



The Political Evolution of Sustainable Development in the Maltese Islands: A Thirty-Year Analysis (1992-2022)



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Abstract: Sustainable development, a concept of critical importance, has seen increasing integration across various public domains, challenged by the interplay of multifaceted environmental, economic, and social factors under the influence of multi-level governance. This complexity is notably magnified in the context of Malta, a small island state with a dense population exceeding half a million within an area of merely 316 km². The unique conditions of insularity, vulnerability, and the imperative for resilience render the Maltese islands an exemplary case study for examining the dynamics driving sustainable development amidst pressures of burgeoning population growth. This study aims to delineate the historical evolution of sustainable development in Malta over three decades, marked by significant local and international events from 1992 to 2022. Employing a qualitative methodology, a thorough chronological analysis is conducted, leveraging a diverse array of sources including regulatory documents, electoral manifestos, and media coverage. These materials, rich in qualitative data, reflect the intricate interplay between local institutional developments and broader international influences, revealing key milestones and advancements in sustainable development. The findings underscore the critical need for enhanced political commitment towards sustainable development, advocating for a comprehensive approach that balances environmental, economic, and social considerations, alongside the promotion of collaborative efforts between governmental and non-governmental entities. This research contributes to the discourse on sustainable development governance within the Maltese context through two original frameworks: firstly, the classification of Malta's sustainable development governance into three phases, namely, initialisation (1992-2002), focusing on foundational recognitions and entities; exploration (2003-2011), emphasizing political acknowledgment and initiatives; and development (2012-2022), prioritizing legislative actions and increased initiative engagement. Secondly, a tripartite model advocating for collaboration, transformation, and policy coherence is proposed. By examining the motivations and strategies of key actors in sustainable development governance, the study offers valuable insights for public policy, governance, and sustainable development, particularly within the context of small island states.

Keywords: Sustainable development; Politics; Island governance; Maltese Islands; Small island states; Document analysis; Islandness

1. Introduction

Sustainable development has become one of the most ubiquitous terms used in various fields worldwide. Over the past few years, the world has witnessed a plethora of environmental, social, and economic issues, which have become pertinent within public life and even more so in political discourse. The endeavour of resolving this general air of malaise within the communities has posed an ever-increasing risk and challenge to various governments with the aim of addressing them at every level of society. This is exacerbated when at the core of any sustainability vision lies the notion of 'wicked problems', which are issues being described as complex, divergent, and uncertain, creating a barrier to the implementation of good governance. Wicked problems are considered the precursor to complexity theory development, which focuses on natural or human-based systems and interactions. The dynamics of these interactions are not linear and open, thus permitting the impact of outside influences.

Given the challenges of islandness and vulnerability within island states, which are discussed in successive sections, the Maltese islands present an ideal and unique case study. It possesses a number of challenges for sustainable development. Firstly, reaching a balance between the environmental, economic, and social needs of the present Maltese population, marking over 500,000 individuals, and also future generations, is difficult on a small island with an area of just 316km². Such an increasing population demands more needs, including high consumption rates and widespread construction, causing the degradation of the limited natural resources available. Such issues are further exacerbated by the influx of tourists, especially during the summer months. All these factors cause a strain on the Maltese islands, especially when considering that other global realities, such as climate change, poverty and migration, also create repercussions on the Maltese islands.

Given the intricacies of such diverse global and local issues in the smallest member state of the European Union (EU), the Maltese islands present an interesting case study of how sustainable development progresses and is dealt with in its political affairs. This study is motivated by the following objectives:

- (1) To map out the important milestones that have shaped the politics of sustainable development in the Maltese islands from 1992 up to 2022.
- (2) To investigate the underlying motives and events which have led to the various milestones of sustainable development governance in the Maltese islands.

This timeframe was carefully selected since it marks the inception of the term ‘sustainable development’ within the Maltese political lexicon up to the year this research was carried out. Fuelled by these objectives, this study seeks to answer the core question: How has sustainable development governance developed in the Maltese islands from 1992 up to 2022?

Following the research objectives, the next section presents the theoretical underpinnings followed by the methodological stance adopted, primarily focusing on document analysis of prevalent documentation, rich in qualitative data. All this paves the way for an in-depth exposition that intertwines corollary international and local events which have been at the heart of sustainable development governance in the Maltese islands. The last section of this article presents some concluding remarks and recommendations prevalent in public policy, governance, and sustainable development. This study adds to the existing body of knowledge by presenting a unique and original case study which provides invaluable insights into the politics of sustainable development in a small island state like Malta.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

Governance is the result of an intricate web of factors, which have recently included sustainable development. Governance for sustainable development does not only refer to green politics but encompasses public debate, decision-making, policy formation, and implementation, including interactions amongst the authorities, private entities, and civil society. It is strenuous to permeate such notions across public life, as governments need to be relevant, flexible, and open to change by being synchronised with varying societal, economic, and environmental exigencies which arise from time to time.

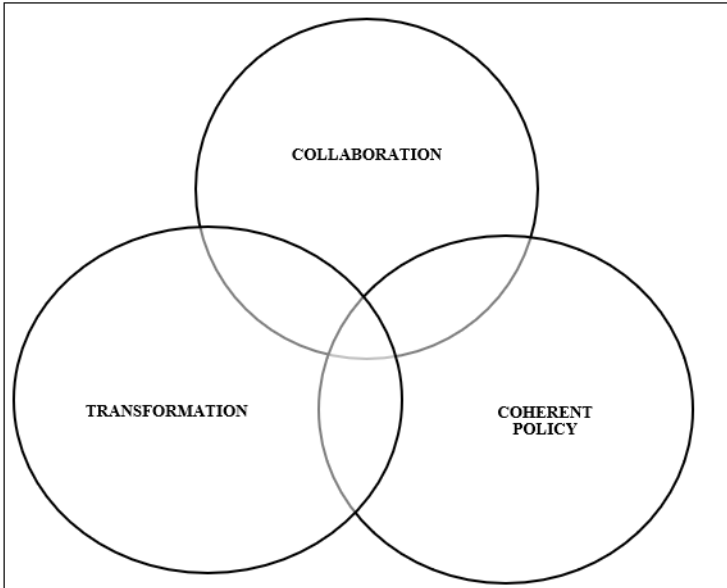


Figure 1. Three pillars of sustainable development governance
Note: This figure was prepared by the author.

Essentially, the politics of sustainable development rest on three important pillars, as delineated in Figure 1. The theoretical backdrop of this study is linked to the aforementioned pillars, grounded on a synthesis of multiple governance theories, as listed below:

- The need for collaboration focuses on the notions of networked governance and cross-sectoral collaboration.
- The need for transformation mirrors the concept of transition governance, and
- The need for coherent policymaking focuses on a particular aspect of policymaking.

2.1 The Need for Collaboration

Governance for sustainability is often characterised by multipartite patterns, happening in terms of ‘co,’ such as co-managing, co-producing, and co-allocating (Kooiman, 2002). This necessitates the need for various forms of collaboration, befitting the requirements of this notion. The aforementioned echoes the theoretical backdrop associated with ‘network governance’, which refers to ‘a form of organizational alliance in which relevant policy actors are linked together as co-producers where they are more likely to identify and share common interests’ (Kim, 2006). Governance needs to be sensitive to societal demands, weaving together a number of relationships between various actors and institutions. The fusion of multiple efforts within network governance mirrors the principles of cross-sectoral collaboration, which is the process of sharing information, resources, activities, and capabilities within two or more organizations to achieve common goals, where these goals cannot be achieved with only one party (Bryson et al., 2006). This might include the involvement of other non-state actors as wicked problems come into play, especially when resources are limited, similarly to what happens in the Maltese islands.

