

Contested Rural Land in Malta

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Introduction

The nation of Malta is an archipelago of small islands (totaling 316 km²), the largest of which are Malta (246 km²) and Gozo (67 km²). Lacking in natural resources, Malta's economy has centered on services, from the shipyard and port industries of the Knights of St. John (1530-1798) and the British era (1800-1964) to the post-Independence tourism industry. More recently, iGaming companies and financial services have been attracted by an effective 5% tax rate for foreign enterprises.

In 2019 the islands hosted almost 3 million tourists (MTA 2019). Coupled with a local population of 525,285, this makes Malta one of the most densely populated countries in the world, placing great pressure on scarce natural resources, particularly water and agricultural land, while increasing its dependency on food imports.

Local agriculture contributes only 1.3% of national gross value added (NAP 2018: 24). Malta's farms are small-scale and fragmented by lax inheritance laws; 69.7% are now smaller than 1 ha (NSO 2022:3), and individual fields are garden-sized. However, the climate allows farmers to cultivate a wide range of fruit and vegetable products throughout the year. Potatoes, tomatoes and cauliflowers are examples of commonly grown vegetables, with strawberries, citrus and peaches among the most popular fruits (NAP 2018: 39-40).



Maltese fields - Photo credits: Jeanette Borg (MaYA)

Farm incomes are low: the mean average gross salary in 2012 was €16,022 (NAP 2018: 26). After EU accession in 2004, integration in the common market brought an end to import levies that had protected local producers. Unable to compete on scale, many rural families have moved to more lucrative industries, with the agricultural labour force declining by 25.8% from 18,212 persons in 2010 to 13,511 persons in 2020 (NSO 2022: 1). The share of workers aged over 55 years old increased from 49.7% in 2010 to 57.9% in 2020 (NSO 2022: 15).

Only 23.7% of farmers are aged less than 45 (NSO 2022: 1). This article relates the experiences of a small group of young arable farmers¹ who were interviewed between 2020 and 2022. It focuses on the difficulties they face in maintaining and growing their landholdings, as well as the arguments they use to strengthen their claims to the land.

Shrinking Farmland

There are multiple reasons that explain why young farmers are finding it difficult to acquire land. One of the more visible threats is the expansion of the built area, a process that picked up pace in the

¹ While the European Union considers young farmers to be those aged under 40, the Maltese National Statistics Office uses slightly different age groupings.

'60s and continues today. The Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA), which constitutes a third of the total land area (31,600 ha), declined by 6.2% from 11,445 ha in 2010 to 10,730 ha in 2020 (NSO 2022: 1). Satellite imagery shows that from 2015 to 2019 the islands lost 1.25 km² of arable land to 'development and the extension of the urbanization zones' (Zerafa 2020: 52).

Outside Development Zones, where most agricultural land is found, limit construction in large part to agricultural structures (DPA). However lax monitoring, the granting of exceptions, and re-zoning have undermined the protections they afford.

The 2006 rationalisation scheme controversially integrated portions from around 77 Outside Development Zones into the building zone (TMI 2014); a politically-motivated decision whose destructive effects on farmland are still being felt today. Joe², one of the young farmers interviewed for the study, said that the scheme had benefited his family. One of their fields, which they owned freehold, was now in the building zone, and they had been granted a building permit. He expressed regret, however, at the fact that the government was supporting the construction industry – by raising building height limitations in addition to increasing the building zone – instead of the agricultural sector.



Fresh Maltese herbs - Photo credits: Jeanette Borg - MaYa

In contrast to farming, the housing and rental market, as well as tourism, have become more profitable, raising the opportunity cost of agricultural land. Even in areas that are still in the ODZ, speculators are buying land that, owing to planning limitations, is comparatively cheap. They hope to secure a building permit – in contravention of planning rules – through patron-client networks, deriving a high return on investment (Caruana Galizia and Caruana Galizia 2018).

Over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic there was also a growth in demand for recreational plots. Sellers began to partition existing fields into smaller plots. Several farmers argued that these sales increased demand for the infrastructure that accompanies recreational space: a room and a path through the field to ensure access by car or machinery, as well as barriers that separate fields and offer some privacy.

