

Sustainable Development

Annual Report 2023



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, ENERGY
AND REGENERATION OF THE GRAND HARBOUR



**Sustainable
Development**
Environment • Society • Economy

Foreword



The 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide us with a unique opportunity for working together towards a sustainable future. Advancing the SDGs at home and abroad continues to be a government priority. Building on the strong foundations achieved over the past years, government remains committed to enable and accelerate progress to achieve the SDGs in an inclusive, across government and across society approach.

The concept of sustainable development lies in maintaining an equilibrium between three pillars: the environment, the economy, and society. Striking a balance between these three dimensions is not an easy endeavour. However, our collective commitment and continued efforts are essential to achieve all 17 SDGs. This can only be realised through enhanced collaboration and tangible actions taken by several stakeholders, including the government, the private sector and civil society at large.

The compilation of this report is a testament to this ethos. It showcases innovative strategies, policies, projects, and initiatives, commencing in or completed throughout 2023. Additionally, it helps us understand the transformation processes and actions taking place across all government fora. This is an essential exercise undertaken to acknowledge those players making positive change; those fostering stakeholder cooperation within our communities; and those taking actions to safeguard our environment, economy and citizens' wellbeing. It is crucial to also identify the remaining gaps and challenges that needs to be addressed to set and achieve our goals in the coming years.

In this regard, Malta's Sustainable Development Strategy for 2050 is a holistic strategy which seeks to help Malta achieve the SDGs. 2023 marked an important milestone of the finalisation of the Strategy following the public consultation phase. This Strategy highlights the Maltese Government's commitment to transition towards a climate-neutral and green economy, towards sustainable urban development and cultural heritage, ensuring healthy lives and wellbeing, accelerating digital transformation, smart mobility, and connectivity, and achieving social fairness and prosperity for all.

With this ambition in mind, these are the goals that will define priorities of national development in the future, that provide us with guidance to steer our actions. We can all be changemakers in fulfilling these goals for the benefit of our wellbeing and of future generations.

Miriam Dalli
Minister for the Environment, Energy and Regeneration of the Grand Harbour

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List of Abbreviations

AACC	Active Ageing Community Care
ABPs	Animal By-products
ACC	Agriculture Consultative Council
ACs	Air Conditioners
ACTS	Agency for Community and Therapeutic Services
AG	Attorney General
ALDFG	Abandoned, lost, discarded fishing gear
ALMA	Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve
AM	Ambjent Malta
AMR	Antimicrobial Resistance
AMU	Address Management Unit
AQP	Air Quality Plan
ARB	Asset Recovery Bureau
ARPA	Agriculture and Rural Payments Agency
AS	Aġenzija Sedqa
AWAS	Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers
AŽ	Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ
BCT	Blue Culture Technologies
BESS	Battery Energy Storage Systems
BPR	Business Process Reengineering
BREEAM	Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method
C&D	Construction and Demolition
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
C-Cover	Coastal-Climate Overall Vulnerability and Exposure Risk
CDW	Construction and Demolition Waste
CEDMS	Corporate Electronic Document Management System
CEMalta	Circular Economy Malta
CEU	Compliance and Enforcement Unit
CFC	Commissioner for Children
CGBVDV	Commission on Gender-Based Violence & Domestic Violence
CION	The European Commission
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna

CJLA	Criminal Justice and Legislative Amendments
CMD	Cleansing and Maintenance Division
CMIS	Case Management Information System
COE	Council of Europe
COLA	Cost of Living Adjustment
COP	Conference of the Parties
CoPE	Community of Professional Educators
CPA	Coastal Protection and Adaptation
CPD	Civil Protection Department
CRIS	Criminal Records Information System
CRO	Criminal Records Office
CSA	Correctional Services Agency
DDLTS	Directorate for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills
DFA	Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture
DIER	Department for Industrial Relations
DMS	Document Management System
DOC	Department of Contracts
DoH	Department of Health
DoJ	Department of Justice
DPIC	Data Protection and Information Coordination Directorate
EC	European Commission
ECDN	European Consumer Debt Network
EEA	European Environment Agency
EES	Entry-Exit System
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
EIT	European Institute of Innovation and Technology
EMA	European Medicines Agency
EPR	Extended Producer Responsibility
ERA	Environment and Resources Authority
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESA	European Space Agency
ESAs	European Supervisory Authorities
ESDW	European Sustainable Development Week
ESG	Environmental, Social and Governance
ESPAD	European School Survey Project

ETIAS	European Travel Information Authorisation System
EU	European Union
EVs	Electric Vehicles
EWA	Energy and Water Agency
FAST	Fight Alien Species Transborder
FEAD	Fund for the European Aid Deprived
FES	Foundation for Educational Services
FF5	Fun Fit 5
FIAU	Financial Intelligence and Analysis Unit
FITA	Foundation for Information Technology Assistance
FOI	Freedom of Information
FSWS	Foundation for Social Welfare Services
FTS	Foundation for Tomorrow's Schools
GAECs	Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions
GHGs	Greenhouse Gases
GIS	Geographic Information Systems
GPP	Green Public Procurement
GRETA	Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings of the Council of Europe
HA	Housing Authority
HEPA	Health-Enhancing Physical Activity
HESC	Home Economics Seminar Centre
HRD	Human Rights Directorate
IAS	Invasive Alien Species
ICM	InterConnect Malta
IEN	Individual Education Needs
IIS	Investing in Skills
IMC	Inter-Ministerial Committee
IMU	Information Management Unit
IPPC	Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control
IPS	Institute for Public Services
ITS	Institute of Tourism Studies
JPI Oceans	Joint Programming Initiative Healthy and Productive Seas and Oceans
LAM	Legal Aid Malta
LC	Local Council

LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer and other sexually or gender diverse
LPG	Liquified Petroleum Gas
LSZs	Learning Support Zones
MAARG	MDIA AI Applied Research Grant
MAR	Managed Aquifer Recharge
MCA	Malta Communications Authority
MCAST	Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology
MCC	Mediterranean Conference Centre
MCST	Malta Council for Science and Technology
MDH	Mater Dei Hospital
MDIA	Malta Digital Innovation Authority
ME	Malta Enterprise
MEEE	Ministry for the Environment, Energy, and Enterprise
MEYR	Ministry for Education, Sports, Youth, Research and Innovation
MFA	Malta Food Agency
MFAA	Ministry for Active Ageing
MFE	Ministry for Finance and Employment
MFET	Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade
MFH	Ministry for Health
MFJ	Ministry for Justice
MFSA	Malta Financial Services Authority
MFT	Ministry for Tourism
MGOZ	Ministry for Gozo
MHS	Mental Health Services
MICIE	Mediterranean Island Cleantech Innovation Ecosystem
MITA	Malta Information Technology Agency
MIVC	Ministry for Inclusion, Voluntary Organisations and Consumer Rights
MMRF	Multi-Material Recovery Facility
MOAS	Migrants Offshore Aid Station
MOST	Ministry of Science and Technology
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPAs	Marine Protected Areas
MPF	Malta Police Force
MPT	Malta Public Transport

MS	Member State
MSDI	Malta Spatial Data Infrastructure
MSE	Malta Stock Exchange
MSFD	Marine Strategy Framework Directive
MSPC	Ministry for Social Policy and Children’s Rights
MTA	Malta Tourism Authority
MTCA	Malta Tax and Customs Administration
MTIP	Ministry for Transport, Infrastructure and Capital Projects
NAA	National Agricultural Act
NAP	National Agricultural Policy
NBSAP	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
NCPE	National Commission for the Promotion of Equality
NEETs	Not in education, employment, or training
NFPs	National Focal Points
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NLTP	National Language Technology Platform
NSO	National Statistics Office
NSSS	National School Support Services
NVL	National Veterinary Laboratory
OCVO	Office of the Commissioner for Voluntary Organisations
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHSA	Occupational Health and Safety Authority
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
OPP	Organic Processing Plant
OTPC	One-Tablet-Per-Child
PA	Planning Authority
PED	Primary Energy Demand
POMs	Programme of Measures
POYC	Pharmacy of Your Choice
PPD	Plant Protection Directorate
PRC	People’s Republic of China
PRIMA	Partnership for R&I in the Mediterranean Area
PV	Photovoltaic
PWD	Public Works Department

R&I	Research and Innovation
RAM	Riżorsi Agrikoli Malta
RAS	Recirculating Aquaculture System
RBMP	River Basin Management Plan
REP	Research Excellence Programme
REWS	Regulator for Energy and Water Services
RIS3	Smart Specialisation Strategy
RPU	Research and Planning Unit
RRP	Recovery and Resilience Plan
SA	State Advocate
SAGE	Satellite Assisted Governance for Erosion
SBEP	Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership
SCH	Superintendence of Cultural Heritage
SCSA	Social Care Standards Authority
SDD	Sustainable Development Directorate
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDIs	Sustainable Development Indicators
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SIS	Schengen Information System
SMEs	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
SMOPU	Substance Misuse Outpatient Unit
SMP	Soil Management Plan
SMRs	Statutory Management Requirements
SPED	Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
SUP	Single-Use Plastics
SVP	St Vincent de Paul
TABS	Thermally Active Building System
TCM	Town Centre Management
TCN	Third Country National
TDP	Technology Development Programme
THB	Trafficking in Human Beings
TM	Transport Malta
TOSFA	TAKEOFF Seed Fund Awards
TSI	Technical Support Instrument

UCA	Urban Conservation Area
UM	University of Malta
UN	United Nations
UNFCCC	United Nations Climate Change Conference
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VHCN	Very High-Capacity Network
VMPs	Veterinary Medicinal Products
VoC	Victims of Crime
VSA	Victim Support Agency
WFD	Water Framework Directive
WMP	Waste Management Plan
WSC	Water Services Corporation
WSM	WasteServ Malta

Introduction

About the Report

This Annual Report has been prepared by the Sustainable Development Directorate (SDD) within the Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry for the Environment, Energy and Regeneration of the Grand Harbour. This fulfils the purpose of compliance with Part VI, Article 14 of the Sustainable Development Act (Chapter 521), which requires the Competent Authority to produce a report where all the sustainable activities carried out by the Competent Authority during the previous financial year are outlined. It is then submitted to the Minister responsible for sustainable development and a copy of this report is to be presented by the Minister to the House of Representatives for debate.

Tasked with formulating and implementing the government's national sustainable development policies, raising awareness, as well as building and enhancing capacity across Ministries to ensure effective mainstreaming of sustainable development principles, the SDD reports on the achievement and progress of each of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at a local and national level. In so doing, it also seeks to identify areas and gaps that require further action. This report will provide an overview of the policies, measures and initiatives that incorporate the principles of sustainable development and address the SDGs, which were carried out by the various government ministries, bodies, departments and entities during 2023, whilst highlighting those areas that require further effort, commitment and improvements.

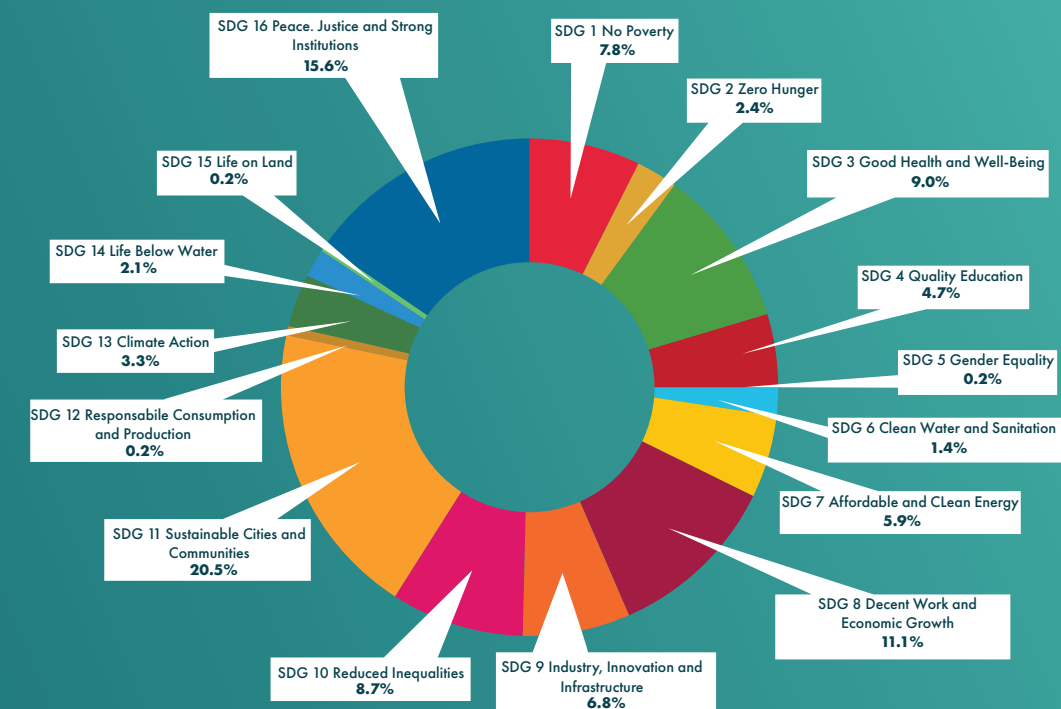
The report will follow the same structure outlined in Malta's Sustainable Development Strategy for 2050, which provides an overarching strategic framework and direction through which Malta can contribute to positive transformative change both within and beyond its borders and, as a result, ensure the protection of the environment and the socio-economic development of the Maltese Islands for 2050. The Strategy focuses on five strategic goals, divided into a number of strategic objectives, which are considered the most significant for, and pertinent to, Malta. A set of National Sustainable Development Indicators (SDIs) was developed in 2023 with the aim of measuring progress towards achieving the goals of Malta's Sustainable Development Strategy for 2050.

