



THE MALTA CHAMBER

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The Malta Chamber and AIS Environment conference addresses Malta's spatial and sustainability challenges

Malta stands at a crossroads. With little land, a growing population, fast urban growth, and more pressure on the environment, businesses are struggling to work in one of Europe's most crowded places. Traffic jams and overloaded roads and services are making daily life harder—and raising serious concerns about Malta's future success and ability to stay green.

In response to these growing challenges, The Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry, in collaboration with AIS Environment, organised the 'Navigating Development and Growth in a Constrained Island' conference. The event brought together business leaders, industry experts, policymakers and government authorities to assess Malta's current trajectory and explore strategies that foster sustainable economic growth while safeguarding environmental and social well-being.

Speaking on behalf of The Malta Chamber, David Felice underscored that the discussion introduces several fundamental themes, including land use, mobility, infrastructure capacity, air and noise quality, and public health. "Equally important are the contradictions and complexities that emerge when these themes intersect, and how precariously they balance the pursuit of economic growth with the safeguarding of our environmental and social well-being," he noted. Felice further remarked that the conference programme suggests Malta stands at a crossroads, and we have been for a while.

In his opening address, Mario Schembri, Founder of AIS Group, highlighted that Malta's economic boom, fuelled by attracting foreign workers to fill jobs, has not only led to record population numbers, but also raised concerns about societal strain and the sustainability of growth on a small island. "The focus should shift from fears of cultural dilution to managing the pressures of rapid development on infrastructure, communities, and long-term resilience," he noted. He also queried "How many more people, infrastructure, buildings, roads can we add on this constrained island to maintain a wealthy and healthy nation? Without understanding these new pressures on our communities, who knows which proverbial straw is going to break our economy's back."

The consultants at AIS Environment performed a detailed study on the status quo of the Maltese Islands. Through a combination of data collection, interviews with key experts, and surveys amongst the members of the Chamber, they examined Malta's current situation in terms of population, tourism, land use, waste, transport, noise, mental health, air quality and others. Sacha Dunlop, Head of Operations at AIS Environment, presented the results of this assessment and highlighted the sectors under critical pressure. He stated that "Our growing population and rising tourism numbers are placing enormous strain on our infrastructure, communities, and environment. These pressures include worsening traffic, inadequate air quality, chronic noise pollution, and declining mental

wellbeing, among other impacts. Malta's long-term economic success hinges on placing wellbeing and quality of life at the centre of national decision-making. This requires aligning our migration, education, environmental, and social policies, and by demonstrating the determination to implement and enforce them when necessary. It is not enough to slow the pace of change or the intensification of current pressures. Policymakers must confront our capacity limits head-on, tackle the issues affecting Malta today, and set out a clear, resilient, and sustainable path for our country's future."

By extrapolating future trajectories based on current trends, the investigative team studied where our current paths, without mitigation, would lead. The results were concerning. One such finding, presented by Ms Yasmin Schembri, was that based on current rate of growth in our vehicle stock, Malta could see about 730,000 registered vehicles in Malta by 2050. Parking all these vehicles side by side would take up the entire area of Attard, or 8% of Malta's entire built-up area. Considering that 68% of the interviewed Malta Chamber members agreed that their business is being impacted by Malta's current and worsening traffic problems, she raised the alarm on how our chronic addiction to cars will continue to impact our economy. Yasmin closed off her presentation by putting forward several recommendations for how to mitigate the impacts our growing economy is having on our wellbeing and environment. She emphasised that "Malta should focus on building an economy that is both prosperous and viable in the long-term — one that thrives, without compromising environmental integrity or social wellbeing. This can be achieved by changing our mindset from quantity to quality, achieving higher returns from less human and material resources."

A panel discussion, moderated by Alistair Grima, Policy Executive (Sustainability), The Malta Chamber focused on the theme of 'Adapting for Tomorrow: Turning Constraints into Opportunities'.

Asked why Malta is apparently struggling to adopt sustainable planning and construction practices, Simone Vella Lenicker, Partner at AP Valletta, stated that the only answer is a lack of will. "Malta has ample legislation and policies in place to ensure sustainability in this sector, yet we persistently seem to ignore them," she stated.

She referred to a quote by Quentin Hughes, former Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, who stated in an interview carried out by the Architectural Review had stated that "the greatest problem the Maltese have to face concerns how their island ... is going to accommodate all the activities that authorities have suggested should be undertaken on it ... Inevitably these will involve a modification of Malta's natural qualities - of her uniqueness as a place which, over the centuries, has developed in a particular way to fight the sheer inhospitability of the terrain. This is where planning has to be authoritarian. If we are to preserve areas of natural beauty, controls are essential ... If Malta accepts laissez-faire development, the whole island will be obliterated by buildings. And this will take very little time. It will happen unless the planners, architects and the legislators take action very soon."

"This quote is from 1969. For 55 years we have not heeded this warning. Is it now too late? Maybe not, but if we continue to ignore the writing on the wall there will come a time when there will be no turning back," stated Lenicker.

During the panel, Kevin Rapinett, member within The Malta Chamber's Board of Management, emphasised the importance of predictable long-term regulatory frameworks, stronger enforcement, and performance-based incentives to support cleaner investment and circular innovation. He highlighted the need for Vision 2050 to be implemented with consistency and anchored to measurable KPIs that turn ambition into accountability. Bridging the gap between Malta's ambitions

and realities demands integrated planning, transparency, and disciplined implementation that match the scale of Malta's challenges.

Matthew Bartolo, Chair of The Malta Chamber's Health and Wellness Committee, emphasised that "progress matters, but I often remind the companies I coach that growth must be healthy. I hope that Malta is growing big, not growing fat. When we rely on importing more and more workers to keep the economy going, it begins to feel like we are building a fat economy rather than a strong one."

As Malta strives to balance economic ambition with our physical and environmental constraints, AIS and the Malta Chamber reaffirm their commitment to helping the country shape a future that is resilient, responsible, and grounded in evidence. By leading with data and advocating for long-term thinking, AIS and the Malta Chamber will continue to empower Malta's business and policy sectors to act decisively and sustainably.

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