According to Meadowcroft (1999), cross-sectoral collaboration vis-à-vis sustainable development occurs through three spheres of public life, which include the governmental sector, the business sector, and the voluntary sector. As a result, different interactions are formed, such as: (i) government-business interactions, which provide more insights on the enterprises that pose significant environmental impact but also provide the resources to address them; (ii) government-Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) collaborations, which provide space for dialogue, educational initiatives and conservation projects. Such collaboration also provides pluralist inputs to policy-making; (iii) business-NGO partnerships, which may provide links for funding campaigns and publicity; and (iv) tripartite government-business-NGO collaborations, which promote a holistic vision which provides a balanced interplay between different interests. Despite having different strengths and weaknesses, these three bodies should act jointly and congruently through shared spaces of democratic dialogue, which is central to many governments.

Even though these collaborations might bear the necessary fruits in addressing wicked problems more efficiently than single efforts, they are not always as effective and innovative because, according to Coulson (2005), collaboration in reality is rarely ‘done among equals’, creating power imbalances. Finding meeting points where actors can bridge any gaps is essential to initiate collaboration, not to be seen as the last option available or any easy solution to the challenges encountered.

2.2 The Need for Transformation

An important transformation from ‘governance about sustainable development’ to ‘governance for sustainable development’ is crucial (Farrell et al., 2005), where the latter is achieved through collaboration, dialogue and decision-making. Such a transition requires sound management, planning, and operation, mirroring the principles of good governance. Frantzeskaki (2011) delineates three types of transitions involving sustainable development, namely, institutional transitions, socio-ecological transitions, and socio-technological transitions. According to the theory proposed by Rotmans et al. (2001), transitions occur through four stages: (i) a predevelopment phase of dynamic equilibrium where no changes in the status quo take place; (ii) a take-off phase where systems begin to change; (iii) a breakthrough phase where structural changes become more evident in tandem with reactions from different socio-cultural, economic, ecological and institutional domains; and (iv) a stabilization phase where a new equilibrium is achieved due to a decrease in social change.

Any transition takes place once the involved radical and incremental systemic changes happen on a variety of levels (multi-dimension) and on an array of systems, such as energy, food, mobility, and consumption patterns, which co-evolves in sync with the principles of sustainable development. For example, the fundamental shift in energy choices (systems) has been strengthened ever since the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, from a multi-level form of governance (multi-dimension).

Furthermore, an important model within transition governance theory is the transition management cycle. This is a four-step transition management process (Loorbach, 2007) dependent on a participatory stakeholder process. The four stages are described as follows:

(1) Strategic: Develop and organize the transition arena by focusing on the sustainability of the issue or problem in question.

- (2) Tactical: Coalitions, images, and a transition agenda are developed to derive the necessary transition paths.
- (3) Operational: Relevant actors are mobilised to establish and carry out transition experiments.
- (4) Reflexive: Processes and outputs are monitored and evaluated. Lessons learned from transition experiments are considered, and adjustments to the overall vision are taken into account for the next cycle.

Meadowcroft (2009) asserts that transition governance is promising in: promoting clarity in current decisions by promoting a futuristic vision; developing interactive processes where multi-actor interaction is possible; transforming unsustainable practices in critical societal subsystems; promoting technological and social innovation; ‘learning-by-doing’ by developing experiments with novel practices and technologies; encouraging a diversity of innovations (‘variation’) and competition among different approaches (‘selection’) to fulfill societal needs. This positivistic outlook postulated by Meadowcroft (2009) is contested by Stirling (2015), who states that such transitions are considered ‘more diverse, emergent and unruly political alignments, challenging incumbent structures, subject to incommensurable knowledge and pursuing contending (even unknown) ends.’ This is even enhanced due to multiple and fragmented authorities.

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987) elucidates that institutions need to work to relatively narrow mandates with close decision processes, since ‘those responsible for managing natural resources and protecting the environment are institutionally separated from those responsible for managing the economy’. Similarly, Borrás & Edler (2020) reveal that since governments are expected to encourage transitions towards sustainability, civil servants are required to perform transition tasks, which should be within a normative framework acceptable to them and the governing system. Moreover, they also add that even though governmental input is still underexplored, it needs to be responsive and willing to put such transitions into action.

2.3 Policy Coherence

Meuleman (2021) claims that one of the major limitations of sustainable development governance is that the focus is placed more on ‘what’ than on ‘how’, creating a disbalance. Therefore, the government is responsible for reducing any possible conflict, fragmentation, overlap, and gaps within policy-making, strengthened by positive praxis, usually through policy coherence. The spatio-temporal context is integral to sustainability, which needs to be addressed by creating multidimensional synergies. This can be achieved through policy integration, which happens horizontally by mainstreaming objectives across policy sectors and vertically through permeation across different levels of governance. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2018) promotes eight recommendations to achieve policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD):

- (1) Political commitment and leadership focus on action and commitment at various levels of governance.
- (2) Integrated approaches to implementation through policy integration in the (a) environmental, economic, and social areas; (b) local and international objectives; and (c) short-term and long-term objectives.
- (3) The intergenerational timeframe ensures that decisions are taken not only in the short term but also in the long term, envisioning the well-being of future generations.
- (4) Analyses and assessments of potential policy effects by assessing the impacts on people’s well-being and informing decision-makers accordingly.
- (5) Policy and institutional coordination to resolve any conflicts or gaps.
- (6) Local and regional involvement to deliver the required transformation for everyone.
- (7) Stakeholder engagement to involve all those concerned by aligning actions and resources.
- (8) Monitoring and reporting are essential to track progress or lack thereof and take necessary action.

The degree of implementation of these three important pillars varies not only from one country to another but even on smaller scales. It is therefore imperative that all stakeholders are involved to ensure good governance that guarantees sustainable development for everyone, thus ‘leaving no one behind’. These recommendations shall be referred to in successive sections, with particular reference to the Maltese islands.

2.4 The Case of Malta

As outlined in the introduction, being a small island state in the middle of the Mediterranean and a member state of the EU also influences its governance, in particular that concerning sustainable development. As a result, the notions of collaboration, transformation, and policy coherence are discussed with reference to empirical examples and case studies from the Maltese context, aligned with the notions of ‘islandness’ and ‘vulnerability’ pertinent to island governance.

2.4.1 Islandness

Islandness is characterized by geographical boundaries, historical distinctiveness, biotic diversity and endemism, linguistic nuances, cultural specifics, innovation practices, and ‘pseudo-development’ strategies (Baldacchino, 2007). This is further enhanced by Hili (2017), who asserts that culture, governance, and development are crucial factors in the relationship between smallness and islandness and sustainable development policymaking.

This notion of smallness has also been associated with ‘closeness’ which can be considered a double-edged sword. Warrington & Milne (2007) warn that such closeness should not be viewed only from a geographical point of view, but also from a political, cultural, and institutional perspective as well. It might be advantageous geographically to govern a small country, as issues can be addressed quite efficiently, but it may also be impacted by insularity and isolation. On the other hand, closeness can be advantageous in creating networking processes and collaboration between state and non-state actors. Salib (2007) adds that in small island states, communication is facilitated and people’s concerns are better understood. This is experienced in the Maltese islands through initiatives carried out by the local government, which often involve locals in decision-making.

The type of relationships built through such collaboration, however, should be observed closely within close-knit communities where everyone is easily identifiable and known, such as in a small nation. Such connections might easily give way to the clientelistic political culture, which is delineated by Warrington (2012) and Boissevain (2005), where intense party loyalty, patronage, nepotism, and clientelism prevail.

Warrington (2012) also accentuates the partisan nature of Maltese politics, where the two main political parties, the Nationalist Party-Partit Nazzjonalista (2013) (PN) and the Labour Party - Partit Laburista (PL), dominate the political sphere of the islands. Boissevain (2005) distinguishes the characteristics of the two parties: the PN holds conservative principles and has often been affiliated with the clergy and professional classes. The PL represents the Worker’s Party, mainly holding socialist principles. It has often been affiliated with the less affluent groups in society. Furthermore, Boissevain (2005) adds that the PN has generally been more tolerant of civil society and NGOs than the PL which was more restrictive in its approach.