This Annual Report was drawn up based on feedback received by all the Ministries and presents all the work carried out during the previous year in accordance with Malta's Sustainable Development strategic goals and objectives.

Integration of the SDGs in the Budget Process and the National Reform Programme

The integration of the SDGs in the budget process is an exercise that the Maltese government has been carrying out annually since 2019, the aim of which is to improve the overall policy coherence when it comes to the implementation of the SDGs and enabling decision-makers to be better equipped to effectively address and realise the ambitions and targets set out by the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In this regard, the Maltese government undertook a long and intensive process involving all the ministries, which required them to analyse and assess the contributions of the measures and initiatives towards the implementation of the SDGs as part of the National Reform Programme.

As in previous years, the measures of the 2024 Budget were integrated with the SDGs.



Malta's Statistical Information on the 2030 Agenda and Performance

Malta's progress in relation to the SDGs is reported mainly through international platforms, these being the Sustainable Development Report, which is prepared by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the Bertelsmann Stiftung, and the monitoring report of the European Union (EU), presented by Eurostat. The data provided by the 2023 Sustainable Development Report placed Malta 41st out of 166 countries, with an SDG Index overall score of 75.5 and a spillover score of 61.5 out of a maximum of 100.

According to the Sustainable Development Report, Malta has achieved both SDG 1 No Poverty and SDG 4 Quality Education but highlights that major challenges remain in SDG 2 Zero Hunger, SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation, SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production, SDG 14 Life Below Water, and SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals. The Report does mention, however, that Malta is moderately improving in most of the SDGs with the only one showing a decreasing trend being SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities.

At the national level, work continued by the National Expert Group on Sustainable Development Indicators (SDIs) chaired by the National Statistics Office. The Expert Group was established in July 2021 with the aim of facilitating the coordination of activities relating to the SDIs by the various stakeholders and effectively addressing any data gaps present. By the end of December 2023, the first 7 SDGs were discussed.

Communicating Sustainable Development & the SDGs

During 2023, the SDD continued to ensure that, throughout its work, activities, events and initiatives, sustainable development is promoted and adopted by all actors throughout all workings of the government as well as across all the different sectors in the Maltese Islands.

Raising Awareness Through Online Platforms

Throughout 2023, the SDD continued to raise awareness of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its targets and objectives through its website (<https://sustainabledevelopment.gov.mt/>), which presents information and data in an interactive and user-friendly way.

Furthermore, as part of its efforts to encourage engagement, action and participation, the SDD has a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/sustainabledevelopment.mt>), an Instagram page (<https://www.instagram.com/sustainabledevelopmentmalta/>), and a LinkedIn page (<https://mt.linkedin.com/company/sustainable-development-malta>) through which it aims to increase awareness on ongoing initiatives and activities happening both locally and abroad, while also instilling a higher level of education on sustainable development in the Maltese Islands. These pages also serve as a platform for people to share their ideas and expertise on how one can lead a more sustainable lifestyle.

European Sustainable Development Week (ESDW) 2023

Malta has been participating in the ESDW since 2018 with this year's chosen theme being, *Sustainability Starts With Us*. The ESDW took place between 18 September 2023 and 8 October 2023 with the core of the week happening between 20 September 2023 and 26 September 2023.

As part of ESDW 2023, the SDD, through the *Malta Sustainable Development Action Days 2023: Be Part of the Change*, organised a number of activities related to sustainable development and promoted a total of 36 sustainable initiatives organised by government entities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and Local Councils (LCs) and businesses which were all showcased on both the local and European platforms. A highlight feature, which can be accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WhX05SgYtU>, was also created to shed light on the work being carried out, together with the effort and commitment that these change-makers are making to bring about a positive change.



29 September 2023

Lejla fil-Park

During ESDW 2023, the SDD, in collaboration with Project Green and WasteServ (WSM), organised the second edition of Lejla fil-Park, which was held at Ta' Qali National Park. The purpose of the event was to create a safe environment for all where, through sport, activities and educational initiatives, everyone could learn how to live a healthier and more sustainable life.

The programme was varied and those present had the opportunity to meet a variety of sports organisations, including the Malta Special Olympics Committee, the Malta Football Association, Malta Cricket, Badminton Malta, and the Malta Taekwondo Association.

There were also representatives from the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Directorate who provided the public with information on how one should live a healthy life and what kind of balanced diet one can eat.

In addition to exhibitions of sporting skills, there was also a fitness session, games for children, crafts, sports activities, and a performance by the Żabbar Scout Group and the Malta Tama Tnabar Association.



The Sustainable Baby Box Project

The Sustainable Baby Box project being implemented by the SDD, provides every newborn with a starter kit which will help guardians shift towards a more sustainable upbringing of their child. By making use of eco-friendly and safe baby products, the Ministry is aiming to ingrain the concept of sustainability from a very young age as well as increase awareness of reusable baby products as alternatives to single-use and disposable items. Each box contains a baby blanket, a muslin cloth, a wet bag, a cloth wipe, and socks and mittens, all of which are made from eco-friendly materials, together with an eco-friendly reusable nappy and nappy liners. There is also a feeding bib, a dummy, a teether, and a cutlery set, all made from Bisphenol A-free material. In addition, a culture of reading is fostered through books in both the Maltese and English languages, which are distributed together with the baby box.

Since the start of the project, by the end of 2023, more than 8,500 sustainable baby boxes were distributed to parents and guardians all over Malta and Gozo.



The Sustainable Localities Scheme for Local Councils

During 2023, work commenced on the three infrastructural projects chosen as part of the Sustainable Localities Scheme which was launched in the third quarter of 2022 with the objective of encouraging LCs to engage in infrastructural projects aimed at safeguarding the environment, social wellbeing, and economic growth. The financial assistance being provided through this scheme is to ensure that the local community's efforts are recognised and supported, while also incentivising them to participate and play an active role in sustainable projects and initiatives.

These projects include the installation of a system of photovoltaic (PV) panels, as well as the embellishment and regeneration of two main squares and the improvement of their surrounding facilities for the benefit of the community.

The Sustainable Development Fund

The Sustainable Development Fund is a support scheme for voluntary organisations, through which non-government, not-for-profit organisations are offered financial support to engage in sustainable activities and initiatives related to the three pillars of sustainable development.

During 2023, five voluntary organisations were given funding for projects that addressed a multitude of sustainable development principles through a variety of ways, namely, the integration of sustainable measures within the daily operations of organisations and the introduction of eco-friendly facilities and spaces at their premises; the promotion of re-using, re-purposing and thrifting among families; the enhancement of services for individuals and families affected by traffic accidents and injury; and awareness-raising and education campaigns directed at all age groups.

The Fun Fit 5 (FF5) Project

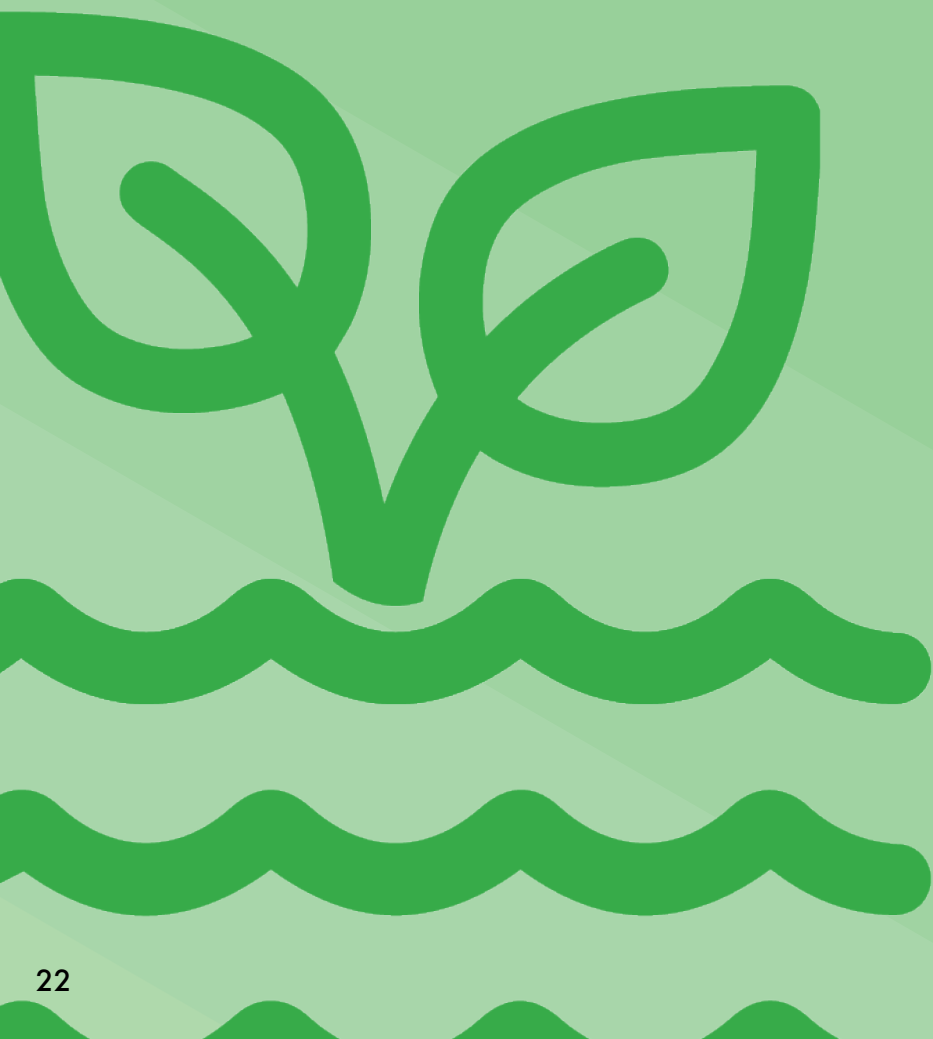
In 2023, the then Ministry for the Environment, Energy and Enterprise (MEEE) and the Fondazzjoni Inġobb il-Futbol signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) regarding the FF5 project.

The FF5 project, which in 2023 entered its second year, offered a variety of physical sessions of approximately sixty minutes each to primary school students all over the Maltese Islands. These sessions were conducted by specialised and trained coaches to encourage school children to engage in physical activity through fun and interactive games and activities. Additionally, analysts and specialised trainers carried out tests and collected data, assessing the impact that physical activity has on the physical, psychological and academic wellbeing of the participants. The findings of this research will be presented in a final study that will be published in 2024.



Chapter 1

Transitioning Towards a Climate-Neutral Green and Blue Economy



The Maltese Government is committed towards the transition to a green and blue economy and much efforts have been made to ensure the economic, environmental, and social transformation needed to make the economy more sustainable in the future. Malta's economic vision in fact places carbon neutrality at its core.

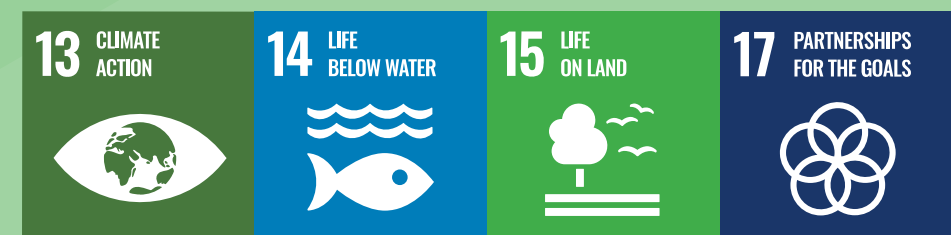
To encourage this transition, the Government is committed to continue accelerating efforts relating to energy efficiency and renewable energy, sustainable mobility and the decarbonisation of transport, clean water and sanitation as well as ensuring that sustainable waste services are being supported through waste management policies and projects.

Education is key in this transition, creating collective effort and a shared responsibility. In this regard, numerous educational campaigns are held regularly, with an emphasis on shifting individuals' social and cultural mindsets while encouraging investment in businesses that have environmental, social and governance (ESG) principles at their core.

Furthermore, considerable progress has been made in the development of Malta's National Strategy for the Environment 2050. This Strategy provides the foundations for protecting and managing the environment in the long term through an overarching framework for Malta's environmental strategies and plans.

Within the framework of the government's efforts in line with the 2030 Agenda, this chapter will highlight measures, projects and initiatives related to SDGs 1, 2, 3, 6-9, and 11-15, 17.