The cumulative result of pressure from speculators and recreational users is that while rural land prices remain low compared to those in urban areas, they no longer reflect the buying power of working farmers. Glenn, another young farmer, said that a tumolo³ would have cost around 10,000 euros only ten years ago. Advertisements on Facebook Marketplace and by real estate agencies show similarly sized fields

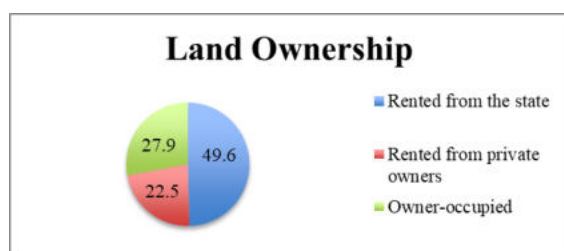
² All first names throughout the article have been changed.

³ A traditional Maltese unit of agricultural land measurement, comprising 1116 m², or 1/9 ha.

now cost anywhere from 50,000 to 100,000 euros; sometimes more if they have amenities like rooms. In contrast, land prices in the European Union vary between 2000 and 100,000 euros per hectare (Eurostat 2018). Unlike his father and grandfather, Glenn cannot afford either to offer to buy the land he leases from his landlords, or to acquire land from elsewhere.

Tenuous Tenancies

With the state owning 49.6% of farmland and private landowners renting out a further 22.5% (NSO 2022: 7), most landholdings are constituted at least in part of leased parcels. The Agricultural Leases (Reletting) Act (1967) (henceforth ‘the Act’) governs both state and private leases. It allows tenants to renew their lease indefinitely across generations, and offers little scope for eviction or for raising rent amounts. As a result, many landlords have seen their land locked away for generations in leases that generate what are now nominal amounts in rent (e.g. 5 euros per tumolo) thanks to inflation. Only when a farmer passes away without heirs can a plot return to its owner without litigation, with one landowner comparing this system to a ‘lottery’. Once freed of a lease, there is no legal obligation to farm the fields in question, and the land can be sold at a price that reflects the owner’s full right to enjoy his property.



Reproduced from (NSO 2022: 7)

Appreciation in land prices has encouraged landowners to pursue evictions with greater vigour. The terms of the Act are governed through the Rural Leases Control Board. However, in

November 2020 a landowner won a landmark Maltese Constitutional Court case which ruled⁴ that the terms of the rent law itself had deprived a landowner not just of a fair rent for his tenancy, but of the very human right, enshrined in the constitution and in the European Convention on Human Rights, to enjoy one’s private property. The tenant was evicted from the fields in question, and other landowners have now opened similar cases against their tenants in the Constitutional Court.

Some of the ensuing court cases have been decided in favour of tenants. Nevertheless, at the time of writing there are roughly sixty farmers who have been taken to the Constitutional Court, and many more who are facing the same prospect. By weakening the security of rural leases, court decisions that lead to tenant evictions will encourage speculation, and raise land prices even further.

Daniel has been taken to court by three different landowners from whom he rents 80% of his land. Having successfully applied for the Young Farmers funding scheme (RDP 2014-2020), he is now facing the prospect of losing a viable enterprise. Glenn’s family is also fighting to keep a small percentage of their land. He explained that although it did not threaten the viability of their farm, the future of this parcel would determine whether he could leave his day job to farm full-time, or whether he would have to keep farming as a part-timer. The family had started acquiring land towards this end a few years ago. Both farmers therefore made prior investments in land and agricultural infrastructure in the belief that they would be integrated into a stable and secure landholding.

Landlords who own land in freehold are understandably unwilling to enter into binding leases with farmers. Joe himself argued that he would make more money renting part of his own land out to a horse rearer than cultivating it

⁴ J&C Properties Ltd vs. Nazzareno Pulis (Const. Appl. 133/2018) decided on the 23rd of November 2020.

himself. However, in order to apply for agricultural subsidies, some landowners have engaged farmers like Joe and Owen to cultivate their fields free of charge. This means that while the remaining 27.9% of farmland is classed as owner-occupied (NSO 2022: 7) and ostensibly refers to freeholders who also cultivate their land, farmers might still be cultivating the land, albeit through arrangements that offer no security. Joe argued that, were these sorts of arrangements to increase, they would make long-term projects such as fruit tree cultivation or organic farming, which are being encouraged on an EU level, particularly difficult.

Evictions can upset a careful balance in indirect ways. Rita explained that a portion of her landholding could only be watered by a water source that was found on another portion of land that risked expropriation. Michael, whose neighbour has sold the land, feared being barred from accessing the reservoir that he was entitled to draw from, but was on his neighbour's parcel.

