to be borne also by the developers themselves. We need to apply set standards for controlled demolition, with the aim of separating and recycling material, and promote practices that are more sustainable and discourage waste. We also need to explore the potential of construction and demolition waste as a resource.

As proposals for huge projects and spacious structures are being approved (or put aside until a technical detail justifying their approval is found) one must be sensitive to the cry of the majority of the Maltese who can no longer bear to witness the destruction of their homeland through uncontrolled construction. The basic issue still remains: Whose interests will be safeguarded? Those of the common citizen who is obliged to pay for the abuse of others? Or those of irresponsible egoists who think that they are above the law and that their money can buy anything and anyone?

The KA feels that once again it is high time for whoever is responsible to defend the interest of each and every Maltese by devising long term plans and policies that guarantee a framework of sustainability for the benefit of present and future generations. Ultimately, it is in the interest of all those involved in the building industry that this industry becomes really and truly sustainable.