2030 AGENDA RELATED GOALS



1.1 Towards a Resilient and Climate-Neutral Economy

Relevant UN SDG Targets

3.9	By 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination
6.3	By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimising release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally
6.4	By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity
6.5	By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate
6.b	Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management
7.1	By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services
7.2	By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix
7.3	By 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency
7.a	By 2030, enhance international cooperation to facilitate access to clean energy research and technology, including renewable energy, energy efficiency and advanced and cleaner fossil-fuel technology, and promote investment in energy infrastructure and clean energy technology
9.4	By 2030, upgrade infrastructure and retrofit industries to make them sustainable, with increased resource-use efficiency and greater adoption of clean and environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes, with all countries taking action in accordance with their respective capabilities
9.5	Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries, including, by 2030 encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per 1 million people and public and private research and development spending
12.1	Implement the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns, all countries taking action, with developed countries taking the lead taking into account the development and capabilities of developing countries
12.7	Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities
13.2	Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning
13.3	Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning
15.9	By 2020, integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts
17.14	Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development

1.1.1 Green Public Procurement

In line with the Green Public Procurement (GPP) 2nd National Action Plan (2022-2027) when drafting and publishing procurement calls, Contracting Authorities/Entities are bound to include Green Technical Specifications and/or Green Award Criteria (as applicable) requirements. In line with the Action Plan, the Department of Contracts (DOC) has published Contracts Circular 06-2022 to guide Contracting Authorities/Entities in their GPP function towards a greener climate and environment, thus contributing towards the UN SDG 13: Climate Action.

Additionally, on 1 June 2023, the DOC published the Contracts Circular 09-2023 titled Reporting of Clean Vehicles Public Procurement. Through this measure, the DOC encouraged clean mobility in Public Procurement Procedures, thus, enhancing the deployment of low-emission and zero-emission vehicles, with the scope of achieving the set minimum national targets for the procurement of clean vehicles and continuing the transition to a greener and climate-neutral economy contributing towards the attainment of UN SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy.

In 2023, Malta achieved an 87% compliance rate in relation to calls for procurement which fall under the remit of a GPP product group. These contain mandatory and non-mandatory product groups, with most annual targets per product group being reached. This was calculated through the weekly compliance checks held by the GPP office and through a cross reference with GPP quarterly reports, which every respective ministerial GPP coordinator must submit by the end of every quarter. Malta's target is to reach 90% compliance rate by 2027 in line with the GPP 2nd National Action Plan. An 87% compliance rate is an improvement from the 2022 compliance rate which stood at 81.5%.

1.1.2 Climate Action

Malta took a very active role during the 2023 UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP 28) convened from 30 November until 12 December 2023. In fact, Malta formed part of the EU negotiating team leading the Conference of the Parties (COP) negotiations on the final climate agreement as well participating and organising several events focusing on different issues related to climate change, particularly challenges and solutions for small island states.

Furthermore, in 2023 the Maltese government announced the setting up of a Climate Change Authority that shall be the national competent authority responsible for the exercise of climate action, to co-ordinate and oversee mitigation and adaptation policy and measures and any matters ancillary thereto or connected therewith and to provide for the reporting of such climate action, as required.

The Public Works Department (PWD) has been undertaking an internal review of its strategic policy vision towards the attainment of strategic objectives contributing to overarching SDGs and climate action at the national level. To this end, the PWD established a Research and Planning Unit (RPU), whose central function is to maintain an ongoing in-depth analysis and assessment of the capacity of the PWD for the contribution to, and implementation of SDGs and climate action through its executive directorates and units.

The mission statement that is now embodied into the PWD's vision for the future policy direction as a result of this reform is 'to improve the environment for public wellbeing, at the local community level, while undertaking the planning, design, coordination and implementation of major capital projects, actions and measures at a regional or national scale, to meet current and emerging challenges of climate change and SDGs, with the latter two main aims being identified as two overarching organisational policy goals'.

From these overarching goals, five pathways to sustainability were identified namely: (i) coastal-climate risk protection; (ii) energy performance in buildings; (iii) integrated stormwater management; (iv) sustainable urban environments and mobility; and (v) use of nature-based solutions and green infrastructure in all the above and more widely.

In parallel, the RPU obtained EU financial support under the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) of the European Commission (EC) for a number of projects aimed at enhancing capacity building at all levels.

Work on two separate TSI projects was undertaken in 2023 to focus on cooperation in the delivery of SDGs, as well as on information needs, policy integration and collaboration across planning tiers and governance levels for climate action. These represent two broad avenues for support for which the PWD is now still acceding to technical policy guidance from local and international experts from the University of Malta (UM), the Coastal and Marine Union and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

A Coastal Protection and Adaptation Strategy (CPA) for the Maltese islands was completed in 2023 through the C-Cover (Coastal-Climate Overall Vulnerability and Exposure Risk) project which aims at providing a planning tool for future risk management based on a comprehensive coastal climate risk assessment of the Maltese archipelago.

Additionally, the Coastal SAGE (Satellite Assisted Governance for Erosion) project, financed by the Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST) with collaborative efforts from the then Ministry for Transport, Infrastructure and Capital Projects (MTIP), together with the Department of Geosciences and the Computer Engineering Department at the UM, was concluded in 2023. This project started to build the requisite capacity for future coastal erosion monitoring programmes with the use of remote sensing Earth observation data, to determine ground displacements, whilst being validated by in-situ sensors. The Superintendence of Cultural Heritage (SCH) has been participating as a key stakeholder in this project to assess the impact of climate change, rising sea temperatures, increased storm and wave effects and coastal erosion on seascapes, landscapes, as well as underwater and coastal cultural heritage. Through this project, low, medium and high-risk assessments took place and mitigation strategies were developed using advanced digital technology through innovative research and design.

One of the main threats posed by climate change to Mediterranean ecosystems is that of forest fires; such threats have also been acknowledged locally. Namely, Ambjent Malta (AM), in collaboration with the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) and the Civil Protection Department (CPD), initiated the implementation of the Fire Prevention Strategy for the three main woodland areas of Buskett, Aħrax tal-Mellieħa and Miżieb with the main aim of mitigating the impacts of fires through sustainable practices in line with climate adaptation principles. The main actions that have been implemented were the zoning of these sites and the installation of signs at the Buskett Woodland Area, which seek to foster public engagement in fire prevention. To gain more insight and to further understand novel fire prevention strategies, AM, ERA and the CPD attended a training course in Greece.

Given the potential impacts of climate change on public health, the then Ministry for Health (MFH) is actively represented and provides expertise to, the Climate Action Board, which is prioritising advocacy on the health effects of climate change and the health opportunities in a whole-of-society transition towards a climate neutral economy. At the political and policy level, technical input was provided by the then MFH towards the drafting of a non-paper on the impact of climate change on health and health systems, having garnered the support of twenty-three other EU Member States (MSs) for discussion at the Council of Health Ministers of the EU in November 2023. The paper highlighted challenges that need to be addressed with urgency in order to be prepared for the future, especially in light of more sustained weather events such as the summer heatwave of 2023, as well as the effects on sustainability and increased demand on already stretched human resources, mental health, air quality and the exacerbation of development of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), in recognition of the fact that the climate crisis is also a health crisis.

Furthermore, a Heat Health Action Plan is being drafted to ensure preparedness for and limit health and health system impacts of future climate-related heat events. Meanwhile, recognising the broad benefits of climate change mitigation towards resilience and climate neutrality, the Department of Health (DoH) has implemented a number of mitigation measures within Mater Dei Hospital (MDH), one of the largest consumers of energy, which include the replacement of old and inefficient light fittings to light-emitting diodes (LEDs), the replacement of old ON/OFF air conditioners (ACs) to Inverter Control ACs, and the replacement of the old Inefficient Variable Refrigerant Flow System. Moreover, the installation of a new environmentally-friendly cold room for medicines was initiated in December 2023 and will be commissioned by the beginning of February 2024. The latter measure will eliminate the use of six large, old Chlorofluorocarbon refrigerators.

The tourism sector is highly vulnerable to climate change, and at the same time contributes to the emission of greenhouse gases (GHGs) which cause global warming. Accelerating climate action in tourism is therefore of utmost importance for the resilience of the sector. In consideration of this, the then Ministry for Tourism (MFT) launched a project with the aim of drafting a long-term plan aimed at reducing emissions in the tourism sector called Toward Net-Zero Carbon in the Tourism Accommodation. The project consists of carrying out a study on the current energy and water consumption in the tourist accommodation sector.

Once this project is finalised, the government will be in a better position to monitor the carbon footprint of the collective accommodation sector and direct initiatives to leverage the necessary investments to accelerate the decarbonisation of tourism operations, to attain Malta's overall climate ambitions and the SDGs.

The Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) and SUNx Malta have partnered to develop a Climate Friendly Travel Education Capacity-Building Programme, which is part of an EU-led programme for 100,000 STRONG Climate Champions in all UN States by 2030. The aim is to have a Strategy Support System for Malta as a Global Centre of Climate Friendly Travel that will be consistent with the Paris Agreement, the SDGs and the EU Green Deal. The developed training programme is in the form of a Diploma at MQF Level 4, with a total of 120 ECVETs. The programme is being taught over a 12-month period in two semesters followed by a one-year International Institute for Peace through Tourism internship.

Following the success of the Diploma in Climate Friendly Travel, which has seen 28 local and international students graduating with this qualification in December of 2022, the collaboration between ITS and SUNx Malta has been taken further with the planning and development of a Master of Science in Strategic Management for Climate Friendly Travel. Both institutions are currently undertaking curricular and market research with the aim of concluding the development of the study programme and initiating the accreditation process. The target commencement of this programme is October 2024.



1.1.3 Air Quality

In 2023, the Maltese government continued its work towards improving air quality and reducing emissions through infrastructural upgrades, as well as the promotion of public transport, alternative transport means, and other plans, strategies and schemes, namely:

- The completion of the Grand Harbour's Shore-to-Ship project, which will enable the cessation of ship engines upon arrival in the Grand Harbour, leading to a smooth transition to electric power. This environmental investment will be cutting 90% of air pollution by cruise liners in the Grand Harbour, providing cleaner air for 17,000 households residing in this area.
- Commencement of the Freeport's Shore-to-Ship project, which will provide the provision of Onshore Power Supply for ships berthing at the Malta Freeport. This project will see the installation of three points at the main terminals of Malta Freeport. The Budget costings for this project amount to over €12.5m and presently, the project is being considered for EU funding, since the Malta Freeport Centre has applied to the "Just Transition Fund". Milestones achieved so far are the works along Kalafrana Road. Excavations and laying of pipes are nearing completion with the project forecasted to be concluded by June 2025. Once completed, three vessels can be connected to the system.
- Scrappage scheme for vehicles of 10 years or more only when purchasing new EVs linked to the schemes promoting the registration of newer, cleaner and/or accessible vehicles.
- Grant scheme on the purchase of new and used EVs, including exemption from registration tax on the purchase of new and used electric cars and the continuation of the scheme for plug-in hybrid vehicles until the end of December 2024 for vehicles ordered by May 2022. Additionally, the exemption from the Annual Circulation License for the first five years will also continue.
- Gas Conversion Scheme to convert vehicles to operate with liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) instead of petrol, or with LPG and diesel simultaneously.
- Continuation of schemes promoting the retrofitting of emission control devices, such as Diesel Particulate Filters and Selective Catalytic Reduction, and PV panels, the conversion of conventional vehicles to electric, the conversion of bicycles to pedelecs, and the registration of wheelchair-accessible vehicles as taxis and light passenger transport (chauffeur driven) vehicles.
- New grant to individuals when purchasing an e-kick scooter.
- Bike-sharing schemes and government grants on the purchase of bicycles and pedelec bicycles as well as on the purchase of bicycles and pedelecs by companies that offer such bicycles for hire.
- Scheme intended to cover the expenditure incurred by LCs and enterprises that install bicycle racks.
- Improvement of ferry landing places, including a fast ferry service which started operating between Malta and Gozo in 2021, reducing the kilometres travelled by private vehicles and also encouraging the use of sustainable modes of transport.
- Free public transport for all holders of the Tallinja card as of October 2022 which was further extended to now include free Grand Harbour ferry crossings for public transport card holders as of January 2024.
- Thirty new 12-metre-long low-floor electric buses were added to the existing fleet of scheduled public transport buses. This addition allowed for the increase of 410 daily additional trips. Besides the addition in frequencies of a new direct route between Ċirkewwa and the UM, designed to target Gozitan students was also introduced.
- Construction of a new bus charging depot. This is the first of its kind on the island and can charge 30 buses simultaneously.
- Measures relating to the public transport system, such as bus priority lanes, improved waiting infrastructure, vehicle tracking, reduced fees when using Tallinja Card on the ferries and when using the IoScoot e-bike sharing services, Tallinja on Demand Plus, and others.

There was also an increase in the use of intelligent transport management systems, the procurement process of which was carried out in 2023. Furthermore, the Government embarked on a core project to change its fleet to EVs. The primary aim of the project is to replace a total of 376 vehicles, which are currently powered by internal combustion engines, with 250 EVs. The leasing of general-use cars was kept to a bare minimum in the form of short lease extensions whilst, where procurement was concerned, only EVs were favourably approved.



Furthermore, only EVs were approved for fully expensed positions within the government whilst this type of vehicle was also heavily encouraged within the public sector.