While the government has promised to support farmers, it is still unclear what shape this support will take, and when it will be implemented. The state could reform the law regulating agricultural leases in order to raise the rent amounts paid to private landowners. This would mirror the action taken in the recent housing reform (Chapter 604 2019), where rents were raised to a level that reflected market prices, and tenants who could not afford to pay underwent a means test and received state support.

Such a law might still have to withstand challenges in the Maltese Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), made on the basis of the right to the enjoyment of private property. In a debate held at the first ever edition of the Agrifair this year, government officials argued that state subsidies might violate EU state aid rules. Two lawyers contacted for this article argued that the Maltese judiciary was following too closely what they characterised as the ECHR's overemphasis on private property

rights. They also suggested that state aid rules might be more interpretable. This points to a wider problem: the difficulty of crafting locally sensitive policies in an integrated Europe.

State Expropriation

The state has a controversial record in the protection of farmland not just because of shortcomings in the permitting process but also because of the expropriation of public and private property for projects of national importance. The state is able to expropriate land for the purposes of projects that are in the 'public interest', a vague justification that has produced many controversial outcomes. Over the past years, a series of major infrastructural works, primarily the construction of roads, contributed further to the takeup of agricultural land. The Central Link project, for example, has led to the destruction of around 49,000 m² of mostly agricultural land (TMI 2021).

Michael is facing the partial destruction of a reservoir that he shares with other farmers, as the state plans to build a roundabout in the vicinity. Since the water source is shared, each farmer is allotted a day or two of the week during which he can extract water. For the others, who cannot leave their crops unwatered in the hot summer months, the reservoir is essential, holding enough water to get them through the rest of the week. Another farmer, from H'Attard, has had his farmhouse and water source split from the land by the construction of an arterial road. Study participants alleged that some of these roads were specifically intended to expand the building zone and justify future commercial or residential developments. Environmentalists argue that expanding the road network will not do enough to solve Malta's traffic problems, since car use remains ubiquitous among the Maltese, who do not trust or seek alternative modes of transport.

Activism

The significant increases in land prices, challenges to the rent law and destruction of farmland by the state are developments that have captured public attention and forced young farmers to speak out about their problems.⁵ Some have created links with environmental and agricultural activist groups.

Moviment Graffiti, a socialist organisation, views farmers as victims of commercial interests that place profit above people and the natural environment. It has been successful in galvanising public anger at the destruction of farmland, holding a number of protests and direct actions, giving farmers like Michael a platform to air their problems. Along with other environmental NGOs, Graffiti sees the fight for agricultural land as one for 'green space'. This is partly due to the fact that much of Malta's natural environment is shaped by agriculture. Environmental groups have often been the only organisations willing to campaign for the protection of farmland in recent decades.

Two farmers' representative organisations have however risen to prominence in the last few years, managing to capture the support of youths in the sector, collaborating with environmental NGOs, and interfacing with the wider public through digital media. Għaqda Bdiewa Attivi (GhBA, the Active Farmers' Organisation) has focused in more detail on the needs of farmers as producers, not just environmental guardians, bringing particular attention to unjust practices in the administration of state land. Malta Youth in Agriculture (MaYA) has focused on the challenges these changes are presenting to young farmers, who are already burdened by generational tensions. It also seeks to represent the interests of prospective and smaller-scale farmers, as well as other stakeholders in the sector.

⁵ Some examples from local media: *Lovin Malta*, January 27 2021 – Young Burmarrad Farmer Warns Proposed Roundabout Will Destroy 500-Year-Old Reservoir And His Livelihood; *Times of Malta*, 8th February 2021 – Agricultural land 'being killed off' to highest bidder; *Friends of the Earth Malta*, 21st August 2019 – Central Link Farmer: 'Help farmers... The farmer is regressing not progressing.'

Misuse of Land

The rhetoric of these organizations and of participants in this study often focused on what they characterize as the misuse of resources by other rural stakeholders. Permits for agricultural structures like animal farms, stables and boutique wineries are allegedly being used to sneak residences into the ODZ (ToM 2020). Solar farms are not allowed on agricultural land (SFP 2017: 10), but there have been proposals to circumvent this rule by mounting them on greenhouses⁶. Agricultural fields have also been turned into dumping grounds, parking spaces for contractors' machinery, and parking spaces.

In contrast, many study participants said they had experienced unwarranted scepticism when submitting applications for agricultural structures such as greenhouses, stores and reservoirs, considered essential to achieving sustainability on the farm. Michael, for example, expressed frustration at the extensive bureaucracy involved in setting up a roadside stall. Many mentioned finding it increasingly difficult to build even reservoirs in the ODZ.