Unfortunately, this partisan outlook on politics hampers, at times, cross-sectoral collaboration. Hili (2017) adds that such contradictions of ‘closeness’ were experienced on occasions concerning the referenda about Malta’s accession to the EU in 2003 and spring hunting in 2015.

2.4.2 Vulnerability

Moreover, the notion of vulnerability stands out when discussing sustainable development in island microstates. Back in 1994, Warrington (1994) outlined three facets of vulnerability in island states: (i) the ease with which environmental and socio-economic island systems can be penetrated and overwhelmed; (ii) demographic instability, as in the case of migration; and (iii) the limited influence islands have on external markets, which renders the goods and services they offer inherently unstable. Throughout these years, these three factors have remained engrained within Maltese society, even increasing in their influence to a certain extent.

For example, demographic instability has increased drastically in the Maltese islands, mainly due to two reasons: (i) irregular migration, which has been a challenge since the early 2000s since many boat arrivals reached Maltese shores: in 2021 (832 boat arrivals), 2022 (380 boat arrivals) and 2023 (444 boat arrivals) (UNHCR, 2023). (ii) the increase in foreigners living on the island, which from 2012 to 2022 caused a 28.6% population growth (from 421,464 to 542,051 individuals) (NSO, 2024).

The aforementioned examples conform to two of Baldacchino’s notions, those of ‘chronic vulnerability’ and ‘nervous duality’. The presence of the three facets of vulnerability identified by Warrington (1994) within Maltese society for over 30 years reflects perfectly the concept of ‘chronic vulnerability’. (Baldacchino & Fairbairn, 2006). The Maltese islands also demonstrate traits of ‘nervous duality’ (Baldacchino, 2005) since they lie between an inward-looking, sheltered, idyllic reality and a constant necessity to engage with the outside world in a global contest (Baldacchino, 2005). This statement holds true, especially with the changing demographic realities and environmental pressures inflicting the island. Vassallo (2012) continues by stating that islands are often caught between ‘conservation and modernity; stability and change; tradition and innovation; seclusion and exposure’. This is a perfect example of policymaking in the Maltese islands. While Warrington (2012) asserts that policymakers aim to promote high standards of governance, in reality, the policymaking process is not plain sailing, especially when involving land use, often creating ‘space wars’ (Warrington, 2012) between diverse actors.

Maltese governance has experienced several transitions, ever since it became an independent state in 1964. This has paved the way, according to Warrington & Milne (2007), for two types of island governance: the fortress and the entrepôt. The former utilizes a paternalistic, inward-looking approach to governance, whereas the latter formulates policies focused on innovation, efficiency, and competitiveness. The fortress’s governance is associated with imperialistic power when the country was under British rule, investing in the island’s technology but generating an insecure national identity. On the other hand, the entrepôt focuses more on affluence and competitiveness. The latter type of governance was responsible for the economic growth experienced in the last few years due to fast-growing export-oriented services in finance, gaming, and tourism, except for the year 2020 due to the COVID pandemic. Recent case studies, such as the COVID pandemic in 2020 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, portray Malta’s vulnerability and resilience as a small island state. Even though the nation had to face several different challenges in both cases, it was able to relatively maintain its normal operations.

Both the fortress and entrepôt types of governance fuse the use of technology and competitiveness. These two factors have been crucial to implementing sustainability, especially since Malta’s accession to the EU. Practical examples include the introduction of electric cars, the number of photovoltaic panels installed in households, and

the emergence of BCRS Malta Ltd., the licensed operator of the national Beverage Container Refund Scheme.

This section concludes the literature exposition by presenting the existing perspectives and theories linked to sustainable development governance, which lay the foundations of the critical analysis presented in the successive sections. The next section presents the methodological approach employed for this study.

3. Methodological Framework

By building upon the existing theoretical foundations, this study aims to address the following research gaps:

(1) The knowledge gap: With the exception of Maltese newspaper articles and dissertations such as Green (2009) and Hili (2017), reference to sustainable development governance in the Maltese islands is limited. This study fills this void by presenting the trajectories in the Maltese politics of sustainable development.

(2) The theoretical gap: Further to the above-mentioned, this research presents a synthesis of the necessary theoretical foundations coined with sustainable development through a three-pillar original model as displayed in Figure 1.

(3) The empirical gap: Previous empirical research has not fully addressed the intersection between the multiple sustainability issues and the actors involved in managing them. By mapping out the various milestones in Figure 2, the fusion of sustainability issues and actors in a spatio-temporal context is explained.

To address the aforementioned research gaps, a qualitative inquiry was adopted as a strategy to address the core question through document analysis. Document analysis involves the meticulous analysis of selected documents to generate new insights. This method underpins a positivistic approach when framing its epistemological foundations since it explores the confirmation of facts and trajectories related to sustainable development.

Document analysis was selected as the sole methodological tool for this research due to two reasons. First, this study aims to focus exclusively on how relevant texts portray different issues or people (Morgan, 2022), which in this case involves the politics of sustainable development and Maltese actors. Second, the use of pre-existing texts, in the form of policy documents, electoral manifestos, official statistics, and newspaper articles, fulfills this objective.

Several factors were taken into consideration to address the data validity of document analysis, namely:

(1) Authenticity: The extent to which a document is genuine was established by choosing official documents from Maltese political parties, parliament, or even newspapers. This methodological choice guarantees authentic data from reliable sources.

(2) Representativeness: While triangulation would have been obtained, if other methodological tools were utilized, this limitation was tackled by selecting different types of sources or documents. In this way, the limitations of one source can be compensated for by another. This especially concerns the bias presented in politically affiliated documents such as electoral manifestos. The author ensured that the manifestos of the main Maltese political parties were equally represented and backed by other sources to reduce biased selectivity.

(3) Credibility: To further reduce bias, local independent newspapers were selected rather than political-affiliated ones to obtain a more objective representation of facts or events.

(4) Meaning: A variety of sources were also utilized to provide a wide perspective on issues and overcome the need to tweak the research objectives due to limited data. In this case, a variety of data was available for the document analysis.

Table 1. Various regulatory documents selected

Document Title	Year
The Malta Structure Plan	1990
The Environment Protection Act	1991
The Development Planning Act	1992
The Malta National Report, submitted by the Government of Malta to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)	1992
The National Strategy for Sustainable Development (NSSD)	2006
Eco-Gozo: A Better Gozo	2009
The Malta Policy for Local Governance	2009
The Sustainable Development Act	2012
Malta's Sustainable Development Vision for 2050	2018
The Sustainable Development Strategy 2050 (Consultation Document)	2022

Note: This table was prepared by the author.

The analytical procedure adopted involved a number of steps. First, a range of sources were observed, and superficial 'skimming' (Bowen, 2009) was carried out. This ensured that the sources most relevant to the research questions were selected. Besides newspaper articles from the Times of Malta, The Malta Independent, and Malta Today, together with the electoral manifestos of the Nationalist Party and the Labour Party (1996-2013), other documents include those presented in Table 1. Once the initial number of sources was reduced to the most pertinent

ones, thorough reading and interpretation of pertinent extracts were chosen. The following steps by Krippendorff (2004) were taken into consideration: (i) Sample text: relevant data was selected from the text; (ii) unitize text: important data such as words, quotes, or examples were distinguished; and (iii) contextualize data: providing a context to the data in the light of what is known or researched. After following these steps, three important categories easily emerged, as discussed in the next section.