For instance, ERA continued to increase the EV fleet by procuring two crew vans. The fleet now consists of twenty-one vehicles (nineteen hatchback cars, and two crew vans). To cater for this EV fleet, the EV charging infrastructure was completed in 2023. The Authority now has a complete charging infrastructure with a total of twenty-two charging stations. ERA also introduced one fast electric car charger, which is only used in case of emergency.

The Ride-Sharing Platform will be integrated with the new fleet of general-use EVs. These initiatives are expected to have positive effects on the environment, namely through reduced carbon emissions, reduced noise pollution, as well as air quality improvement, particularly in dense urban areas. Moreover, the ride-sharing application, will result in better optimisation of vehicle occupancy and thus improve the overall efficiency of transportation. Furthermore, the utilisation of a smart ride-sharing application allows for real-time traffic updates and smart routing algorithms, resulting in more efficient and streamlined transportation.

Furthermore, there is an increased consciousness of reducing pollution through transportation routes. For instance, this is reflected in the routes for vehicles distributing medicines to the Pharmacy of Your Choice (POYC) pharmacies, which are designed to reduce the use of fuel and therefore reduce the impact of emissions on air quality. The territory, including Gozo, was divided into twelve regions each comprising of towns and villages which are in proximity such that the transport vehicle performs the least possible mileage.

ERA also continued working on the draft Air Quality Plan (AQP). This involved compiling the necessary activity data for the quantification of measures that will be included in the AQP, which would feed into the dispersion modelling. The AQP was issued for public consultation in September 2023.

Within the realm of air policy and the AQP, ERA actively participated in the negotiations of the Ambient Air Quality Directive. Furthermore, the Authority also continued following the progress on the implementation of a Sulphur Emission Control Area for the Mediterranean Sea as a whole, in accordance with the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships – Annex VI, which was approved at COP 22 of the Barcelona Convention. The Sulphur Emission Control Area would start applying on 1 May 2025. ERA also continued chairing the Nitrogen Emission Control Area (NECA) working group which aims to commission the development of a study focusing on the health and socio-economic impact that a possible NECA would have on Malta.

The study on the feasibility of the low emission zone in the air quality management area also commenced in 2023. Furthermore, improvements and efforts were and are undertaken by ERA in relation to the emissions inventory for Malta in order to implement the National Emission Ceiling Directive and Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution.

ERA also continued to strengthen air ambient monitoring. This air quality monitoring system provides online real-time data to the public free of charge. Currently, there are five real-time monitoring stations and a network of passive diffusion tubes at 100 sites.

With regard to Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control (IPPC) permits, which aim to regulate pollutant emissions from industrial installations, as per obligations arising from the Industrial Emissions (IPPC) Regulations 2013 (S.L.549.77), between 1 January 2023 – 31 December 2023, there was one new application, as well as seven variation applications, one application for extension and six granted applications.

To investigate complaints and ensure compliance with permit conditions, three hundred twenty-seven inspections were carried out on facilities including IPPC sites, waste management sites, petrol stations, pharmaceutical companies and the general manufacturing industry. Meanwhile, activities undertaken without environmental authorisation were subject to action by ERA, allowing them time to comply with obligations and acting where

operators failed to abide by instructions. In this regard, ten warning letters were sent and three 'Stop and Compliance Orders' with daily fines were issued by ERA to different operators.

In terms of outreach, ERA participated in the Public Service Expo Week between 10 and 12 May focusing on air monitoring and the Correct Enjoyment (and Awareness Raising) of Natura 2000 Locations (CORALLO) project. Further to this, ERA organised joint campaigns in schools (both primary and secondary) with Transport Malta (TM) on air, noise pollution and sustainable mobility. The main aim of this campaign was to raise awareness of air quality and noise health impacts, sources of pollution and measures to improve air quality and noise by using cleaner modes of transport. In the summer months of 2023, four sessions were held during Skolasajf.

1.1.4 Noise Pollution

Following a public consultation of the first draft of the Noise Action Plan, the action plan has been revised and updated accordingly. It has now been adopted and was reported and submitted to the European Commission (EC). Furthermore, in terms of noise pollution, a Noise Model Validation exercise was carried out. This involved data manipulation, including cleaning and analysis relating to the extensive monitoring of ambient noise levels in six sites around Malta, which will be validated to confirm the noise calculation model used for the noise mapping exercise. Noise modelling calculations and relevant assessment and uncertainty calculations have been finalised. The final report is being drafted and expected to be finalised in the coming months of 2024.

ERA is also developing noise maps to identify noise exceedances and establish measures to reduce noise levels in such areas for the assessment year 2021. In 2023, the fourth round of noise mapping exercises for road, aviation and industrial noise sources were reviewed and revised and the compilation of the maps was initiated. Data collection and initial preparation of the computational models is underway. Finalisation of the agglomeration boundary definition and confirmation of population and building datasets have also been carried out. In addition, industrial noise measurements have been taken and noise monitoring reports finalised. Likewise, road network layers for both major roads and the agglomeration are being concluded. It is expected that the final delivery of maps will be completed at the beginning of 2024.

Within the area of soundscapes, a study for Spencer Garden was carried out. This study is an education campaign and aims to raise awareness of soundscapes and environmental noise. To this end, ambient noise monitoring of Spencer Garden together with sound recordings and sound walk was undertaken. Noise modelling of the before and after scenarios in relation to the refurbishing and embellishment of the garden was also carried out to analyse the introduction of sound barriers. It is expected that once the garden renovation is completed, a fresh set of noise monitoring, sound recordings and listening exercises will be carried out. Outcomes will feature in an interactive map (sound map) similar to the Mdina soundscapes project, showcasing a comparison of the before and after. The first phase relating to the initial works of the garden has been completed and an interim report has been drafted by the consultant and is being reviewed by ERA. Audio files of the sound recordings have also been edited.

1.1.5 Renewable energy, energy efficiency and energy security

In 2021, Malta embarked on the construction of the 2nd Malta-Sicily cable link. The project will double the electricity interconnectivity capacity of Malta with the European electricity network to meet the forecasted increase in the island's electricity demand expected from projected economic growth, the electrification of the transport sector and the use of onshore power for vessels. It will contribute to Malta's 2030 energy and climate targets and the transition to a carbon-neutral economy by allowing the importation of green electricity and the optimisation of the power generation mix. The project will also act as an enabler for increased indigenous renewable electricity generation, including offshore renewable energy sources, by providing a buffer to counterbalance the renewable energy sources' intermittency and by enhancing the stability and balancing the Maltese electricity grid.



Over 2023, works on the design and permitting advanced considerably, whereby the route and protection, both onshore and offshore, have been determined, and the cable sizing and ampacity were designed according to the route length and its physical properties. The design of the transformers, shunt reactors and switchgear have also been completed and the first Energy Performance Certificate tender was launched for the procurement of this equipment. The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for Malta was submitted to and approved in August 2023 by ERA. The Maltese development permitting procedure has reached its final stage (Planning Application No: PA/04448/22). The application for the Italian Single Authorisation Decree and the relevant environmental permitting documentation were also submitted in August 2023. A proposal for European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funding for the project was submitted in September 2023 and is currently being evaluated by the Managing Authority.

Malta is also looking at implementing utility-scale Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) (<https://icm.mt/projects/battery-energy-storage-systems/>). In 2023, the government, through InterConnect Malta (ICM), started working on two projects for Utility Scale BESS. The first Project will be located in Delimara Power Station and will be funded through ERDF funds. The second project, funded by the Recovery and Resilience Fund, will be located within the 'A' Station in Marsa. Technical and economic consultants have been contracted to prepare the design of the BESS to enable the preparation and publication of an open tender call for awarding an Energy Performance Certificate contract for the installation of these two projects. The permitting procedures for both projects also kicked off in 2023. The BESS Projects will allow a more efficient and flexible operation of the electricity grid, reduce congestion and allow further ingress of renewable energy sources and optimisation of the energy mix during periods of excess renewable energy sources and peak demand, such as peak shaving.

As part of Malta's forward outlook and ambition to increase the share of renewable energy, the Maltese government is focusing on the development of its offshore (floating) renewable potential. On 31 August 2023, the then MEEE launched the first policy document, detailing the National Policy for the Deployment of Offshore Renewable Energy for public consultation. The policy provides a comprehensive framework to promote investment in renewable energy, direct potential investors towards efficient renewable technologies, promote research, development, and innovation, and ensure that the offshore energy potential supports the country's energy security.

In April 2023, ICM was delegated to act as a project implementor to plan, prepare, issue and award an agreement for Offshore Renewables in the Exclusion Economic Zone on behalf of the then MEEE. Technical and commercial consultants' services were contracted in August 2023 to guide ICM during the planning and study phase, and thereafter also during the procurement procedure. The project, once implemented will increase the share of renewables, thereby reducing further GHG emissions from local power generation.

The RESINDUSTRY Interreg Europe Project, was concluded in 2023. Seven European countries including Malta, represented by the EcoGozo, within the then Ministry for Gozo (MGOZ), participated in this project. The aim of the project was to increase the energy independence of the EU industry sector, by decreasing its energy intensity through promoting the adoption of renewable energy solutions in industrial settings to support sustainable development.

During 2023, the Energy and Water Agency (EWA) continued participating in the EnergyEfficiency4SMEs project, a 3-year €1.8 million EU Life project, aimed at increasing the implementation of energy efficiency measures in three target sectors, namely food production, hotels and restaurants, and metal processing. A number of meetings were held with non-Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises with the aim of sharing best practices, and a list of local financial assistance schemes was compiled. An economic report analysed the outcome of these two exercises, highlighting areas of potential added value. A number of other meetings were held with Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) who had carried out an energy audit, to share benefits and identify areas where SMEs may be supported to implement improvement opportunities.

Opening meetings were held by EWA with twenty-eight guesthouses who opted to benefit from the 'GUEST' Project. This project is aimed at making guesthouses more sustainable in terms of energy and water use. During these meetings, the project was explained and the guesthouse was given the opportunity to share their achievements and challenges. An energy auditor was also present and some audits were scheduled to be completed by end-2023, and the outcome will be discussed with all guesthouses in the first quarter of 2024.

Over 2023, energy audits have been ongoing at a number of shops as part of the project Managing Essential Resources in Retail through Consumption Analysis (MERCA) Project, being implemented by EWA in collaboration with the Chamber of SMEs targeted towards food retailers such as mini/supermarkets and convenience stores. The aim is that of identifying the characteristics and the best ways to support this sector in order to become more energy efficient. These audits will be concluded in the coming months with the aim of disseminating the findings among the sector once the project is concluded in 2024.

The WE MAKE project, which involved a collaboration between the EWA and the Malta Business Bureau together with the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry came to an end in 2023. The main objective of the project was to promote energy efficiency and water conservation in the manufacturing sector through different actions. The project concluded with an international online conference which exposed local businesses to solutions adopted by international companies.

The REEVALUE project led by EWA was also launched at the end of 2023. This is an EU-LIFE-funded project which aims to generate value-chain collaborations amongst businesses in target NACE codes, through which energy efficiency and renewable energy sources opportunities will be identified and implemented. The project will also support businesses by matching them to financing measures for energy efficiency, renewable energy sources and value-chain collaboration projects for each participating MS. The project consortium is made up of nine partners which include energy agencies and chambers of commerce.

EWA also continued to provide free-of-charge professional advice service to vulnerable and low-income households on energy appliances and behaviour. Following the support and recommendation of the social services offered by the government and private entities, the EWA, through its Vulnerable Household Scheme provides free-of-charge white goods as a replacement for faulty and low-energy efficiency appliances whilst at the same time safely disposing of old appliances. The scheme which was originally launched in 2018 has provided over 1,080 new and more energy efficient appliances to vulnerable people. Up until the end of 2023, one thousand, two hundred ninety house visits in vulnerable homes were made and one thousand ninety-nine appliances were distributed. During 2023, twenty-two ACs, seventy washing machines and fifty-six fridge freezers were distributed.

Through the Energy Awareness and Management in Micro-SMEs initiative, EWA also continued to provide free-of-charge service in the form of on-site visits by trained agency officers to micro-SMEs, who assist micro-SMEs by providing relevant and feasible advice (both in terms of technology and available schemes) to help improve their efficiency both in terms of their energy and water consumption. In 2023, the Agency, with guidance from the Malta Chamber of SMEs, decided to focus on childcare centres and pharmacies respectively, and create general frequently asked questions to help these sectors improve their efficiency both in terms of their energy and water consumption.

1.1.5.1 Energy efficiency and renewable energy initiatives within the public administration

An EC TSI project being implemented by the PWD was mobilised in 2023 with the aim of building national capacity in relation to energy performance in buildings. The overall aim of the project is to establish a more systematic and sustainable approach towards the design and implementation of public building renovations intended to improve energy performance. It consolidates PWD know-how by updating the set of energy performance measures considered and is also introducing whole-building energy modelling to the design phase where appropriate.

To further encourage the use of renewable energy within public buildings, EWA through a pilot project which kicked off in 2022, installed PV panels and batteries within LCs. The first two LCs in which these panels were installed were the Paola and Mellieħa LCs. The main idea behind this pilot project is to have these buildings, which are visited by the general public throughout the day, running on renewable energy. This is achieved through the surplus of electricity which is generated by the PV panels in the morning and afternoon and stored in the batteries to be used later on when the PV panels are not generating electricity. Thus, the LCs would be meeting the majority of their electricity needs through renewable energy. Furthermore in 2023, through the Association for LCs, an expression of interest within LCs was distributed for this project to be replicated. Following a positive response from the LCs, work commenced in order to have this project replicated within the Siġġiewi LC.