Groundwater is another resource that is subject to conflict. In recent decades, the ability of farmers to irrigate their fields increased, as boreholes were drilled to tap Malta's two water tables: the mean sea level aquifer, found across the islands, and the perched aquifer, found in some areas over a blue clay layer. However, over-abstraction led to the imposition of a moratorium in 2008 that is still in force today⁷. Joe, who lacks a water source, argued that this is holding him and other farmers back from reaching their full potential. He claimed that water drawn from existing agricultural boreholes is regularly sold for use in other industries (e.g. construction or tourism) or in private pools, adding that monitoring has to

⁶ A small number of these solar farms were built before the introduction of a Solar Farm Policy in 2017.

⁷ <https://mra.mt/groundwater>

increase in order to ensure that water is in fact used for farming.

For young farmers like Owenn and Glenn seeking to grow their landholdings, the abandonment of neighbouring fields is a source of frustration. Owen pointed out fields that are irrigated but are being used to grow wheat, which is normally reserved for non-irrigated areas. Glenn described the fields around his family's landholding as being overgrown with weeds. He has pleaded with several of the owners to buy their land, but none of them are willing. Such is the mistrust towards tenants that he has not even been able to lease these parcels, formally or otherwise.

Sometimes this mistrust exists within the family. When Owen asked for land from family members with extensive landholdings, he received a stern rebuke, in spite of the fact that they were not under cultivation. He was dismayed to learn that they saw land as a speculative asset, rather than a productive asset that should be put to good use. His request had been perceived as an attempt to appropriate it for himself. An older farmer exemplified this attitude when he described how one of his fields, leased from the state, was too far away from his main landholding for him to cultivate. His nephew was asking to cultivate it informally, but he wouldn't hear of it, fearing a hidden motive to take it away from him for good.

Hunting and trapping are particularly controversial forms of rural 'misuse', because they are only carried out in Malta thanks to a number of derogations from the EU's Birds Directive. These have been the subject of a constant tussle between environmentalists and hunters on both a local and European level. In 2019, there were still 12,161 licensed hunters and trappers (TMI 2019). While some farmers engage in hunting, they often have little time for hunters and trappers for whom the countryside is in the first place a recreational, not a productive, space.

For study participants the more land that is lost to urbanisation, the less space should be allocated to non-productive activities in rural areas. But some also had an issue with small-scale farmers, or dilettanti (hobbyists), who might be retired farmers, heirs to small parcels of land, or people who have bought land. Some young farmers saw them as at worst a cover for family picnics and at best a barrier to professional farmers accumulating viable landholdings. Joe referred to the growing trend of planting olive trees around fields and repairing boundary walls, with the scope of converting the parcel into a garden-like recreational space. He saw the olive tree, which requires little maintenance and remains green all year round, as an easy way for tenants to pretend that they were farming the land, a symbol of a shift in values in the countryside. Both he and Daniel, however, were also sympathetic to the public's need for open space, particularly when considering that a larger section of the population now resides in urban apartments.

While participants frowned at what they saw as illicit or undesirable land uses, they also acknowledged that freehold land is not subject to any obligation to farm. Tenants of agricultural leases, on the other hand, are subject to the terms imposed by the Act. Nevertheless, there are severe shortcomings in the monitoring of agricultural activity in leases. Since the state owns so much farmland, both farmers and landowners argue that tackling this area of land governance is an important step in addressing the land crisis.

Administering Leases

All tenants of state and private leases are obliged by the Act to maintain agricultural activity, but there is insufficient monitoring, even on state property, to ensure that this condition is met. In 2020 there were 1798 full-time farmers⁸, up by 38% from 1300 in 2010. But these are dwarfed by 11,713 part-timers, even if that number has in turn declined by 31% from 16,912 in 2010 (NSO 2022: 15).

⁸ Working 1800 hours a year or more.

Many research participants suggested that state authorities are allowing the abandonment or misuse of land in order not to upset this large number of tenants.

Despite the difficulty of making a living from farming, a number of factors encourage tenants to hold onto leased land. The first is the ease with which a lease can be maintained, as tenants simply need to till their parcel at least once a year. Furthermore, rents are mostly low enough to pose no burden. In order to apply for EU subsidies applicants simply need to register that they are growing a particular crop in the relevant fields. In many cases concerning direct payments, proof of tenancy or ownership is not a requirement: farmers simply need to prove they are cultivating it. For elderly farmers, these payments can constitute a significant supplement to their pensions. Forage crops like wheat are favoured because they require little maintenance. They are also the most practical crops in dry farmed areas, which is why they constitute the predominant (67.5%) use of arable land (NSO 2022: 8).