Such a variety of sources were selected purposefully to:

(1) Present a clear picture by providing a thorough systematic review of the sociocultural, political, cultural, and economic context in which the politics of sustainable development was developed from a multi-perspective approach;

(2) Provide the contextual and historical richness of sustainable development in alignment with the theoretical framework of this study. All these documents, in some way or another, shed light on the model presented in this research, which focuses on collaboration, transformation, and policy coherence. This was executed by mapping out the different layers and milestones of the Maltese politics of sustainable development from a historical point of view in tandem with European and international governance, including state and non-state actors as well, as displayed in Figure 2.

(3) Complement each other and ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Including more than one type of source is crucial to providing a wider perspective on the research issue and to strengthening its limitations with the support of another.

4. Analysing Sustainable Development Governance in the Maltese Islands

Gad et al. (2018) stress that sustainability should not be studied in a vacuum as it carries a ‘baggage of meaning’, especially when viewed as a political concept, thus requiring historical and conceptual positioning. Taking this into account, this section starts by highlighting the evolutionary narrative of sustainable development within international and supraregional domains, weaving it within the contextual and political context of the Maltese islands. The main trajectories in the Maltese islands were categorized into the following stages, which are considered as the main themes in this discussion:

- The initialisation stage (1990- 2002)
- The exploration stage (2003-2011)
- The popularisation stage (2012-2022)

Figure 2 maps these stages by juxtaposing the various international and local corollary events that have shaped the politics of sustainable development in the Maltese islands through different administrations over the span of 30 years. It should be noted that major events occurring in the Maltese islands are represented in a white box; sustainable development events in the Maltese islands are displayed in bold, whereas international milestones are both displayed in bold and underlined.

An in-depth analysis of the underlying reasons behind such milestones is explained on the following pages. For each stage, the analysis shall be divided into these sections: policy development, criticism, and response, followed by outcomes and recommendations.

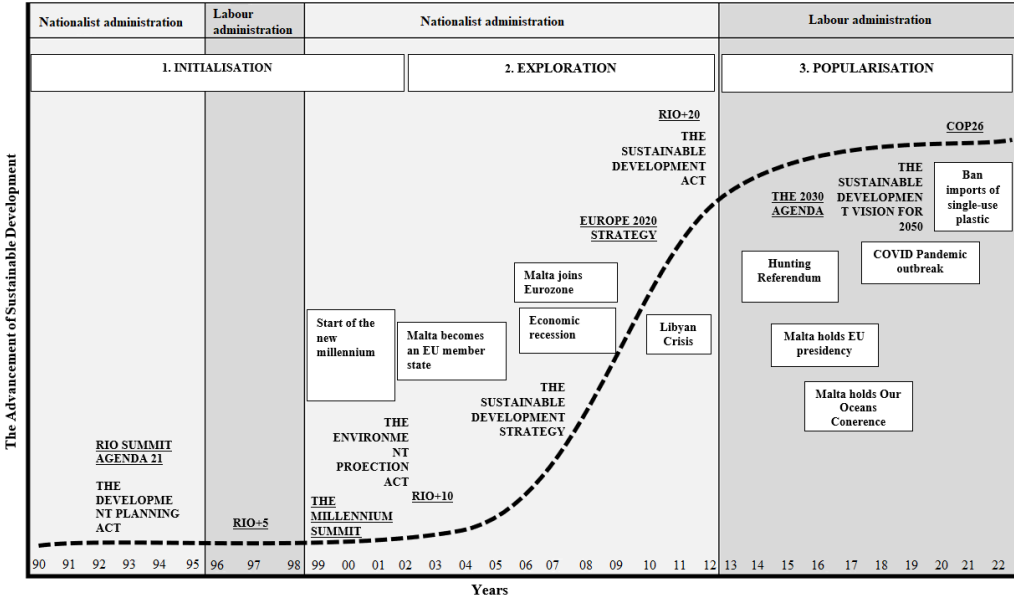


Figure 2. Milestone map of sustainable development governance in the Maltese Islands
Note: This figure was prepared by the author.

4.1 The Initialisation Stage (1992-2002)

4.1.1 Policy development, criticism and response

Sustainable development first gained international recognition at the 1972 Conference of the Human Environment but attained further importance through the 'Our Common Future', better known as the Brundtland Report, which was formulated in 1987. This report earmarked the definition that has been used ever since within various fora.

At this point in time, little was known about sustainable development in the Maltese islands. It was at the 1992 Rio Conference that the concept became gradually recognized on the island. During this conference, leaders established the principles of sustainable development, out of which the blueprint called Agenda 21 was formulated. Important milestones during this phase include the Malta Structure Plan in 1990, the Environment Protection Act of 1991, which was amended in 2001, and the Development Planning Act in 1992, which included, to varying degrees, the concept of sustainable development at its core rather than just environmental protection. This provided a more holistic approach to the issues afflicting the island. This Act was also crucial in the enactment of the Planning Authority, which was responsible for the preparation of the Structure Plan.

Government of Malta (2002) adds that before 1992 (Government of Malta, 1992), 'no integrated network existed, resulting in various proprietary databases, individual organisation protocols and non-transferable formats'. The planning system became more systematic with the introduction of the Internet, an important tool in the planning process.

Also, a number of institutions and bodies were inaugurated during this time. Besides the Planning Authority, in 1992, the Ministry for the Environment was set up. It focused primarily on environmental protection and public works. Supporting the ministry was the Environment Protection Department through the development of policies and regulations. Eventually, this department merged with the Planning Authority to become the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA), this time under the Ministry for Home Affairs and the Environment. Government of Malta (2002) clarifies that this move was done 'to further clarify the delineation between operational and regulatory roles in the implementation of environmental legislation.' Essentially, MEPA operated through the fusion of two directorates: the Environment Protection Directorate and the Planning Directorate.

The electoral manifestos of 1996 delineated divergent perspectives between the Nationalist and Labour parties regarding environmental and sustainable development policies. The Nationalist Party's manifesto (Nationalist Party, 1996) briefly references the environment and sustainable development in the section titled 'The Tie of the Knot: Integrated Resource Management', advocating for integrated resource management to mitigate environmental degradation and emphasizing the necessity for sustainable development. However, this was strengthened in the 1998 manifesto, where a section called 'The Environment and Health' was entitled. More emphasis is given in this respect, linking it to the beneficial effects of the environment on human health. Interestingly enough, this manifesto advanced the ideology of transition governance articulated by Meadowcroft (2009), which advocates for 'promoting technological and social innovation', since it encouraged 'the use of solar power, giving it tax advantages and subsidies. Modern technology enables surplus domestic solar power to be transferred to the Enemalta grid, with savings all around' (Nationalist Party, 1996). Through the investment in innovative technological approaches, both political parties were envisioning the characteristics of the entrepôt type of governance mentioned previously.

On the other hand, the Labour Party's manifesto in 1996 focused on environmental protection, while sustainable development seemed to be linked solely to housing, and regional development in Gozo and the South of Malta (Malta Labour Party, 1996). By the 1998 manifesto, the concept of sustainable development was notably expanded, being linked directly to the establishment of a principal environmental authority (Malta Labour Party, 1996). It was emphasized that an institution tasked with environmental protection must play a central role in the comprehensive process of safeguarding environmental integrity, situated within a policy framework that promotes sustainable development.

The 1998 Labour Party's manifesto seems to link this term with economic development and tourism. Among the future proposals were amendments to the Environment Protection Act and the regular publication of the State of the Environment Report, which were eventually considered. The manifestos reflect the subjective nature of sustainable development, which was envisioned differently by both parties between the 1996 and 1998 elections, with the latter seeing more momentum.

Internationally, there was a decline in sustainable development policy before the year 2000, which Røpke (2005) identifies as an 'implementation deficit'. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002, seemed to be less influential, as no agreements or financial mechanisms were implemented. Similarly, this was also experienced in Malta, where most attention was directed towards EU accession, even though this milestone required the fulfillment of certain sustainability standards which had to be adhered to. However, at the onset of the new millennium, Malta was preparing itself for the new challenges brought by the 21st century. In September 2000, Malta became a signatory to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and promised to contribute towards eradicating world poverty.