Furthermore, 2023 saw the publication of a call to set up PV panels on existing Water Services Corporation (WSC) assets, covering a roof area of 19,000m². These solar farms, with a 2.7 MW peak capacity, will deliver a renewable energy output of circa 4.3 GWh per annum by the first quarter of 2025. During the same year, another call for the supply and installation of energy-efficient turbo blowers was awarded for replacing the current wastewater treatment plant aeration system at Ta' Barkat. This project is expected to render an energy saving of circa 3 GWh per annum and enhance treatment performance, with its completion expected during the third quarter of 2024.

The Public Abattoir continued its investment and expansion of the use of the energy monitoring system to identify wastages in the energy system as well as improve efficiency. Furthermore, during the period under consideration, it completed the shift from thin fuel oil towards LPG and diesel as a backup. As a result of all these efforts, the Public Abattoir currently has a Green Energy certificate.

The utilisation of ERDF funding at the St Vincent de Paule (SVP) Long-Term Care Facility has ushered in a new era of infrastructure, with a prime focus on enhancing the comfort and sustainability standards for elderly residents, staff, and visitors whilst ensuring a substantial reduction in energy consumption and a marked decrease in greenhouse gas emissions.

The first phase of this transformation centred on transitioning from Heavy Fuel Oil to clean gas for heating systems, ensuring a more efficient and environmentally friendly approach to providing residents with warm water. Subsequently, the ERDF project concentrated on installing cutting-edge energy systems such as air conditioning, ventilation, lighting, and heating. Moreover, the project aims to replace the current single-glazed aluminium apertures with an energy-efficient thermal break/double-glazed aluminium apertures alongside blackout curtains. These transformative endeavours also prioritise waste recycling initiatives and the strategic reduction of single-use plastics (SUPs) within the facility, underlining a steadfast commitment to sustainable facility management practices.

In terms of residential units, the Housing Authority (HA) undertook a pilot project to carry out an intensive energy renovation of a housing block, consisting of forty residential apartments, to nearly zero energy performance. In 2023, the planning application submitted to the PA was validated and is currently awaiting recommendation. The HA is currently liaising with the Lands Authority to identify a suitable piece of land for a substation.

Further to the above, the HA carried out structural repairs and improvement works in leased tenements of social housing blocks wherein various energy efficiency measures were adopted, where possible including the replacement of single-glazed apertures with double-glazed apertures, roof insulation and energy-efficient sanitary ware and fittings. New developments of residential social accommodation blocks being undertaken by the HA also include these measures.

The Ministry for Education, Sports, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR) has undertaken a number of commitments focusing on sustainable infrastructure in education designed to support hands-on learning tailored for individual outcomes. The infrastructural works in the education sector are focusing mostly on the building of new schools, new extensions to existing buildings and facilities and other renovation works.

MEYR, in conjunction with the Foundation for Tomorrow’s Schools (FTS), has been very proactive in its endeavours to renovate public schools and construct new schools that are in line with the new requirements of the EU Energy Performance of Buildings Directive EU 2018/844, i.e. to achieve a nearly zero-energy status.

Current infrastructural works on educational facilities are being carried out by FTS with a total capital investment of over €73 million. A further €1 million was invested by MEYR during the summer of 2023 for the maintenance and modernisation of all schools in Malta and Gozo.

The FTS is responsible for the implementation of two milestones under the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP). These are:

- Renovation works of two public schools (St. Benedict College Għaxaq Primary School and Gozo College Nadur Primary School), which together cater for around five hundred students. The renovation shall achieve a reduction of primary energy demand (PED) of at least 30%.; and
- Construction of a near carbon-neutral school. The school is estimated to cater for around five hundred students and to have a land surface area of at least 14,499 m². Once ready, the school will have a PED that is at least 20% lower than the Nearly Zero-Emission Building requirement.

The Financial Intelligence and Analysis Unit (FIAU) in May 2023 moved their offices to Trident Park, a green office campus. Trident Park is a green development that employs energy-efficient infrastructure and is in its last stages of achieving the internationally recognised Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) certification.

Additionally, FIAU offices run on an innovative system, the Thermally Active Building System (TABS), which is 40% more energy efficient when compared to conventional air-conditioning. Further improvement of the efficiency of TABS is the various layers of insulation in the building that reduce energy consumption. Solar fins installed along the height of each aperture create both a unique design characteristic and a source of shade, further weakening the impact of the sun’s heat. The apertures are equipped with a thick profile, double-glazed, and UV-resistant glass which enhance the building’s insulation and optimise soundproofing.

The Ministry for Social Policy and Children’s Rights (MSPC) took necessary actions so that the premises are more energy efficient and employees are more cautious about the use of energy consumption. In this regard, some of the measures and initiatives which were undertaken include, switching off any idle appliances; controlling AC settings; controlling MSPC’s facade lighting; procurement of LED lights; and making use of blinds and curtains as necessary. On their part, the then Ministry for Finance and Employment (MFE), changed the lighting system in one of the offices within the then MFE to an LED profile lighting system. This lighting system is more energy efficient and has a longer lifetime while providing a higher quality of lighting in the office.

Furthermore, the Malta Stock Exchange (MSE) formed a Green Team, which is made up of representatives of the different offices within the Exchange. The aim of the Green Team is to introduce sustainable practices and address sustainability-related practices at all levels of the Exchange’s functions. The first task of the Green Team was the drafting of the MSE’s Sustainability Policy which was approved by the MSE’s Board. The policy outlines the MSE’s commitment to environmental responsibility and provides guidelines for all employees to contribute towards a greener and an eco-friendlier office environment. By collectively adopting these measures, MSE aims to create a healthier workplace and move forward towards a more sustainable future.

1.1.5.2 Energy efficiency and renewable energy schemes

The Regulator for Energy and Water Services (REWS) continued to administer the following schemes to encourage the use of energy efficiency and renewable energy:

- Feed-in Tariffs to promote the purchasing of PV systems were made available to both residential and commercial systems for PV systems with a capacity of less than 40kWp;
- The competitive bidding process for the award of support for electricity generated from renewable energy sources was extended to cover renewable energy source generators with a capacity of between 40kW to less than 1MW;
- Solar Water Heater Grant Scheme provides a grant of 75% of the total eligible cost, up to the maximum of €1,400. This scheme also provides for a €500 grant to cover maintenance costs after 5 years. For 2023, five hundred sixty individuals benefitted from the 2021 Solar Water Heater Grant Scheme with a total grant amount of €764,484;
- Heat Pump Water Heater Grant Scheme that provides a grant of 50% of the total eligible cost, up to the maximum of €1,000. For 2023, there were seventy-two beneficiaries of the 2021 Heat Pump Water Heater Grant Scheme with a total grant amount of €68,687;
- Roof Insulation and Double Glazing Grant Scheme that provides a grant of 50% of the total eligible cost, up to the maximum of €1,000 for retrofitted Roof Insulation and €1,000 for retrofitted Double Glazing; and
- RES Grant Scheme which provides a grant based on the below options:

Option	Number of Beneficiaries
Option A – PV system with standard solar inverter: 50% of eligible costs up to a maximum of €2,500 per system and 625 euro/kWp.	Twenty-four beneficiaries with a total grant amount of €51,252.
Option B – PV system with hybrid inverter: 50% of eligible costs up to a maximum of €3,000 per system and 750 euro/kWp.	Five hundred thirty-two beneficiaries with a total grant amount of €1,547,685.
Option C – Hybrid/Battery inverter and battery: 80% of eligible costs of the Battery Storage up to a maximum of €3,600 per system and 600 euro/kWh plus 80% of eligible costs of the Hybrid inverter up to a maximum of €1,800 per system and 450 euro/kWp.	One hundred ten beneficiaries with a total grant amount of €515,322.
Option D – Battery Storage only: 80% of eligible costs of the Battery Storage up to a maximum of €3,600 per system and 600 euro/kWh.	Seventy-one beneficiaries with a total grant amount of €248,400.
Combination of options B and D together.	One hundred eighty-seven beneficiaries with a total grant amount of €1,207,050.

A 3rd call was issued in May 2023 with regard to the Scheme to Sustain Energy and Water Efficiency within Voluntary Organisations managed by EWA. The scheme supports voluntary organisations in carrying out projects to reduce their energy and water consumption with a grant of up to €27,000 including VAT. More than forty-five organisations have benefitted from the scheme so far with a number of the projects having been completed in 2023 and the remaining expected to be completed by early 2024.

Furthermore, through the Promotion of Energy Audits for SMEs Scheme, EWA is supporting small and medium-sized enterprises in carrying out an energy audit within their premises by reimbursing the cost of the audit up to a capped amount. An average of twelve companies per year have benefitted from this scheme since its inception.

Additionally, the Research and Innovation (R&I) Grant Scheme financially support projects in the field of water and energy in the form of a grant, over the course of 2-3 years. In 2023, a total of 13 projects (from the first call issued in 2020) have benefitted or are benefitting from this scheme and the 4th scheme was issued for applications by interested parties.

Additionally, the Planning Authority (PA) assisted several LCs and other organisations, which implemented or proposed energy-efficient projects in the form of aid schemes. The following table indicates the number of LCs and NGOs that benefitted from this scheme.

Project Ref	Proposal	Applicants	Amount
GS/50004/2023	The joint application between Birgu LC and Reġjun tal-Port to change halogen lamps to LEDS and restoration of the WIP type arm of these lamps. This project will cover tal-Fawli Housing Estate and other roads in Birgu	Birgu LC & Reġjun tal-Port	€14,820.59
GS/50002/2023	Proposed decorative lighting scheme at Triq il-Mitfina, Xagħra	Xagħra LC	€6,983.87
GS/50013/2022	Replacement of railings, and installation of lighting	Żebbuġ Gozo & Gozo Region	€156,718.75
GS/50006/2021	Installation of 30 new decorative lighting at Triq il-Kbira, Qormi	Qormi LC	€59,756.97
GS/50008/2023	To supply and install 3 LED Classic Style Luminaires	Mosta LC	€3,270.96

Additionally, in 2023, Malta Enterprise (ME) administered the Smart & Sustainable Investment Grant, a Scheme tailored to support businesses in their investments to incentivise the adoption of the twin transition path to adopt more digital and environmentally sustainable business practices. Eligible investments may benefit from a cash grant of up to €100,000 capped at 50% of eligible costs in machinery and equipment resulting in the applicant becoming more sustainable in the fields of waste minimisation, sustainable materials, energy efficiency, water efficiency and sustainable digitalisation.

1.2 Responsible and Efficient Use of Resources which Safeguards Environmental and Socio-Economic Wellbeing

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
11.6	By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management
12.1	Implement the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns, all countries taking action, with developed countries taking the lead, taking into account the development and capabilities of developing countries
12.3	By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses
12.4	By 2020, achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle, in accordance with agreed international frameworks, and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil in order to minimise their adverse impacts on human health and the environment
12.5	By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse
12.c	Rationalise inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption by removing market distortions, in accordance with national circumstances, also by restructuring taxation and phasing out those harmful subsidies, where they exist, to reflect their environmental impacts, taking fully into account the specific needs and conditions of developing countries and minimising the possible adverse impacts on their development in a manner that protects the poor and the affected communities

1.2.1 Waste Prevention and Management

2023 saw the implementation of a number of key measures emanating from Malta’s Long-Term Waste Management Plan (WMP) 2021–2030. Notably, the regional door-to-door collection of municipal waste started in early January, with a view to foster the establishment of economies of scale, reducing the environmental footprint of door-to-door collection of waste and strengthen separate collection. With regard to the latter, a new harmonised collection schedule for all LCs in Malta, characterised by an increased frequency of collection rounds for bio-waste and reduced collection rounds for mixed residual waste, as well as the fact that the bio-waste is collected only on Mondays, was also implemented through targeted amendments to the Abandonment, Dumping and Disposal of Waste in Streets and Public Places or Areas Regulations, S.L. 549.40. The shift to the regional collection of waste was coupled with the implementation of a reform in the management of municipal packaging waste, whereby the management of such waste is organised by the regional councils, whilst the Producer Responsibility Organisations finance it.

Furthermore, the Waste Regulations, S.L. 549.63, were amended in February 2023 to establish waste separation as a key duty of every person, including households, economic operators and government entities. This new obligation came into force in April 2023, whilst its enforcement is carried out in a phased approach. The aim is to prioritise education and awareness-raising during the first phase, to then enforce it in full. The above-mentioned new obligations have been coupled with targeted amendments to S.L. 549.40, whereby the enforcement system (which includes other entities besides ERA) and penalty regime established therein are used to implement mandatory waste separation.

ERA conducted a nationwide campaign on mandatory waste separation covering all communications channels. This campaign is being metered by waste volumes collected by WasteServ Malta Ltd. (WSM) which has registered a positive and desired change with a reduction in the black bag and an increase in the organic bag. ERA also participated in a number of events to raise awareness about the new law.