There is also an informal economy around rural lease. Landowners wishing to recuperate their property sometimes resort to paying off their tenants in order for them to vacate it willingly. A similar process occurs when a prospective tenant wishes to replace the existing tenant, who ‘makes a bargain’, in the words of one farmer, by demanding a monetary gift (rigal) to give up his lease. Before a recent amendment ratifying transfers to third parties, such changes in occupancy sometimes happened clandestinely, as the law only permitted transfers to parents or children. As a result the land registry, or a private landowner for that matter, is not always aware of the real situation of occupancy on the ground, making it harder also for young farmers to know exactly what land is legitimately occupied and which is up for grabs.

The Government-Owned Agricultural Land Regulations of 2018 enabled tenants to transfer their leases to third parties who are bona fide

farmers, but the only real stipulation is that the applicant is registered as a farmer with the employment authorities. By failing to monitor recipients of these transfers, the state is relinquishing even more of its control over lease distributions, allowing existing tenants to choose who gets their land. This situation makes it even harder for young farmers, who cannot afford to pay these ‘gifts’, to access state land. Some farmers reported seeing older farmers ‘grab onto’ any field that became available, because they insisted on working into their old age, and had the capital to continue growing their landholdings.

The law states that the relevant authority

“shall ensure that the agricultural land which will be transferred to third parties by virtue of these regulations continues to be used for agricultural purposes (Article 5 (2))”

Farmers however shared the belief that leases, particularly government leases, are insufficiently monitored, both for use and occupancy. One farmer said he had been approached by non-farmers and offered sums in the hundreds of thousands for a field in a scenic spot.

The situation is made worse by the fact that, when a leased field does return to the state, it is then reissued through a tender, with the winning applicant being chosen not by merit but through an auction. This summer, GhBA used satellite imagery to prove that three tumoli of land leased by tender had shown no signs of agricultural activity in the past two years (ToM 2022).

The 2018 regulations also allow the division of leases among heirs if they are able to demonstrate that the ensuing parcels remain economically viable. It is unclear what criteria are used to evaluate these demands. Besides fragmenting fields into unviable parcels, this gives heirs who are not interested in farming the leverage to demand payment for their shares from any siblings who might want to farm. One landowner pointed out that this is an injustice on those heirs

who have to pay out their siblings, on property that was never theirs in the first place, as well as on the owners, who receive no portion of these payouts. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the devolution of leases through inheritance, as well as through lateral transfers, and focus instead on granting the state greater authority in allocating leases. However, the boards making these decisions need to operate according to publicly available criteria. These are not currently available for the Agricultural Advisory Committee, which judges the suitability of applicants to agricultural leases and agricultural structures.

It is important to note that regularising state leases would uncover many uncomfortable situations. One farmer, who heads the Borg family, recounted how he had taken over land from his neighbours when their children immigrated to Australia. They were reluctant to transfer their leases, should their children ever return, but tolerated him cultivating their fields. After doing so for decades, he and his children, who are young full-time farmers, are still not recognised as the tenants in these parts of their landholding, and cannot set up infrastructure that reflects the size of their enterprise, since permits for structures such as agricultural stores are given according to the total amount of land one officially leases or owns. They do acknowledge however that had the original owners agreed to transfer their lease, the correct process would have involved putting those plots up for tender, which would have exposed them to the risk of someone else applying for and getting them.

Farmers who apply for EU funding schemes sometimes find that the irregularities in their landholdings prevent them from doing so. Others find that banks are not forthcoming with credit when land is leased rather than owned.

Economic Difficulties

Tenants encountered in the field justified both the abandonment and the recreational use of land by appealing to the claim that farming is no longer viable.

It is definitely true that farmers face mounting challenges today. Recent statistics issued by the National Statistics Office indicate that hours of sunshine are on the increase, temperatures have risen by 1.5 degrees in half a century, and periods of drought are increasingly common (MT 2022). In an increasingly arid climate, young farmers no longer see dry farming, once widely practiced on the islands, as a viable option. Daniel described the increasing incidence of heatwaves and dry winters as a decisive factor in his refusal to risk growing crops on unirrigated land.