In the preface to the Malta National Report (Government of Malta, 2002), the Maltese Prime Minister at the time, Dr. Eddie Fenech Adami, highlighted the importance of Agenda 21 in local sustainable development governance since it ‘stimulated the government to update and introduce legislation, to adopt policies and to take action conducive to sustainable development, seeking public participation towards this end.’ Malta provided its contribution in Rio 1992, by presenting to Working Group III of the Preparatory Committee of the United Nations (UN) Rio Conference with a submission towards the need to cater for future generations. In paragraph 17 of this document, Malta suggests the appointment of a person as a ‘guardian’ of future generations. This proposal was not taken up in the Rio Declaration (The Malta Independent, 2012a) but was implemented later on locally in 2012 through the Sustainable Development Act.

Interestingly, this report confirms that Agenda 21 was pivotal in strengthening institutional setups while addressing the need for more collaboration with civil society (Government of Malta, 2002). Despite the government's apparent positive stance towards sustainable development governance, this perspective is not universally shared. Friends of the Earth, an environmental NGO, criticized the actual application of Agenda 21 in Malta, noting the absence of any local Agenda 21 initiatives up to that point and a general lack of awareness about Agenda 21 itself (Times of Malta, 2002b). The initiation of Local Agenda 21 projects began to gain momentum subsequently, particularly during the exploration stage (2003-2011).

The impetus of voluntary organizations is imperative to increase governance efficiency. Even though some NGOs were formed in the 1960s, such as the Malta Ornithological Society in 1962 and Din L-Art Helwa in 1965, it was the establishment of the Green Party and Alternativa Demokratika in 1989, which gave the environment impetus in parliament.

Boissevain (2005) asserts that since the mid-1980s, the main political parties have paid lip service to the environment and have not enforced any laws to protect monumental heritage and landscape. This is mainly attributed to networks of nepotism, patronage, population density, and strong family ties (Boissevain, 2005). Boissevain (2005) adds that environmental contention was pivotal in ensuring that the environment formed part of the Maltese political agenda. The escalation of NGO activities was instrumental in positioning environmental concerns on the agenda of the 1987 general election.

A good example of environmental contention was the conflict that Boissevain (2005) outlined, which involved hunters and birdtrappers, the government, and the public in the early 1990s. The Nationalist government introduced legislation to restrict the hunting open season to conform with EU hunting regulations. This created severe opposition from the hunting lobby, to which the Nationalist Party reacted by eventually re-extending the open season. This, however, did not garner the satisfaction of hunters. In 1994, the Labour Party, in opposition, vouched to further liberalise hunting and trapping. Many attribute this as being one of the reasons which contributed substantially to the party's electoral victory in 1996.

In 2002, the WSSD, better known as Rio+10, was held in Johannesburg to review progress in implementing the outcomes from the Rio Earth Summit 10 years earlier. The WSSD developed a plan of implementation for the actions set out in Agenda 21, known as the Johannesburg Plan. During the summit, states were asked to implement their national strategies by 2005. As a result, Malta established the National Commission for Sustainable Development (NCSO) whose responsibility was to permeate sustainable development in society and review its progress. During the first meeting of the NCSO, reflections on Malta's progress in sustainable development were shared by the Prime Minister at the time, Dr. Eddie Fenech Adami. It was noted that, ‘Substantial progress has been acknowledged by the nation, yet the desired goals remain distant’ (Times of Malta, 2002a).

This statement delineates the conclusion of the initialisation stage, which is a period characterized by the nascent integration of sustainable development within certain regulatory frameworks and entities, yet its principles have not fully extended across various sectors of society. This is partly due to a lack of consideration by other members of society and also a lack of political will. While the aforementioned achievements laid the foundations for sustainable development governance, they were still in the embryonic phase and had to be further developed.

4.1.2 Outcomes and recommendations

Some of the outcomes during the initialisation stage include the following:

(1) Despite such shortcomings, this phase initiated the setting up of organisations and entities, such as the Ministry for the Environment and the Planning Authority. Also, important regulatory instruments including the Environment Protection Act and the Development Planning Act were enacted. The institutionalisation process was essential as the country embarked on implementing sustainable development. These developments later became important landmarks in the history of sustainable development in the Maltese islands.

(2) The emergence and input of voluntary organisations increased during this ten-year timeframe, as confirmed by Abela (2001). In fact, in 2000, a total of 63,718 people were members of non-governmental organisations, signifying a substantial rise of 31.1 percent during the previous four years (NSO, 2009). During this phase and subsequent ones, civil society has become influential in policymaking, challenging the traditional system of decision-making. Environmentalists have undergone a significant transformation in public perception, as noted by Boissevain & Theuma (1998). Once marginalized as ‘harmless lunatics’ in the 1960s and variously labeled as

communists or undemocratic fundamentalists, they have evolved into a 'new political elite', commanding respect across broad segments of the public.

(3) Another transition brought about by civil society is to challenge 'the hierarchy of infallibility' which is the fear of confrontation with established authorities, including the acceptance of their decisions. Briguglio (2015) delineates some of the 'environmental victories' won by environmental alliances during this phase, which included, amongst others alliances, against the Hilton project in St Julians, a new proposed golf course, a proposed leisure complex in Munxar in the mid-1990s, the proposed Siggiewi cement plant and a proposed landfill near the Mnajdra temple.

(4) Direct reference to sustainable development at this point seems rather limited, as it is implicated only in environmental issues and planning. Hence, even though marked by limited concrete achievements, this phase paved the way for a more concrete grasp of this term in public life.

4.2 The Exploration Stage (2003-2011)

4.2.1 Policy development, criticism, and response

The nation had undergone significant transformations in the social, economic, and political context which arose with the nation's accession to the EU in 2004. Slowly, but steadily, the country started to shift its paradigm towards the EU legal context. One remarkable and worth-mentioning step was the immediate closure of the Maghtab and Qortin landfills, which, had it not happened, 'infringement fines and adverse action from the EU' would have taken place (The Malta Independent, 2008a). However, despite such improvements, the EU has not been instrumental in controlling 'scarcity of land, land-use competition, and insufficient or ineffective de facto public commitment to safeguarding the natural landscape (TPPI, 2014).

A major milestone was the NSSD, which was finalised in 2006. While this strategy was theoretically valid, its implementation did not bear the fruits expected, with Cacopardo (Times of Malta, 2008) emphasising bridging the gap to ensure that the strategy is 'owned by the community and not just by the political parties'. Green (2009) points out that the lack of political will and coordinated attempts failed its implementation. However, another positive measure was the appointment of green leaders in various ministries and authorities which brought a culture of change within the public service, especially in its day-to-day running.

As delineated in the 2008 manifesto, the Nationalist Party strengthened its views on sustainability, with the Prime Minister at the time, Dr. Lawrence Gonzi, committing himself to reducing the environmental deficit by taking MEPA under his scrutiny (Nationalist Party, 2008). While such a premise was promising, his administration faced turbulence ranging from within the internal structures of the party up to the international domain where the economic recession was prevalent. Nonetheless, sustainable development increasingly became embedded within the political dialogue, as articulated by Prime Minister Dr. Gonzi, who highlighted its multifaceted nature, particularly within the context of a small island state. As observed, 'Issues such as MEPA, development permits, light pollution, dust, barbecues, police presence, wardens, heritage conservation, cultural initiatives, green space maintenance, littering, preservation of village cores, climate change responses, and housing loans were interconnected, among many others' (The Malta Independent, 2008b).