Following targeted amendments to the Deposit of Wastes and Rubble (Fees) Regulations, S.L. 549.07, carried out in December 2022, differentiated gate fees were introduced for municipal waste deposited at public facilities operated by WSM as of 1 January 2023 to encourage waste separation and to divert waste from landfills as much as possible. These amendments apply to operators who dispose of waste directly at WSM's facilities. Any services offered to the public free of charge were not affected, not to hinder any efforts being made by the public. This economic instrument disincentivises landfilling over treatment options higher up the hierarchy, as the landfill gate fee is being progressively increased from €20 in 2022 to €40 in 2023 and up to €120 per tonne of mixed waste deposited for landfilling in 2027. On the other hand, the gate fee for dry recyclables separated at source for recycling stands at €0.50, whilst the one for bio-waste is €20 per tonne. A new system of differentiated gate fees started to apply as of 1 January 2023.

ERA also carried out two waste compositional surveys on municipal waste, namely the 2023 survey on the mixed residual fraction of municipal waste generated from both households and commercial entities, as well as a survey on municipal packaging waste in 2022. Such surveys represent an important tool in terms of assessing disposal patterns in Malta, measuring the effectiveness of implemented measures, as well as designing new policies on waste management.

Additionally, ERA commenced work on various other measures emanating from the WMP; including discussions and drafting of a mandatory electronic, web-based reporting platform for all waste operators, and the engagement of auditing experts to audit End-of-Life Vehicles authorised treatment facilities, with a view to certifying that such operations comply with national legislation and permit conditions.

The Multi-Material Recovery Facility (MMRF), a €20 million investment partly funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020, was inaugurated in June 2023. This facility is designed to accept waste streams such as wood, mattresses, polystyrene, tyres, and textiles. Through several pre-treatment processes which include baling, shredding and recovery of certain material waste streams, the MMRF allows the application of circular economy principles and diverts waste from landfills. Additionally, waste will be exported with a lower environmental impact for further processing/treatment to convert it into usable resources. The facility is also serving as a storage facility for Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment received through the Civic Amenity Sites.

In 2023, WSM continued with the procurement process and adjudication stage in relation to the Waste-to-Energy project, which will process waste in the most sustainable and resource-efficient way possible while also turning it into energy. The Waste-to-Energy plant is projected to treat around 192,000 tonnes of non-recyclable waste generated locally, diverting it away from landfills and converting it into green energy.

The Skip Management Facility will be accepting bulky waste from open-topped skips. By separating the bulky waste into different waste streams, this facility will be recovering valuable materials, effectively reducing waste directed to the landfill. This facility is expected to receive around 47,000 tonnes of mixed bulky waste that is delivered in open-topped skips every year, thereby improving Malta's recycling rate and diverting waste from landfills.

2023 was the first full year of the Beverage Container Refund Scheme implementation. As stipulated in the Regulations governing the Scheme, S.L. 549.134, the collection target for 2023 stands at seventy per cent (70%) in terms of weight of the single-use containers registered in terms of the Scheme as having been placed on the market during the said period. Data reports pertaining to this period demonstrate that such targets have been met successfully by the licensed operator.

Guided by Circular Economy (CE) Malta, Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) students were challenged to present proposals for the creation of a pilot repair lab at MCAST. The repair lab may cover a diverse range of items, such as electronics and electronics equipment, textiles, and furniture. The task is to conceptualise a business proposal that not only addresses the technical intricacies, operational, marketing, and financial aspects of repair but also resonates with the circular economy ethos.

1.2.1.1 Construction and Demolition Waste

2023 also saw the implementation of a number of measures within the Construction and Demolition (C&D) Waste Strategy 2021-2030 (C&D Strategy). Specifically, the Construction and Demolition Waste (CDW) Framework Regulations were enacted at the end of 2023. Such regulations are structured to promote the prevention and better management of CDW, separation of waste at the source, the development of a secondary market, and to promote a shift from recovery and disposal to reuse and recycling. The regulations also assign specific responsibilities related to the management of waste generated during developments to actors involved in the sector. Furthermore, two additional measures from the C&D Strategy were also successfully implemented through their inclusion in the CDW Framework Regulations, namely a measure on improving waste classification and source separation, as well as a measure that sets up re-use and recycling targets for the industry. These two measures are targeted towards major developments, as well as high-density residential developments serving sixteen or more units. Waste classification and source separation will be improved through a requirement of a pre-demolition audit, which will include the amount, type and quantity of waste expected to be generated during the development, as well as the proposed fate (treatment) of such waste, among other information. The targets will require developers to meet certain targets with regards to re-using, recycling or recovering (other than backfilling) particular amounts of wastes generated during excavation, demolition and construction. Moreover, the targets also include the requirement to use certain amounts of recycled materials in development. The obligation to meet these targets will provide a boost to the market of secondary materials.

1.2.1.2 Food and Organic Waste

WSM has been working on a new proposed Organic Processing Plant (OPP) as part of the ECOHIVE project. This facility will be an investment of over €50 million and will target the organic waste stream. The OPP will convert organic waste into high-grade compost and will also generate biogas which will be transformed into electrical energy. The OPP is envisaged to generate around 20,981.604 MWh per year of electricity, displacing energy that is currently fossil-fuelled and thus contributing to the improved sustainability of Malta's future energy mix. Moreover, this project will divert organic material from landfills, thus preventing the generation of harmful greenhouse gases. During the year 2023, WSM has concluded the basic design of the plant, prepared the detailed cost estimate, started the process of submitting PA permit, got the EIA permit, started the drafting of the Design and Building tender document and started the preparation of the documentation required to apply for EU funding.

The Malta Food Agency (MFA) manages all the markets relating to local produce. Currently, the Agency has a process through which the unsold produce, which is still of good quality is distributed to food banks and other NGOs while the products that are not fit for consumption are transferred to WSM for recycling. WSM then transfers back the recycled material as compost that is distributed free of charge to farmers. Further to this initiative, the MFA has developed a technology platform from which importers, wholesalers, supermarkets, restaurants, and other food distributors can register and upload any excess food products while food banks, NGOs and other organisations can register their requests. The Agency shall then match the requests with the supply and facilitate the delivery process.

The Public Abattoir, as practically the only slaughterhouse for red meat in Malta, has a key role to play in terms of food-waste reduction. In this regard, over the last two years, it has been working on a number of measures to systematically reduce the discard of animal by-products and animal wastes (ABPs). In collaboration with the UM, it has initiated a systematic research study on the different waste streams being generated, identifying volumes of each by-product, as well as how it can be re-utilised, with the priority being its retention within the food chain.



The Public Abattoir has also undertaken the investment of a new blood/*mazzit* processing plant as well as machinery to process tripe in order to utilise these byproducts in the production of local traditional dishes. The substantial increase in demand for animal blood for the production of the traditional Maltese *mazzit* meant that within a year the design and construction of a new facility for the harvesting and initial processing of blood had to be undertaken, barely a year from the original investments. The Public Abattoir has also consolidated the investments for the harvesting and cleaning of tripe and other intestines, in view of the increasing demand, particularly for bovine tripe. At the end of 2023, work was finalised for the processing and placement on the market of pork-lungs which are estimated to enable the diversion away from incineration of circa 47 metric tonnes of lungs a year during 2024.

During 2023, it is estimated that the Public Abattoir has diverted circa 74 tonnes of ABPs from becoming food waste. Of these, 8 tonnes of animal blood were diverted into the production of *mazzit*, and circa 56 tonnes of tripe (*kirxa*). Other products which were also diverted away from becoming waste included, lard, liver etc. Savings in food waste average 1 kg per head of swine or small ruminants and 6kg per head of cattle.

When it comes to the catering industry, the FoodTuristic project, which is being implemented by the ITS, addresses the lack of green technology curricula in European culinary and hospitality schools, which have traditionally focused more on gastronomy and hospitality management skills. It is funded via the Erasmus Key Action 2 framework, with the project running from November 2023 to November 2025. This project aims to develop digital resources for educators and students in hotels and culinary schools across four partner countries to reduce food waste, develop circular economy skills, and localise food production. It aims to develop a Vocational Education and Training (VET) course delivered as a digital badge, a website, a mobile application, and a good practice guide, to address the green skills gap in European culinary and hospitality schools. As a result, it will reduce food waste, utilise food waste in novel technology composting systems, and adopt new technologies to grow appropriate foods onsite. The skills developed by project output users will have strong legacy potential and benefit the reduced carbon impact of schools and industry.

1.2.1.3 Medical Waste

Multiple systems have been put in place including a system of medicine returns so that excess stock at pharmacies is made available for redistribution. Furthermore, the POYC Pharmacies are being held liable for expired goods arising from suboptimal stock rotation. In such cases, items are released utilising the First Expiry First Out principle to ensure that inventory products with the shortest shelf life are transferred first. The deliverable of these measures is to reduce wastage and reduce the costs of handling expired goods. This will also help minimise waste and thus reduce waste costs from product deterioration and logistics expenses to retrieve deteriorated or damaged items.

The DoH, through the POYC Unit, is utilising the quantitative method of Simple Exponential Smoothing to predict demand based on historical patterns in tandem with patient growth. Factors such as expiry dates and out-of-stock days are also considered during demand projections. New items and items that exhibit irregular behaviours are judgementally reviewed (qualitative inference). Moreover, POYC promotes good stock management to minimise discrepancies and stock deterioration through the 'Liabilities' procedure, thereby increasing accountability at the pharmacy level. This strategy also ensures that proper entries and corrections of transactions are executed, hence increasing data accuracy and integrity.

1.2.1.4 SUP

ERA continued working on the implementation of a number of measures arising from the SUP Products Strategy for Malta 2021-2030 (SUP Strategy), particularly Measure 13, which identifies the need to prohibit the release of balloons and plastic confetti in any open-air events, primarily to avoid these items ending up as litter in the marine environment. The enactment of S.L. 549.149 in 2022, saw the introduction of consumption reduction measures in line with the EU SUP Directive, namely:

- i. As of 1 January 2023, catering establishments shall offer reusable alternatives to single-use plastic food containers and drinking cups at the point of sale. They shall properly inform consumers of the availability of reusable alternatives; and shall offer adequate incentives to consumers who bring their reusable food containers or drinking cups for take-away, and properly inform consumers of such incentives; and
- ii. SUP drinking cups and food containers shall not be provided free of charge to final consumers by catering establishments. Catering establishments shall properly inform consumers of the fee charged on such SUP products at the point of sale. Furthermore, single-use plastic cups and food containers shall not be provided in any restaurant, cafeteria, bar, snack bar, lido or canteen, including those in schools, university campus, hospitals or any government building, for any food or beverages consumed on the spot.

In view of this, in September 2023, ERA engaged the UM to perform two separate studies on SUP food containers and beverage cups as follows: (i) A study on available alternatives to SUP food containers and cups for beverages and the provision of guidelines to catering establishments; and (ii) A study to determine appropriate fees to be charged for SUP food containers and beverage cups by catering establishments as per S.L. 549.149.

In 2023, work commenced on new legislative initiatives to establish Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes for fishing gear containing plastic and tobacco products with filters containing plastic, with the aim of implementing the EPR principle on such products within the spirit of the EU SUP Directive.

During 2023, CEMalta implemented the Re-Usable Veggie Bags Dissemination Initiative in collaboration with local supermarkets. The objective of this initiative was to spread awareness about and mitigate the harmful effects of SUPs generated through the use of SUP bags in supermarkets. CEMalta distributed approximately 2,000 reusable veggie bags throughout the roll-out of this initiative.

1.2.1.5 Enforcement and Compliance

During 2023, ERA's Compliance and Enforcement Unit's (CEU) warning system was substituted with immediate administrative fines on litter offences to strengthen enforcement and instil more responsibility by the public.

From a compliance and enforcement perspective, CEU shall continue to expand the areas being addressed through administrative fines rather than court actions and implement an enforcement strategy based on high-risk activities so that the efforts of the Directorate are focused where it matters most and ensure the efficient use of resources. Furthermore, the CEU shall strengthen the collaboration with other entities that have regulatory functions to maximise resources and provide more effective compliance and enforcement in areas that are prone to non-compliance with litter/waste regulations, including shipments of waste, waste/litter dumping, SUPs and EPR, amongst others.

Four thousand, eight hundred ninety-seven transfrontier shipments of waste documents were reviewed and processed by the CEU within ERA. Between October 2022 and December 2023, four hundred sixty-seven inspections were carried out in relation to exports of waste from Malta or through Malta. These included the monitoring of the loading of containers with waste material and non-waste exports. An additional four hundred two inspections were carried out to monitor the status of recycling across Malta and Gozo. Three hundred forty inspections were undertaken on quarries and construction-related facilities to investigate complaints and ensure compliance with permit conditions; whereas activities undertaken without environmental authorisation were subject to action by ERA, initially requesting the necessary action to facilitate compliance with obligations and subsequently acting where operators failed to abide by instructions. In this regard, fourteen warning letters were sent to different operators and one 'Stop and Compliance' Order with daily accruing fines was issued by ERA. One thousand, one hundred fifty inspections were carried out and six hundred forty-five complaints were investigated on dumping of waste around Malta and Gozo, of which four hundred sixty-seven were successfully addressed whilst a total of thirty-four administrative fines were issued.

