

Talking point

Re-enforcing a broken promise on ODZ

Alex Vella

The Ramblers' Association is alarmed at the sudden proposed amendments to regulations that determine whether projects should be subjected to environmental impact assessments.

The association is particularly concerned with the changing of thresholds for some project categories and with the interpretation of certain project categories. The real motivation behind these amendments becomes doubtful as the small print is read.

Some suggestions, like the construction of homes for the elderly outside development zones (ODZ), are definitely unacceptable. The provision of more homes for the elderly is laudable, but why in ODZ areas? Studies have shown that elderly people prefer localities close to urban centres where they have spent most of their lives. The countryside, like the coastline, just cannot afford to be plundered any more.

When introducing the development zones "rationalisation" exercise back in May 2006, the Minister of the Environment and Rural Affairs promised that new regulations would no longer allow Mepa to sanction illegal developments in ODZ areas. The Ramblers' Association asks: What happened to that promise? Why has "rationalisation" stopped short of that promise? Is the Cabinet aware of Minister George Pullicino's promise or is it a part in breaking that promise?

Pity, such regulations would enormously have benefited the Maltese islands and would have saved both Mepa and the developer a lot of time and money, while safeguarding the little countryside that is left.

The association had also suggested that all existing illegal constructions in ODZ areas be dismantled and the land brought back to its previous state as much as possible. Lessons need to be given and Mepa must be seen to be the efficient enforcer of the law.

The Ramblers' Association has always been against the current practice of Mepa allowing or sanctioning buildings in ODZ areas. It believes that any applications for development in an ODZ area should be rejected outright, with the possible exception of essential, state-driven, infrastructural projects and in the case of applications of a strictly agricultural nature filed by bona fide farmers.

Exceptions should certainly not include unnecessary extensions to farms (often under the excuse of "upgrading"), old people's homes, marinas and, you wait for it, supermarkets.

Exemption from EIA requirements on loose grounds of interpretation can only worsen the plight of the countryside and foreshore.

Sanctioning illegal developments not only discourages law-abiding citizens but creates a vicious circle in that it encourages more illegal development cowboys to take the law in their hands.

The Ramblers' Association fears that the broken promise will, in turn, generate additional "criteria" for more "rationalisation". But that is the old rationale! With the latest amendments, the association fears the ground is

being laid to further facilitate the slaughter of the countryside.

Mr Vella is honorary secretary of the Ramblers' Association of Malta.