Another young farmer, Mario, told me that ‘you only have as much land as you have water’. He has ample access to groundwater and New Water – treated sewage water provided by the state to farmers – and is able to grow crops intensively. The conversion of dry land to irrigated land in recent decades has been a contributing factor to the over-abstraction and salinisation of groundwater, leading farmers like Owen, whose family grew vines, and the Borg family, to limit or halt their use of groundwater.

The sector has not fared well in the competitive and highly regulated European Union. Labeling and packaging are still not widely practiced, limiting the appeal of local produce and making the local market more susceptible to food fraud. There is also a dearth of processors, with the most developed sectors being olive oil pressing and tomato processing⁹. Transportation costs are high, since almost all inputs are imported from overseas. After the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, farmers started reporting price increases of 200-300% in some cases.

⁹ The dairy sector, on the other hand, is highly developed, organised around a major cooperative and a commercial enterprise.

While retailers have forged links with importers bringing in well-presented, cheaper produce, many farmers continue to sell their produce through intermediaries in the Pitkalija, a wholesale market that has been plagued by shortcomings in transparency and traceability. Uncoordinated production also leads to overabundance of certain products during peak harvest periods, with farmers generally lacking adequate facilities to store or process surplus produce.

Combined with the constant availability of imported food, this means that farmers do not get a good return for their produce. Reforms aimed at modernising the market were announced in 2021 (ToM 2021), but are still being implemented. For Daniel, inertia in the Pitkalija is related to the unwillingness of older farmers to challenge the status quo. He said they were happy to accept lower prices because they had a pension and a secure home, while younger farmers faced soaring property prices that tied them up in loans for life.

In theory, cooperatives could help producers transcend limitations of scale, but they have struggled to make headway in the farming community. The young farmers interviewed seemed unconvinced of the benefits of acting in concert, preferring to work alone. Often however, the family's involvement was crucial, allowing them to pool land and labour time, even if it sometimes denied them the ability to make decisions on the farm.

Some of these young farmers had also made considerable efforts to sell their wares themselves, by setting up their own shops, selling at Malta's two farmers' markets or delivering directly to the retailer. Some have increased the viability of smaller landholdings by converting to organic agriculture, benefiting from the relatively high premiums still in place in this nascent sector. All participants had invested in machinery and infrastructure and in some cases received EU funding to support their efforts. Their

commitment is why MaYA and GhBA campaigns show the public that there are still farmers for whom it is worth protecting the land.

Circumscribing agricultural land

In arguing that rural areas need to be kept for agriculture, farmers like Glenn and Daniel expressed a desire to see land sales take place in a specialised market that is open only to farmers. This would entail imposing the same limitations on freehold land as are imposed on agricultural leases. They argued that prices for private land should reflect the myriad features that make land productive, not its aesthetic features.

In France, the SAFER agencies, which are state entities, are able to intervene in the land market to ensure that the 'best bidder' receives land, not the highest bidder. They do so by acting as 'intermediary of an amicable transaction' – almost like real estate agents – or exercising their 'pre-emptive right to buy', whereby they intervene to determine the price and buyer according to the merits of the proposed project (ATL). Another option that could be considered is the creation of a land bank offering credit to farmers seeking to buy land.

In addition, France, where 80% of land is leased, has long protected farmers by controlling rent prices, setting long minimum periods for leases, and giving farmers pre-emption rights (ATL). In Malta, the Constitutional Court has created a conflict between the human rights of landowners and the rights of tenants to farm in the 'national interest' by providing food. Different magistrates have decided in favour of both on different occasions, so policymakers and lawmakers seeking to solve the issue are operating in an area of uncertainty. However, the government should be more open about its available options and be clear about the severity of the potential consequences it may face in the ECHR.

Circumscribing agricultural land users

For farmers, the crucial precondition for better resource allocation is a stronger definition of what constitutes a farmer. A considerable source of indignation is the ease with which anyone can register as a farmer with the employment agency, benefiting in turn from the ability to apply for a lease, for ODZ planning permits, for subsidies, and for access to New Water.

GhBA is arguing that, at least when applying for ODZ structures, farmers should be distinguished as such because they earn more than a specific amount of turnover from farming. The National Agricultural Policy 2018-2028 (103) proposes the establishment of a classification system, claiming that

“ a fair and effective farmer benchmarking system should be capable of identifying levels of farming activities that distinguish between active farmers, recreational farmers and new-comers in the sector (139).”

