

Mepa has lost vision of its mission

Alex Vella

After what has been said and done with respect to the Ramla I-Hamra development of 23 villas, one can draw certain conclusions.

In spite of it being a Monday evening and a hot one at that, the turn-out for the Valletta protest showed the scale of the people's sentiment with respect to the environment in general and to Ramla in particular, confirming the 7,000 signatures raised in just one week. Placards at the protest showed rock-bottom credibility levels enjoyed by Mepa.

The Prime Minister, as head of the government, as promoter of dialogue and transparency, will do well to take heed of a desperate cry from the heart lest all other achievements will fade into the shade of general environmental disillusion. For the disillusion on the state of the environment is widespread, even including some of the usual apologists.

Take heed by reversing the proposed onslaught on Ramla, like he did on the Xaghra I-Hamra issue where his decisive and final U-turn bought over the admiration of all, and showed that U-turns are honourable when taken determinately and for the common good.

For is it not disgraceful that, in the case of Ramla, a photo montage, using a green cover of trees and plastic turf, has been accepted in lieu of an environment impact assessment? Shameful of Mepa to publish the montage to appear as one determinant factor in the granting of the permit. Scandalous that the montage is used on the media not by the developer but by Mepa's PRO to persuade people of the aesthetic viability of the project!

What with the reality that the project is so invasive it relies indispensably on cover? A cover up par excellence! Without cover it is a no go. But it is such cover that Mepa is using to justify its decision to issue the permit What with PRO Sylvana Debono writing daily chapters using these montages, trying to defend the indefensible fabrication? Truth needs no justification!

Her ploy is certainly confusing the issue by diverting attention from the real danger of the clay terrain, from the actual excessively-enlarged footprint, from the tacit taking over of the public path, and from the virtual 12 swimming pools on virgin land.

Take heed that Mepa is not performing to the expectations of the people but succumbing to the insensitive pursuit of the few oligarchs, at an exorbitant cost to the nation, both financial and environmental.

Otherwise, how can one explain the uncontrolled building taking place all over the island with no consideration whatsoever towards neighbourhoods, their lifestyle, health and safety? A case in point is Sliema in general and Tigné in particular, where massive projects were permitted even against Mepa's same local plans and policies. Just mention one local plan that has been adhered to by Mepa itself.

Then how can one explain the ghetto complex at Tigné opposite the beauty of baroque Valletta? Who at Mepa permitted such a scandalous edifice with impunity? Here again we had the project's architect attempting to justify Mepa's repeatedly-revised permit, again promising a metamorphosis once tree cover is put in place.

At the same time, Minister Ninu Zammit was declaring stone balustrades were preferred on the Ta' Xbiex seafront as they harmonise with baroque Valletta opposite!

Take heed that much is amiss with the constitution of Mepa for the reason that planning considerations are riding roughshod over those environmental.

The administrators at Mepa seem to have lost track of the spirit enshrined in its stated mission "to pass onto our children a better country than we inherited. It is for this very reason that we compare our environment to a treasure, something we place our energies in, to protect, care for and improve.

The environment encompasses all - nature, cultural and architectural heritage, towns and villages, the countryside, the seas and air. We believe that together we should carefully plan so that our heritage, this gem which we treasure, will not fade away" (Mepa website).

The multi-million liri institution instead points an accusing finger at the resource-starved NGOs when objections are not raised during the limited outline permit period. So now we have it: Mepa accepts at face value applications to placate the developer and expects the NGOs to seek out evasive tactics or possible loopholes and to object in time. The truth and the widespread knowledge is neglected that, in spite of the NGOs' constant and continual whistle-blowing, together with other individual do-gooders, illegal developments are getting out of hand at an increasingly faster rate.

Has it ever occurred to the Mepa executives that they are paid "to place their energies in, protect, care for and improve" the environment? One doubts the day will come when the authority will at last erase past disturbances for environmental considerations. To rectify past mistakes not perpetrate them.

With hand on heart, the Prime Minister will do well to ask himself whether or not Mepa is living up to its mission. May he wake up to the grim reality that Mepa has lost all credibility. One and all know that Mepa has itself become a montage behind which accountability becomes untraceable for the widespread rampage of the ODZs, its own policies and structure plans.

Start with Ramla to rectify not perpetrate past mistakes.

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