Two hundred seventy-four inspections were carried out to investigate the placing on the Maltese market of packaging and/or batteries and/or electrical and electronic equipment, for compliance with the applicable EPR Regulations, whereby ninety-nine warning letters were issued. A total of forty-nine reports were reviewed which include half-yearly, annual and audit reports of EPR organisations and submissions made by self-compliant producers. Furthermore, nine administrative penalties were issued against self-compliant producers of packaging material who failed to attain the minimum recycling targets.

Five hundred nine cases were investigated in relation to waste carriers. A total of one hundred sixty-four warning letters and seventy-four administrative fines were issued against non-registered waste carriers, together with waste carriers which failed to comply with their permit conditions and relevant subsidiary legislations. With respect to disposal at sea, continuous desktop assessment was carried out on six disposals at sea environmental permits to ensure that the operations were in line with permit conditions.

Between the 1 January 2023 and the 31 December 2023, a number of permits, applications and regulations were issued, the amount of which can be found below:

- Disposal to sea permits – aim to regulate the disposal of inert material at the official spoil ground as per obligations in the Environment Protection Act – seven new applications, one variation application, three granted applications and four withdrawn applications;
- Waste carrier barges registrations – aim to regulate the transport of waste at sea by vessels as per the Waste Management (Activity Registration) Regulations, 2007 (S.L.549.45) – seventeen new applications, seventeen renewal applications, two renewal and variation notifications, thirty-seven granted applications and one dismissed application;
- Hull cleaning notifications – aim to regulate the underwater cleaning of vessels as per the Environment Protection Act – fifty-nine new notifications, nineteen renewal and variation notifications and seventy-seven granted notifications;
- Waste carrier vehicle registrations – aim to regulate the transport of waste on land by vehicles as per the Waste Management (Activity Registration) Regulations, 2007 (S.L.549.45) – Seven thousand five hundred sixty-four new applications, five thousand eight hundred forty-nine granted applications and one thousand three hundred ninety refused applications;
- Waste broker registrations – aim to regulate the brokerage of wastes as per the Waste Management (Activity Registration) Regulations, 2007 (S.L.549.45) – two new applications, forty-one renewal applications, thirty-six granted applications, two dismissed and one withdrawn application;
- Animal livestock registrations – aim to regulate the generation of waste by animal livestock as per the Waste Management (Activity Registration) Regulations, 2007 (S.L.549.45) – thirty-one new applications, four renewal applications, twenty-nine granted applications and one dismissed;
- Waste consignment permits – aim to regulate the transfer of hazardous waste as per the Waste Regulations, 2011 (S.L.549.63) – nine hundred sixty-three new applications, eight hundred ten granted applications and one hundred sixty-one refused applications;
- EPR scheme permits – two renewals granted and three renewal and variations granted;
- Registrations and renewals and de-registrations – aim to regulate businesses/producers who manufacture and/or import products and place these products on the market and assume responsibility for those products when they reach their end-of-life as per the EPR Framework Regulations 2021 (S.L.549.141) – two new applications, three thousand, two hundred thirty-nine renewal applications and two thousand, nine hundred ninety-one granted applications; There were thirty-five de-registrations which were received and granted; and
- Transfrontier shipment permits – aim to regulate shipments of hazardous waste being exported from and transiting by Malta as per the Waste Management (Shipments of Waste) Regulations (S.L.549.65) – eighty-four new applications, thirteen variation applications, seventy-eight granted applications, twelve dismissed applications and twenty withdrawn applications.
- General environmental permits – aim to regulate various waste management and industrial installations as per obligations in the Environment Protection Act – two hundred thirty-seven new applications, fifty-six renewal applications, twenty-seven variation applications, nine renewal and variation applications, one cessation application, one extension request, one reconsideration request, two hundred seventy-eight granted applications, three refused applications, eleven dismissed applications and eleven withdrawn applications.

In 2023, one hundred ninety-five inspections were carried out in various commercial outlets to ascertain compliance with the SUP Directive, including the placing on the market of SUP items, their markings and lightweight plastic bags. This resulted in the issuance of twenty-five warning letters and seven administrative fines due to non-compliance. In addition, ninety-one requests for clearances from Customs were reviewed and processed.

1.2.2 Water Management and Efficiency

The drafting of Malta's 3rd River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) was concluded during 2023 and the document was issued for a 6-month public consultation period. The 3rd RBMP presents a review of the status of fresh- and marine-water resources in the Maltese islands, identifies the gaps to achieving good status for all water bodies and presents a programme of measures (POMs) intended to enable water bodies to progressively achieve good status. The measures included in the POMs are owned by different Ministries and entities and the RBMP serves as a framework to ensure the coordinated implementation of these measures. The 3rd RBMP is led by the EWA in relation to groundwaters and the ERA in relation to surface and marine waters.

The matter of groundwater abstraction was addressed through a Green Paper on the Regulation of Private Groundwater Abstraction issued for public consultation in 2023. The Green Paper proposes the establishment of a national licensing framework for private groundwater abstraction including a pricing policy intended to incentivise the efficient and effective use of abstracted groundwater. The licensing framework establishes three main categories of private abstractors: agricultural, commercial and domestic, and establishes different conditions including tariffs for the different categories. Additionally, the Green Paper proposes a package of support measures to enable private abstractors to increase their water use efficiency and therefore achieve more sustainable practices.

During 2023, REWS continued to administer the Domestic Wells Restoration Grant Scheme to encourage rainwater harvesting and reuse as second-class water. The scheme provided for a grant of 50% of the total eligible cost, up to the maximum of €1,000. For 2023, there were seventy-two beneficiaries with a total grant amount of €62,894.

Furthermore, the then MFE continued to provide a grant on the purchase of equipment to purify water at home by reverse osmosis. This scheme applies to expenditure incurred once only on the purchase price of purifying water equipment for domestic use by the applicant.

A new phase of the Alteraqua Project was launched during 2023, with a specific focus on the management of rainwater runoff in urban centres. Further to this, works on the restoration of a historical reservoir in Birgu (Auberge d'Angleterre) were initiated.

The GiFLUID project (green infrastructures to mitigate flood risks in urban and suburban areas to improve the quality of rainwater discharges), financed under the Italia-Malta programme came to a close in 2023. This project included the development of a demonstration experimental Green Roof at the GĦAJN Educational Centre in Rabat. The Green Roof includes a monitoring framework to assess the rainwater runoff management features of the green roof, its water demand, the impact on water quality and its cooling effect on the building.

Works related to the development of Malta's new hydrological monitoring networks were finalised in 2023, with the setting up of the catchment-based rainwater runoff monitoring network, the deep groundwater monitoring network and the freshwater-saltwater interface monitoring network. This new monitoring infrastructure will be able to contribute to a more holistic management of water resources in Malta and Gozo by providing key information to develop a more detailed understanding of the local hydrology and hydrogeology, thereby informing the development and implementation of more focused and effective actions.

The implementation of the LIFE IP RBMP Malta also continued during 2023, namely through the implementation of the different actions under the project. The LIFE IP project, led by the EWA, brings together public agencies in Malta with an interest in water management to ensure a coordinated approach supporting the implementation of Malta's RBMP. Specific information on the respective project actions is outlined below:

- Action C.1 - Household Water Consumption Audits

The aim of this action is to conduct a nationwide campaign wherein trained EWA officers visit households to advise on energy and water consumption. Each visit will provide the occupier with useful generic tips on water and energy consumption optimisation and guide how to reduce their energy and water consumption. Over the past two years, approximately eight hundred visits per year were conducted. The visits have been extended to also cover small businesses that have a maximum of ten employees. During house visits, households receive a gift pack which, among other things, contains a booklet featuring energy and water-saving home tips for daily use. The Agency's officers carry out follow-up house visits to get important feedback from the consumers. Moreover, following the signing of consent forms, consumers allow the Agency to gather consumption data from ARMS Ltd. This data is then analysed by comparing consumption patterns before and after the replacement of the particular appliance/s.

- Action C.2 Eco-Label scheme:

The aim of Action C.2 is to develop a voluntary water labelling strategy aimed at promoting water-efficient devices and appliances to empower consumers with verifiable information. The tender has been awarded for the development and establishment of a voluntary eco-labelling scheme for water-efficient devices and appliances, and preliminary research on ecolabels at the EU and international levels has been conducted and the methodology of the water eco-label scheme at the local level has been prepared. This methodology will be discussed with local stakeholders to collect feedback that will ultimately lead to the actual development of the eco-label.

- Action C.3 - Remote Sensing for Agricultural Water Demand

Remote Sensing for Agricultural Water Demand is creating an online tool for the management of water in the agricultural sector. The approach adopted is based on the use of optical Earth Observation data, specifically using the Sentinel 2 data of the Copernicus programme. The Action aims to provide a better estimate of the agricultural water demand and develop a continuously updated total crop map based on remote sensing data. This will estimate the evapotranspiration and irrigation needs as determined by climate, crop and management characteristics. The development of a crop classification algorithm has been completed. An operational online platform that provides data and insights to academic and public stakeholders will be available towards the final stages of the project.

- Action C.4 – Educational Campaign

Several water conservation projects in schools in Malta and Gozo have been implemented, to enable the direct and practical involvement of students in the development of water management practices. Furthermore, regular energy and water and sustainability lessons are carried out for school children who attend the Għajjn Water Conservation Centre with their teachers.

Corporate training on energy, water and sustainability is carried out as part of this action to provide a valuable service to the corporate sector through employee training initiatives.

- Action C.8- Managed Aquifer Recharge (MAR)

This action is developing a pilot project on MAR that is the augmentation of inflows to a groundwater body to support the achievement of good quantitative status. This aquifer system, due to its hydrologic isolation and anthropogenically highly impacted nature, has been identified as one of the ideal sites for the undertaking of an initial application of MAR techniques on a groundwater body scale. The MAR will consist of injecting New Water, which is highly polished treated water for agricultural use, within drilled boreholes. The aim is to restore the qualitative status of water, increase the quantitative status of the aquifer and stop seawater intrusion. A geophysical investigation and a field 'hydraulic characterisation have been carried out and boreholes will be drilled in 2024 to finalise this pilot project.

- Action C.20: Setting the Framework for Increasing Circularity in Wastewater Treatment

This action consists of a number of studies to identify opportunities for the optimisation of water reuse. These studies assess how the identified new treatment technologies can be adapted and applied in the development of wastewater treatment and reuse solutions in Malta by identifying sustainable methods for the increased production of New Water while also introducing the concept of nutrient recovery. Currently, all data provided by the plant operators is being analysed to enable the undertaking of the above-mentioned activities.

The Public Abattoir, which is a major consumer of potable water, continued its work to reduce water consumption without jeopardising the high level of hygiene expected from such a food processing plant, achieving an average of 150m³ a day over the first nine months, a reduction of 15m³ per day over the previous year and a staggering halving of the consumption from 2021. This means that in the last two years, it reduced its water consumption by the equivalent of 0.15% of the total potable water production of the Maltese islands or the equivalent of the water consumption of one thousand, three hundred sixty-three persons.

1.3 Protecting, Conserving and Enhancing Natural Capital to Improve Ecological Resilience and Sustainability

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
1.6	By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes
14.1	By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution
14.2	By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including strengthening their resilience, and taking action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans
14.3	Minimise and address the impacts of ocean acidification, also through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels
14.4	By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics
14.5	By 2020, conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law and based on the best available scientific information
14.6	By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognising that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidies negotiation
14.a	Increase scientific knowledge, develop research capacity and transfer marine technology, taking into account the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Criteria and Guidelines on the Transfer of Marine Technology, in order to improve ocean health and enhance the contribution of marine biodiversity for the development of developing countries, in particular, small island developing states and least developed countries
14.c	Enhance the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law as reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which provides the legal framework for the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources, as recalled in Paragraph 158 of “The future we want”
15.1	By 2020, ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements
15.2	By 2020, promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally

15.3	By 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world
15.5	Take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species
15.8	By 2020, introduce measures to prevent the introduction and significantly reduce the impact of invasive alien species (IAS) on land and water ecosystems, and control or eradicate the priority species
15.9	By 2020, integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts
15.a	Mobilise and significantly increase financial resources from all sources to conserve and sustainably use biodiversity and ecosystems

1.3.1 Protecting and Enhancing Biodiversity

The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) aims at providing strategic direction on the management and protection of biodiversity and is the principal instrument for implementing the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) at the national level. In 2023, the draft NBSAP was issued for public consultation between 14 February and 28 March 2023.

1.3.1.1 Terrestrial Ecosystems and Biodiversity

Throughout 2023, the Wild Birds Regulation Unit within the then MGOZ continued to centralise the relevant regulatory functions pertaining to the implementation of the Conservation of Wild Birds Regulations (S.L. 549.42) and related subsidiary legislation and implemented government policy in relation to sustainable hunting governance and conservation of wild birds. The Unit coordinated work with various institutional structures including the Ornithological Committee, and liaised with the Police, Customs, ERA and other entities to ensure proper implementation and enforcement of applicable legislation on the ground. The Unit also ensured the continuation of regular awareness-raising activities to inform all members of society about the various aspects of the local legislation concerning conservation and sustainable use of wild birds together with information regarding conservation measures adopted to safeguard these species.