Recognising that grading farmers according to turnover would be somewhat arbitrary, one of the Borg brothers suggested an identification system that would monitor the farmer's enterprise as a whole, comparing income to expenditures, checking that inputs are related to agricultural use, and cross-checking these data satellite imagery of the farm.

While older farmers tend to be wary of the authorities and have even been willing to forgo applying for subsidies in order to keep the state out of their landholdings, many of the young farmers who participated in this study were asking for more stringent, consistent and holistic monitoring.

Michael, on the other hand, described crop plans, which are necessary to applying for funding, as a barrier to his flexibility on the farm, particularly since he intercroops, rather than growing monocrops in each field. Another condition, to till the land, directly contradicted his attempts to develop permanent beds. A classification system

must also be able to cater for enterprises of different sizes and of different methodologies, from intensive farms to permaculture farms.

Consolidation

The authors of the National Agricultural Policy 2018-2028 astutely point out that intensive farming in Malta is a direct result of foreign competition forcing farmers to extract more and more from their comparatively small landholdings. Farmers need more space in order to be able to practice crop rotation (NAP 2018: 142, 164).

However, landholdings are not only small but also fragmented, with some landholdings being split across different localities. Cultivating these landholdings as an integrated whole may entail stretching resources, including labour time, quite thinly. Daniel said it would take him at least a whole morning to drive around all his different fields and stop to check that everything was working well.

Farmers have to set up separate irrigation systems or make arrangements with neighbours. Manuel, who has a few outlying parcels, has agreed with his neighbour to share his water source. Michael has received permission from a neighbour to draw the water he collects from the roof of an unused greenhouse. Another young farmer described how he had laid a water pipe over a great distance, spending thousands of euros in the process, in order to connect disparate fields to a single water source. The relations tying together different landholdings are therefore quite complex.

For these reasons the Policy lists consolidation as one of its primary objectives (2018: 7) and calls for incentives that ‘encourage or facilitate consolidation’ ‘through reciprocal exchange between lease holders’ (2018: 136). Consolidating landholdings would not only enable more efficient farmwork with machinery, but also reduce the need to set up different water sources and irrigation systems, as well as ease pressure on the

ODZ for stores and access roads, which sometimes have to be passed through other farmers' fields.

In order to achieve a greater degree of consolidation on farms, the NAP (140) proposes a scheme that would encourage the swapping of land. Owen was in two minds about the benefits of consolidation. He and Daniel are exploiting the advantages offered by the different microenvironments found across their landholdings: more hours of daylight as opposed to more shade, greater proximity to natural pollinators as opposed to greater exposure to sea spray.

For organic farmers, however, consolidation offers an added benefit. The main argument raised by detractors of organic farming is that the close proximity of fields and the interspersed nature of ownership make it difficult to stop the drifting of sprayed chemicals. Jason, who comes from a family of active farmers, farms a small portion of the family land organically. He sees an opportunity to swap a large area of his family's intensively farmed landholding for an area that abuts another organic farmer's landholding. For others, such as Gregory, whose land is found adjacent to an industrial winery, conversion to organic agriculture does not seem to be an option.

The National Agricultural Policy 2018-2028 was an important step in this direction. However, it is not clear to what extent its suggestions are being implemented. At the government's first ever Agrifair held earlier this year, a roadmap for the development of organic agriculture was unveiled. There was no discussion about how consolidation could be encouraged to this end, a factor which is discussed in detail in the NAP, whether certain parts of Malta were particularly suited towards organic agriculture, nor an explicit discussion of how neighbours could be persuaded to switch to organic farming. Two young farmers described being completely unable to make the conversion because of their proximity to large working farms or other sources of pollution.

The values of farming

All of the young farmers mentioned in this article emphasised the need for food security on a small island, the cultural value of farming, and the role of the farmer as guardian of the landscape. They argued that agriculture's negligible contribution to GDP obscures these fundamental roles. These claims are not uncontested. A landowner questioned the necessity of maintaining local production in a globally integrated economy, and challenged the assumption that farming is the form of land use that is best suited towards conserving the rural landscape. He related his own experiences of tenant farmers letting rubble walls (which are intended to protect against soil erosion) crumble and building a greenhouse (which he considered as an eyesore) without a permit.



Verdalat 5 - Photo credits: Christian Borg (FoEM/MaYA)

He added that he would like to be free to explore other uses of the land, possibly by turning it into a small nature reserve, and that this should constitute suitable grounds for reclaiming one's property from a tenant, as well as for receiving support from the state. The rules around agricultural leases effectively give landowners no say over what happens on the land beyond the remits of the law, and the focus of farmers on maximising productive space seems to leave little scope for any of the 'rewilding' efforts that are increasingly in vogue elsewhere in Europe.