Such words imply that theoretically, this term is pertinent, which, alas, is arduous to implement due to an interweaved web of issues affecting it. This mirrors, to some degree, Cacopardo (Times of Malta, 2011), who states that 'Malta, through its present government, has paid lip service to issues of sustainable development. It is clear that on the issue of sustainable development, this government is very rich in rhetoric, but when it comes to implementation, it gets cold feet' (Times of Malta, 2011). He further explains this by stating that a national environmental policy was designed with issues duplicated from the national sustainability strategy. This is also supported by Briguglio (Times of Malta, 2019) who stated that the government 'preaches one thing and, in practice, does another'. This same sentiment, mentioned in the Initialisation Stage (1992-2002), and outlined by Boissevain (2005), seems to be still well-engrained within Maltese politics. However, this is also encountered internationally since Swyngedouw (2007) argues that sustainable development is supported by all political actors, at least rhetorically.

The Eco-Gozo strategy, formulated for the period 2010 to 2012, represented a significant endeavour in the domain of sustainable development governance, aligning with the culmination of the Nationalist administration's five-year term. The Ministry of Gozo was charged with the ambitious goal of transforming Gozo into a sustainable island, a task that initially appeared overly ambitious. Questions were raised regarding Gozo's potential to serve as a paradigm for other regional and island communities (Debono, 2012). Four years later, the Minister for Gozo indicated that '61 completed or ongoing projects related to the proposed 82 recommendations. Furthermore, the ministry has also completed or is in the process of completing more than 140 other recommendations that were originally proposed through the public consultation' (Times of Malta, 2012). However, this vision did not gain the trust of many, being described as an 'illusion' (Times of Malta, 2010d), lacking 'adequate communication, education and public awareness' (Times of Malta, 2010a), and even 'talking the talk is something that all politicians are good at; however, they usually fall well short of expectations when it comes to walking the walk'

(The Malta Independent, 2010b). Vassallo (2012) argues that the situation is far from idyllic as pictured, especially since Gozo suffers from a ‘double insularity’ syndrome, meaning that when faced with wicked problems, Gozo is more vulnerable since it depends on another country which is also an island state.

The Malta Policy for Local Governance was introduced in 2009 as a further measure, primarily aiming to act as an extension of the NSSD and to promote the practices of Local Agenda 21. The initiative was designed to incorporate the principles of sustainable development into the economic, social, and environmental layers of local communities. The belief in the potential of localities was emphasized, with the NSSD envisioned to complement and bolster initiatives at the local level. The Local Councils of Mellieħa and Dingli were among the local councils that promoted sustainable development at a local level, with the latter having a definite strategy formulated leading up to the year 2020.

Moreover, Malta was still targeting to fulfill the MDGs by 2015. Malta was in the lead of the new member states in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) percentage contribution, even though it fell behind countries like Sweden, Austria, and Ireland. Awareness about the MDGs was significantly poor, with only 4% of the population knowing about these goals when compared to the 18% achieved throughout Europe (Times of Malta, 2007). While approaching 2015, Dr. Tonio Borg, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, remarked that MDG governance functioned in tandem with the changing national landscape:

‘Malta therefore believes that it is of vital importance that the examination of MDG success and failure be a constant process which should reflect the changing political, economic, and social environment with the principal priority of offering support for sustainable progress in poverty reduction’ (Times of Malta, 2010b).

The exploration stage was characterised by traits of transitional governance since it was earmarked for societal changes brought about by Malta’s accession to the EU. Hence, such transitions ushered in a new form of governance that shifted towards sustainability. Sustainable development has become more mainstream within the Maltese context thanks to the EU in a variety of ways, such as through funding, policies, directives, and expertise, some of which are discussed in the following section.

4.2.2 Outcomes and recommendations

(1) New legislation was enacted leading to general environmental improvements, which included, according to TPPI (2014), the ban on leaded petrol; the regular observance of bathing water quality and air quality; the establishment of sewage treatment plants and consequently the ban on the dumping of raw sewage at sea; the establishment of various conservation sites, including Natura 2000 sites; and the enhancement of a rigorous Environmental Impact Assessment process together with the introduction of Strategic Environmental Assessments.

(2) The introduction of renewable energy has improved throughout the years, especially since the Europe 2020 target of 10% was achieved. Eurostat (2022) data shows 10.7% of Malta’s energy consumption is derived from renewable sources.

(3) New NGOs such as Flimkien għall-Ambjent Aħjar (FAA) and Ramblers’ Association were introduced. EU membership provided new opportunities for the lobbying sector, strengthening the active involvement of civil society (Briguglio, 2015).

(4) Malta was also still lagging behind vis-à-vis performance. The Lisbon Review in 2004 listed Malta’s score as regards sustainable development as 3.24, way below the EU average of 5.16 (World Economic Forum, 2004). Also, in 2010, Dr. Leo Brincat (Labour MP) argued that Malta did not have any Sustainable Development Indicators (SDI) and lacked personnel working in this area (The Malta Independent, 2010a). However, this seems to be contested by Caruana et al. (2011), who indicate the formulation of sustainability indicators carried out in 1997 by the Planning Authority concerning land-use planning policies and another set of indicators named ‘The Sustainability Indicators: Malta Observatory’ in 2000. A total of 100 indicators were identified in the latter, based on a variety of factors such as economic activities, land use, environment, and population, amongst others. The outcomes of this research, however, point out the need for indicators that are congruent with local requirements and the island context. The above-mentioned demonstrates the need for concrete indicators which focus closely on the sustainability of island states such as Malta.

(5) This phase is characterised by a major divergence between rhetoric and action. Since no major international breakthrough occurred during this timeframe, the local politics of sustainable development during this stage was rather experimental, since it explored possible avenues where it could be implemented, such as the Eco-Gozo strategy and various local councils. For example, Mellieħa was declared a European destination of excellence “in lieu of its commitment to social, cultural and environmental sustainability” (Times of Malta, 2010c).

(6) It also seemed that the NSSD was a requirement Malta was bound to fulfill, following the obligations of Rio+20, in preparation for future endeavours in this respect.

(7) Briguglio (2022) supports the introduction of green leaders but suggests that these should be mainstreamed at various levels of governance and not just by the top echelons of the public service but even in other departments, agencies, schools, and organisations. This should be done to permeate sustainability initiatives such as procurement, education for sustainable development, and policymaking.

4.3 The Development Stage (2012-2022)

4.3.1 Policy development, criticism and response

Sustainable development issues were now being addressed frequently in the Maltese parliament; among them were the Rio Summit's outcomes in 2012. Dr. Leo Brincat (Labour Party MP) pointed out that 'a new sense of skepticism was created as there were still renewed commitments, some of which date back 20 years' (The Malta Independent, 2012a). Indeed, as he confirms, at this point in time, the world was different than it was in 1992. He also added that while many international economies have developed assertively, concrete decisions have not been taken due to the escapism demonstrated by politicians around the world. On the other hand, Dr. Demarco (the Minister at the time responsible for environment, tourism, and culture) pointed out Malta's potential as a springboard to influence and attract organisations, as had been done for Malta's Law of the Sea. It seems that such a recommendation was taken up, as in 2017, the Our Ocean Conference was held in the country.

Coinciding with the Rio+20 Summit, another local pivotal milestone was established when the Sustainable Development Act was enacted, bridging to some degree the rhetoric-action gap from the previous phase. Dr. Demarco stated that 'for the first time in this country, all political parties are recognising the need for sustainable development and many government and opposition speakers follow the subject' (The Malta Independent, 2012b). Two bodies are associated with this Act: the Guardian of Future Generations (GFG) and the Sustainable Development Network (SDN). Both aim to implement sustainable development in Malta. Moreover, the Act also indicates that each ministry has a sustainable development focal point to permeate sustainable practices horizontally across ministries. Also, the act postulates that a discussion in Parliament is held regarding the Sustainable Development Report, which is brought forward by the minister concerned.

Members of the opposition criticised the bill, stating that it was vague and lacked focus and accountability (Times of Malta, 2012). Moreover, both Cacopardo (The Malta Independent on Sunday, 2012) and Briguglio (Times of Malta, 2019) point out that replacing the NCSO with a network of 8 people lacks representativeness since the former 'had the advantage of being a wider cross-section of civil society together with representatives of all the Ministries'. Bezzina (2020) criticises the effectiveness of the Sustainable Development Act, with particular reference to the SDN, since the latter's efforts in trying to mainstream policy coherently are still in their infancy. This is partly due to a lack of human and financial resources and strong political will. Moreover, the author also comments on the increase in the representativeness of SDN by including an NGO representative not only in the environment sector but also in other sectors, especially the social one.

In the manifesto of the Nationalist Party (2013), a commitment was articulated, which stated, 'We will not take decisions which are environmentally irresponsible for the sake of political convenience or opportunism, the consequences of which decisions generations of Maltese will have to face for many years afterwards'. While these words embody the notion of sustainable development, it is doubtful whether this commitment would have just remained rhetoric and not truly implemented.

On the other hand, the Labour Party's manifesto focused on environment, planning, and resources, where the notion of planning resurfaced again. This is because once elected to government, the Labour administration demerged MEPA into ERA and PA, which, according to Hili (2017), strengthened environmental governance through an independent agency. This, however, was criticised by the Office of the Ombudsman due to a lack of transparency, accountability, and public scrutiny (The Malta Independent, 2015). Moreover, during this administration, a change in nomenclature became evident, with 'climate change' and 'sustainable development' forming part of a ministry entitled Ministry for the Environment, Climate Change and Sustainable Development.

A relevant case study was The Maltese Spring Hunting Referendum, which showed that hunters are a politically powerful group in Malta. Therefore, such an important decision was left in the hands of the electorate. According to Prime Minister Dr. Joseph Muscat, this was 'a final chance' for hunters, as he would not tolerate abuse, despite the fact that hunting of quail and turtle doves is abated across Europe. Briguglio (2015) claims that despite the result, the environmental movement was instrumental in mobilising people as an electorally significant political constituency.

In 2015, Malta became a signatory to Agenda 2030 which encapsulates 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), each with a number of targets that ought to be achieved by 2030. These goals succeed the MDGs. Francisco Guzmán, Chief of Staff of the President of Mexico, stressed that the SDGs should not be seen as a burden but complimentary 'at the heart and core of government responsibilities' (OECD, 2017). Indeed, SDG governance has been incorporated within the Maltese political scenario, with these 17 goals laying the foundations for further regulatory frameworks, such as the Malta Sustainable Development Vision for 2050 in preparation for the new Sustainable Development Strategy and even the national budgeting as of 2020, thus promoting policy coherence. Furthermore, policy coherence is also demonstrated with the adoption of common deadlines which include the years 2030 and 2050.

However, despite demonstrating more policy cohesion, in response to the vision for 2050, the Church Environment Commission (2019) suggested that a shift in mindset and operation should be implemented in sustainable governance since most focus is on the 'environment' and ministries focus too much on their own remit

rather than integrating it with sustainability. As a result, the Commission also proposes that this concept should fall under the prime minister’s portfolio, as was similarly done in 2008, and that a parliamentary committee from both sides of the House be organised. On the other hand, Kamra Tal-Periti (2019) remarked about the long list of ambitious targets which makes it a difficult task to accomplish. The need for measurable indicators is required to be able to measure progress and aim for improvement. It seems that in response to this recommendation, the National Expert Group on SDIs was established in 2021, where the Permanent Secretaries appointed individuals to carry out data collection and statistics for each ministry as part of this group.

This phase is also marked by a rapid increase in economic, social, environmental, and geopolitical crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, climate change, food prices and energy supply are all global issues which impacted the vulnerability and resilience of the Maltese islands.

4.3.2 Outcomes and recommendations

(1) Sustainable development has become infused within the political lexicon, integrated at least annually in Parliament as postulated in Article 14 of the Sustainable Development Act of Malta, where a discussion without a vote is carried out on a Sustainable Development Annual Report tabled by the Minister concerned. Moreover, sustainable development has become a common occurrence in the government budget, with Prime Minister Dr. Robert Abela pledging to integrate budget measures with the SDGs as of 2020 (Office of the Prime Minister, 2020).

(2) In 2018, Malta submitted its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) which provided an outlook on all 17 SDGs, with a particular focus on those goals that are relevant within the Maltese context.

(3) During the development phase, an international organisation called the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and the Bertelsmann Stiftung commenced the SDG Index and Dashboards – Global Report. This was launched to track SDG progress and ensure accountability. From 2016 to 2023, Malta ranked more or less within the range of 30, with the exception of 2017 which was the best result (22nd) and 2023 being the worst rank (41st). This might indicate that constant monitoring and evaluation are needed to maintain constant results and prevent any further decrease in ranking.

(4) The SDI measures the ecological efficiency of human development, recognizing that development must be achieved within planetary boundaries. The latest results in 2019 show Malta ranks 97th out of 165 countries in the SDI, which measures the ecological efficiency of human development across countries. Over time, Malta’s SDI remained steady. It peaked in 2001 at 0.62 and scored its lowest ranking in 2008 at 0.4 (Meilak, 2022). Once again, these results demonstrate the need for more efforts to improve these rankings (Table 2).

Table 2. SDG index rank of the Maltese Islands (2016-2023)

Year	SDG Index Rank
2016	32/149
2017	22/157
2018	30/193
2019	28/162
2020	32/166
2021	33/165
2022	33/163
2023	41/166

Note: This table was prepared by the author.

5. Discussion

Once the document analysis has provided an in-depth chronological investigation, the next step is to answer the core research question: How has sustainable development governance developed in the Maltese islands from 1992 up to 2022?

The research question is answered by referring both to the document analysis and the theoretical backdrop of this research. Reference is made to the three-pillar model, consisting of the need for collaboration, the need for transformation, and coherent policymaking vis-à-vis the notions of islandness and vulnerability, which forms the basis of the discussion on the following pages.

Mapping out the various milestones, sustainable development has been consolidated, and varying levels of implementation have been attributed. The three phases outlined through the analysis conform to the theory proposed by Rotmans et al. (2001), discussed in the theoretical framework of this study. The initialisation phase conforms to the pre-development phase of this theory; the exploration stage matches the principles of the take-off phase; and the development phase matches the breakthrough phase. The stagnation phase of this theory has not yet been experienced in Malta.

5.1 The Need for Collaboration

All administrations have demonstrated immediate action to implement national strategies or measures that are in sync with international ones. In Figure 2, for example, the Development Planning Act and the Sustainable Development Act coincided with the Rio Summit in 1992 and Rio+20 in 2012, respectively. This demonstrates that Maltese governments show an initial willingness to take action that befits the needs of the time, mostly due to the direct influence of international requirements, mostly from the UN and the EU.

Government structure tends to be vertical, with a lack of synergies demonstrated through the lack of consistency, not only across policies but also the praxis adopted between administrations, as supported by Green (2009) and Hili (2017). The compartmentalisation of policies is evident within the same administrations and also from one administration to another. Such a lack of synergies can be addressed by increasing opportunities for multilevel governance and the establishment of interdepartmental committees. The role of green leaders across different sectors of public life, as suggested by Briguglio (2015), should be considered. Furthermore, initiatives for education and training are also important, especially for civil servants. As indicated by Borrás & Edler (2020), civil servants are the individuals who are the ones to implement sustainability on a daily basis. The University of Malta provides several courses to educate individuals, including civil servants, about sustainable development.

While various commendable initiatives have been promoted, the need for more human resources coupled with a strong political will is necessary. This encourages the need for more collaboration between different sectors, as highlighted in the theoretical component of this chapter.