The islands have a long history of importing grain to feed their inhabitants, and that dependence

has increased to the point where Malta now relies on foreign sources for the majority of its food supply. The steady arrival of containers bringing cheap and better-packaged food leads many consumers to doubt the necessity of an indigenous farming economy. Farmers reply by pointing towards food scares and price hikes during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war, emphasising Malta's vulnerability as a small archipelago. When discussing this issue, participants did not appeal to a notion of nativist self-sufficiency, which is acknowledged as an impossible ideal, but towards preparing for contingency, diversifying and maintaining some control over the islands' food supply.

At the same time, the public image, perpetuated by farmers, of agriculture as a bulwark against development of the built environment might be postponing a reckoning of the effects of modern agriculture's methods on the natural environment. If agricultural land is to be touted as crucial green space because it constitutes a large part of our rural areas, so it must be considered as integrated into the ecosystems that surround it. The difficulty in Malta of allocating land for different uses lies in its scarcity, which makes it difficult to reconcile ecological needs (particularly relating to climate change mitigation) and agricultural needs (particularly relating to food security). We need to understand better the impacts of intensive farming methods on flora and fauna within and above the soil. Some participants still talked about Malta's water resources as if they were unlimited.

Projects focusing on conserving water, schemes encouraging the planting of orchards, and incentives for organic farming are some of the ways in which the state and farmers have sought to balance these conflicting requirements. Naturally, notions of sustainability differ among farmers. For John, a new farmer, sustainability is primarily about creating a market for his own produce by linking the farm to a farm shop and restaurant. For Simon, who has been farming for a long time, organic is unsustainable in today's

market conditions because of increasing pest loads. He claims to have achieved water sustainability and maximised space on his farm by installing a vertical farming system in a greenhouse that recycles water. For Michael, sustainability is about growing vegetables with ecological health as the top priority.

In the words of one farming representative, the state cannot implement land reform 'without also deciding what it wants from agriculture'. In order to do so, it needs to implement a holistic vision that brings together the different state authorities that govern land use, land ownership, water, pesticides, environmental resources, and agriculture itself. Larger nations often have multi-level land management systems that differ across regions. In contrast, despite the difficulty of reconciling the numerous claims on land with its increasing scarcity, Malta's small size should make it easier for authorities to devise holistic policies that are rooted in inter-departmental cooperation.

Smallholders cannot be dismissed, as they often are by the wider agricultural community, as using land only for 'barbecues and picnics. Smallholders were often found to be farming recreationally, cultivating bountiful gardens and trying to do so in an ecologically sensitive manner. We need to understand better what the impact of this kind of farming is on rural resources, and offer guidance to smallholders as legitimate land users in their own right because many are here to stay: kitchen gardens increased from 1117 ha in 2010 to 1995 ha in 2020 (NSO 2022: 8).

Besides having a material interest in keeping their lease, tenants also have an emotional connection to their fields. The farmer who had been offered hundreds of thousands for his lease refused because 'money isn't everything,' and the place was an oasis of sanity away from his overdeveloped hometown. Owen insisted that he could not bring himself to take over the family's land when his father was now looking forward to spending his retirement farming. Smallholders

interviewed for the study emphasized how their landholdings brought them a great sense of peace.

At the same time, it is undeniable that rural areas are undergoing a change in the patchwork of ownership and use. This might put recreational and productive land users on a 'collision course' (NAP 2018: 12): pesticide spray, the dust from tilled soil, the noises and smells of farming, even the flight paths of bees, do not respect boundaries. It might also be creating new opportunities: a beekeeper who had returned to the land in his retirement found that large areas of abandoned land around him provided excellent undisturbed pasture for his bees.

Conclusion

In Malta, changes in the value of land as well as mismanagement of natural resources, which are crucial to farmers, have created a complex scenario in which various stakeholders compete for scarce farmland that is often expected to fulfill numerous uses. Finding that the requirements of agriculture are no longer served by the sector, young farmers are developing their rhetoric alongside their production and marketing methods. But their arguments are not unproblematic, and the consequences of farmers' proposals need to be explored more fully, ideally through a master plan that recognizes agriculture's entanglement in the ecological, social, legal and political systems discussed above.

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agricultural sector, focusing on the ways in which different rural stakeholders experience, debate and manipulate the land governance regime.