5.2 The Need for Transformation and Transition

An emerging notion was the lack of political will shown towards sustainability and the environment. This was reinforced by Cacopardo (2009), and Bezzina (2020). As a result, the need for what Frantzeskaki (2011) refers to as institutional transformation is needed so that Maltese policymakers can identify pertinent sustainability issues and provide tangible results to safeguard the country.

Further to the previous point, governments tend to have short-term goals bound to a political timeframe: the timescale of five years linked with each administration is still a limiting factor in sustainable development governance since ‘the current political incentives are as such that politicians have to be more concerned with generating policies that secure the short-term goal of re-election, rather than the inevitably fraught transition towards sustainable development’ (Pearce, 1999). This is even confirmed by Cacopardo (2009) who states that ‘the political cycle determines a five-year vision. Anything maturing beyond five years is generally of minimum concern to the political class.’ (Times of Malta, 2019). This has also been brought up by Green (2009) where ‘loss of votes and popularity, as well as clashes brought about due to ego’ are also determining factors. However, a shift away from this ideology has been the formulation of the Malta Sustainable Development Vision for 2050. While this has been a good practice in envisioning the future, the need for concrete indicators to reach such goals is needed. This point conforms with OECD Recommendation 3 of PCSD, referred to in Section 2.3 of this study.

Thus, the notion of sustainable development or the interchangeable notion of ‘the environment’ has evolved within the sphere of Maltese politics, as reflected by the ministries ever-changing nomenclature, as seen in Table 2. The historical evolution of the various ministries was merely symbolic to accommodate evolving national needs, with more emphasis on climate change since 2013. On the other hand, with the exception of a few administrations in 1992 and 1998, the ministry was never solely dedicated to either the environment or sustainable development. There is also a need for a transition to move away from the idea that sustainable development equates to the environment only. As confirmed by Green (2009), the Hili (2017), the Church Environment Commission (2019), and Bezzina (2020) sustainable development is still coined with the environment, neglecting the other equally important pillars of the economy, society, and even culture. The need to address this mirrors OECD Recommendation 2 of PCSD, referred to in Section 2.3 of this study. Table 3 shows the different ministries on the Maltese islands throughout the years.

Table 3. Different ministries in the Maltese islands throughout the years

Administration	Ministry Nomenclature
1992	Ministry for the Environment
1996	Foreign Affairs & Environment
1998	Ministry for the Environment
2003	Rural Affairs & Environment
2008	Prime Minister, Tourism and Environment /Tourism, Culture and Environment
2013	Sustainable Development, Environment and Climate Change
2017	Minister for the Environment, Climate Change and Planning/ Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Sustainable Development
2022	Minister for the Environment, Energy and Enterprise

Note: This table was prepared by the author.

5.3 Coherent Policy Framework

The policy-making process is a slow incremental process, which does not befit the radical changes postulated by sustainable development principles. This is indeed a difficult task, mostly due to ever-changing issues coupled with the notion of needs, especially in a small island state with a high population density and a lack of natural resources. Therefore, a balanced approach should be adopted by formulating manageable long-term policies. Such policies should not be too ambitious to guarantee their achievement. To do this, policymakers need to identify key areas which need to be prioritised to ensure radical change by shifting focus to pressing issues while allowing incremental policies in other less pertinent areas. For example, the issue of climate change has been prioritised globally and even in Malta, especially after the momentum generated by the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP) 26 in Glasgow in 2021.

In an increasingly globalised world where international forces tend to impose one-size-fits-all obligations, Malta has benefited from international exigencies to adopt sustainable development, as seen in the closure of the Magħtab landfill. It is important to note that such a generalised approach was not always adopted in the case of Malta, where, for example, the EU granted Malta a 10% renewable energy share of electricity consumption in view of the Europe 2020 goals, whereas other member states had to achieve 20%. Moreover, as an island state, Malta can further leverage its unique position in the Euro-Mediterranean region to influence international sustainable development policies. This should follow the example of the Our Ocean Conference in 2017 held in Malta, where the nation vouched to inspire tangible solutions to protect the seas, leading to the abolishment of single-use plastics by 2022. This conference has shown that Malta has the potential to forge collaborative efforts with other member states, organisations and NGOs to amplify its impact on sustainability legislation and initiatives.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Synthesis of Findings and Lessons Learned

Through its analytical narrative, this paper has exposed the underlying intricacies involved in the Maltese politics of sustainable development. In essence, the major parties in the Maltese islands have in their merit contributed to sustainable development in one way or another, be it rhetorically or in practice, through the three established stages: (i) the initialisation stage, which focused on the identification of sustainable development as an important concept and the establishment of the first important entities; (ii) the exploration stage, which attributed importance to this term in the political lexicon and promoted some initiatives; and (iii) the development stage, which gave impetus to sustainable development as an integral component of Maltese politics through the enactment of legislation and more involvement of initiatives.

Based on the aforementioned, the key lessons learned from this research include the following:

(1) Despite its islandness and vulnerability as a small island state, the Maltese islands are resilient enough to achieve cycles of accomplishments and other less successful ones in their sustainable development governance. Consistent with Quental, Lourenco, and Nunes de Silva in 2009, peaks of political activity coincided mostly with important summits or conferences, demonstrating their influence as catalysts in this regard.

(2) Given the five-year cycle pertaining to each government, fragmented sustainable development governance is a common occurrence.

(3) Political parties seem to lip service sustainable development and utilise it as part of their political agenda.

(4) Civil society is a powerful contributor to sustainable development governance, achieving a number of environmental victories throughout the three phases.

6.2 Recommendations and Empirical Contributions

Despite showing positive signs of outcome, there is still room for improvement. While it is impossible to foresee what future prospects of sustainable development will occur in Maltese politics, it is hoped that this research paves the way for future studies. In view of this, six main action points are being recommended, namely:

(1) Promoting transformative governance involves the shift from ‘governance of sustainable development’ to ‘governance for sustainable development’. Sustainable development should not be viewed as just a buzzword used to accomplish set targets but as a lifestyle, a nation needs to adopt for people’s well-being. Hence, a bottom-up approach needs to be further strengthened to implement such a transformation.

(2) Policymakers should also ensure a holistic approach to policymaking by considering environmental, social, and economic considerations equally without limiting any of these three pillars. Also, more continuity should be ensured both in nomenclature and accomplishments to allow a smooth transition from one administration to another, decreasing the incidence of fragmented governance.

(3) The need for more human resources, tools, and instruments to support sustainability initiatives and legislation is required. This can be done through initiatives in education, research, and monetary instruments in

order to encourage behavioural change in society's mindsets.

(4) As delineated in OECD's Recommendation 8 of PCSD, referred to in Section 2.3 of this study, the need for measuring the effectiveness of policy and practices is required. As suggested by Bezzina (2020), reporting and evaluation procedures should become more common to achieve tangible results, outcomes, and indicators.

(5) Policymakers should encourage alliance formation and knowledge transfer through the opportunities for cross-sectoral collaboration between state and non-state actors. Fostering synergies between academics and researchers is needed to establish tangible results and monitor progress towards sustainable development.

(6) The recommendations put forward by the Church Commission for the Sustainable Development Vision for 2050 are relevant to coherent policymaking. Hence, sustainable development policymaking is coherent once it focuses on long-term solutions and is integrative, participative, reflexive, and honest.

Finally, this research provides new insights in the field of sustainable development and public policy, since it presents a valid contribution to the evolution of sustainable development governance within a small island state such as Malta. The academic community is invited to develop further studies in this research area by taking the Maltese islands as a case study and comparatively analysing how small island states develop sustainable development within their politics. Moreover, other aspects of Maltese governance can be explored, as mentioned in previous sections, such as the effectiveness of the GFG and the SDN.

Data Availability

The data used to support the research findings are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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