A number of projects were implemented and concluded through the Conservation of Wild Birds Fund namely, the satellite tagging of Mediterranean and Yellow-legged gulls, the tagging and release of captive-bred European turtledoves, the re-introduction of the Barn Owl into the wild, habitat measures involving the planting of indigenous trees, and educational programmes. In addition, a new call for applications was launched in November 2023 for projects that will be implemented in 2024.

ERA is also working on the formulation of Malta's National Strategy and Action Plan for Pollinators to 2035. The intent and objectives of this policy were published for public consultation between 13 February and 17 March 2023 to duly notify the public and gather feedback; various comments were received which will be reviewed and taken into consideration when drafting the strategy. ERA has meanwhile commenced piloting the Malta Pollinator Monitoring Scheme in 2023.

Work is ongoing for the setting up of a National Database on Biodiversity. This shall consist of an inventory of information on local species, in particular, native, endemic and threatened species. In this regard, it shall include information on species of flora and fauna that particularly contribute towards the natural and cultural heritage of the Maltese Islands. A similar exercise shall be considered in connection with alien species in the Maltese Islands, in which case, information will include details on dispersal, breeding, extent of invasion, and possible eradication methods, amongst others. Throughout the years, studies were commissioned to collate

information that will eventually feed into the aforementioned databases. ERA is also working at Argotti Gardens to propagate species of flora which are either rare or extinct in the wild.

Moreover, a number of citizen science tools were launched or implemented over 2023, to enable citizen engagement in the monitoring of litter, alien species, protected species and habitats, leading to a parallel increase in awareness.

Concerning biodiversity monitoring and assessment, ERA is currently engaged in the monitoring of various habitats and species, with new contracts being in place since 2023 (e.g. bats, liverwort).

With regard to terrestrial site and species management, through collaboration with environmental NGOs, the focus of implementation this year concentrated on sand dunes and marshlands. This included sand dune restoration works at il-Bajja tal-Mixquqa with the removal of IAS, planting of typical species and securing with cordoning. Marshland habitats were extended in an area at is-Salini and Marsaskala, while the Life Integrated Project LIFE 16IPE/MT000008 proceeded with the plans to tackle the problem of coastal erosion for Il-Ballut ta' Marsaxlokk.

Furthermore, ERA held the first NGO training seminar, inviting NGOs who are involved in terrestrial site management, whereby all invitees attended. This was held on 7 March 2023. The aspects covered included: Malta's obligations for implementing environmental conservation measures and the role of NGOs, enforcement tools and best practices, and permitting requirements. All respective NGOs were invited to present some of the tangible efforts they are affecting in relation to protected areas and species.

Meanwhile, in terms of enforcement and compliance, the following inspections and actions were carried out by the ERA:

- Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)-related licences, clearances and permits which aim to regulate the trade of endangered species as per the Trade in Species of Fauna and Flora Regulations, 2004 (S.L.549.38), between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2023, there were seven thousand, four hundred new applications, seven thousand, three hundred nineteen granted applications, one refused and seven dismissed applications;
- Wildlife Trade: two hundred twenty-four inspections were undertaken on wildlife commodities at the point of entry between October 2022 and December 2023 to ensure compliance with the CITES and the EU Wildlife Trade Regulations (Council Regulation 338/97 an ancillary regulation). These inspections resulted in the seizure of one hundred seventy-one specimens following the disclosure of six cases of non-compliance. During the same period, a further one hundred eighty-nine inspections were conducted on protected specimens for which an intra-EU community trade permit was requested;
- Trees and Protected Areas: Between October 2022 and December 2023, two hundred forty-one inspections were carried out on matters pertaining to tree protection and a further eighty-four inspections in relation to activities within protected areas. During the same period, eleven administrative fines were issued, and two criminal cases were initiated for breaches of the trees and woodlands protection regulations. Four administrative penalties were issued for cases involving environmentally damaging activities within protected areas; and
- Wildlife Crimes: one hundred eighty-one inspections were carried out in support of wildlife crime investigations resulting in the disclosure of seventeen cases involving the possession and exploitation of illegally acquired protected species and the ensuing seizure of two hundred forty-six protected specimens.

In terms of habitat restoration, AM continued working on the removal of IAS such as Acacia and Reeds, with a special focus on Natura 2000 sites. Other habitat restoration measures included the restoration of rubble walls, removal of artificial structures, pruning when necessary, cleaning and maintenance, patrolling of rangers in Natura 2000 sites, cordoning of sand dunes, the planting of trees/shrubs, conservation of local stock, and habitat expansion of the salt marsh in Comino.

With regard to afforestation and management of wooded areas, in 2023, AM continued to plant various trees and shrubs, both indigenous and non-indigenous, amounting to circa twenty thousand. In total, circa €1.8m in expenditure covered measures addressing habitat restoration measures such as rubble walls, signs, trees/shrubs, wooden stakes, preservation, and maintenance of structures of historical importance in Natura 2000 sites, removal of invasive species, and support to NGOs with management agreements, amongst other initiatives and actions.

Work was carried out towards the finalisation for publication of Guidelines for Good Forestation Practices for the Maltese Islands. The aim is for successful and functional tree-planting projects in natural, rural and urban environments. These can be used by the public and interested parties to support planting initiatives through various projects.

Meanwhile, a number of scientific studies to better understand local woodland ecosystems are being considered, with one related to fungi carried out in 2023. These studies will ultimately aid in the conservation and regeneration efforts of these localised habitats, informing both policy and management processes.

Throughout 2023, the Eco-Gozo Directorate within the then MGOZ continued to implement a number of projects related to the restoration of rubble walls along various road sections in Gozo such as the restoration of the rubble walls along Ramla Valley and the restoration of rubble walls along Marsalforn Road, aimed to restore around 4,000m of rubble walls and to conserve approximately 24,000m³ of soil annually due to the reduction in the occurrence of run-off and field flooding.

With regard to valley management, the then MGOZ is in the process of developing a master plan for the preservation of the valley known as 'Wied il-Lunzjata', located within the limits of Kerċem. In 2023, preliminary geological investigations were commissioned to assess the geological and geomorphic conditions of the cliff located above the chapel.

On its part, Project Green has executed interventions in nine valleys around Malta, targeting issues such as fly-tipped material, construction waste, and IAS. To complement interventions in Malta's valleys, Project Green has also submitted plans and designs for a large-scale pilot project in Wied Speranza. This project will see a full ecological restoration in the area as well as the establishment of an informal educational trail for the public. The initiative 'Islands Clean-up', has successfully raised awareness about illegal dumping and environmental protection, resulting in the collection of 2000 tonnes of waste. This campaign has fostered collaboration with NGOs, individuals, and private companies, collectively contributing to a cleaner and more resilient environment.

1.3.1.2 Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems

Following the designation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) for the conservation of seabed habitats and marine species as listed in the EU Habitats Directive, and also pursuant to the EU Birds Directive, ERA has completed the setting of conservation objectives and measures for these sites. This process will ensure appropriate management of such sites and improvement of the conservation status of the relevant habitats and species through the management of relevant pressures. The pertinent policy document was adopted in January 2023.

Meanwhile, work is ongoing in relation to more overarching management processes for aquatic ecosystems (including freshwater and marine) pursuant to the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD). In this regard, POMs targeting the sustainability of surface waters have been developed as part of the third RBMP. Between the 14 April 2023 and the 28 April 2023, ERA published the intent for the MSFD POMs for public consultation and undertook public consultation of the draft MSFD POMs between 11 September and 23 October 2023, with a view to its finalisation and adoption. The final MSFD POMs were published online in December 2023.

Furthermore, a project addressing knowledge improvement and long-term monitoring in relation to the exploitation of fish and shellfish has continued, to inform long-term monitoring and management processes,

complementing the existing data collection processes undertaken as part of fisheries management. This is an important step towards an integrated approach to managing biodiversity through socio-economic sectors.

Management of surface, transitional and coastal waters is based on an integrated approach towards sustainable use of such waters and achievement of good status. This is achieved through constant collaboration with relevant stakeholders for the management of pressures on such waters and associated habitats and species. One such pressure that is currently being addressed is anchoring/mooring activity in coastal and marine waters. In this regard, ERA is leading the implementation of an action as part of the EU-funded Life Integrated Project LIFE16IPE/MT000008 which is assessing the impacts associated with this activity on the seabed and identifying management options.

Water quality is an important aspect to address. In this regard, ERA is also engaged in monitoring contaminants of emerging through the regular monitoring of selected contaminants that are not currently regulated in both inland surface and coastal waters, known as 'WatchList mechanism' as well as through another project being undertaken as part of the EU-funded Life Integrated Project LIFE16IPE/MT000008. The ongoing contract under this action is seeking the sampling of four types of water categories and screening of such samples for the presence of contaminants of emerging concern. Furthermore, through LIFE16IPE/MT000008, ERA is collaborating with the UM on another ongoing action which will lead to the development of a hydrographical model for Malta's coastal and marine waters, with a main action being the deployment of a multiparametric buoy. The development of such models will assist ERA in ensuring that development at sea does not jeopardise the hydrological regime supporting marine ecosystems and facilitate environmental assessment procedures.

Furthermore, ERA is currently engaged in a contract for the monitoring of inland surface and transitional waters as designated under the EU WFD. The outcome of this monitoring feeds into the development of the relevant measures and their implementation for Malta's waters under the WFD which seek the sustainable use of water resources. ERA is planning to continue the implementation of monitoring processes in coastal and marine waters on the basis of an updated monitoring programme, which was reported to the EC in August 2023. Such a monitoring programme was prepared by ERA as an update of the 2015 programme, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, and a public consultation was opened between 26 June 2023 and 24 July 2023.

The Posidonia seagrass meadows are a priority habitat under the Habitats Directive and local legislation and are affected by various pressures including non-indigenous species. In this regard, AM commenced several pilot projects on the removal of invasive species. AM, in collaboration with a number of stakeholders, concluded the project Mapping and Monitoring of Posidonia Oceanica using the Remote and Sentinel Technology (MAARES) (SRF-2021IS2 - Mapping & Monitoring of Posidonia Oceanica using the Remote and Sentinel Technology), which was initiated in the previous year, with a view to increase knowledge to implement applied habitat conservation initiatives in MPAs and territorial waters of the Maltese Islands. The main actions involved during this year included the procurement of a boat (open water) and the dissemination of information such as workshops/videos.

Meanwhile, ERA continued funding the programme of wildlife rescue led by Nature Trust Malta, to ensure that injured protected fauna are rehabilitated and released back into the wild when feasible. It is essential that for site and species management to be ensured, guidance is provided in terms of various other policy aspects and more specifically when considering projects and other initiatives. In this regard, several consultations are followed to ensure the integration of relevant considerations. This also applies when considering other policy sectors, whereby input is provided to ensure the streamlining of biodiversity, nature, water and marine issues across sectors as pertinent.

During 2023, two turtle nests were afforded protection by the issuance of an Emergency Conservation Order and by coordinating the required on-site surveillance. This entailed the setting up of enclosures, publication and enforcement of an Emergency Conservation Order, Commissioning of Overnight Security during the Incubation Period and the presence of ERA enforcement officials during the hatching process.

In July 2023, a two-year moratorium regarding the collection of sea urchins was issued through a Legal Notice led by ERA, especially noting their decline in recent years (as noted through an earlier study that was carried out) and their crucial role when considering marine ecosystems. Compliance checks were carried out during routine marine patrols. From October 2022 to December 2023, fifty-eight patrols totalling three hundred fifty-nine hours of surveillance were undertaken at sea, whilst nine patrols totalling eighteen hours of land-based surveillance were carried out along the shore.

The Sea Urchin Restocking Project, financed through National funds was launched in 2023. It is envisioned as a three-year project to release sustainable numbers of sea urchins into identified areas in Maltese waters, enhancing the species' stocks. In 2023, wild specimens of *Paracentrotus lividus* were collected and acclimated to a Recirculating Aquaculture System (RAS) within the Aquaculture Directorate within the Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights (MAFA). Throughout quarters 3 and 4 of 2023, *Paracentrotus lividus* have been subject to acclimation and conditioned with specifically formulated feed, promoting somatic growth to allow reproduction.

Furthermore, between October 2022 and December 2023, three hundred three sea-based inspections in various MPAs, fish farms (also including but not limited to tuna pens) and other routine inspections associated with compliance checks on permitted facilities related to coastal and marine operations were carried out. Another eight hundred seventy inspections were carried out on infrastructural works alongside the coast. Additionally, two hundred two inspections were related to investigations of complaints received by the ERA. An additional sixty-five inspections were carried out in relation to the Control of Major Accidents Hazards, sampling and drone surveys; as well as pre-permit matters. Concerning administrative actions, twelve administrative fines and ten warning letters were issued for malpractices and/or non-compliance which caused pollution to the marine environment.

Meanwhile, in 2023, AM continued its work on the habitat restoration of the wetland in Comino as supported by the financial assistance of the Priority Actions Programme Regional Activity Centre within the UN Environment Programme/Mediterranean Action Plan through ERA. This intervention focused on the creation of a lagoon and the planting of appropriate species which can withstand harsh climatic conditions such as Vitex and Tamarisk.

1.3.1.2.1 Cleanups and Educational Campaigns

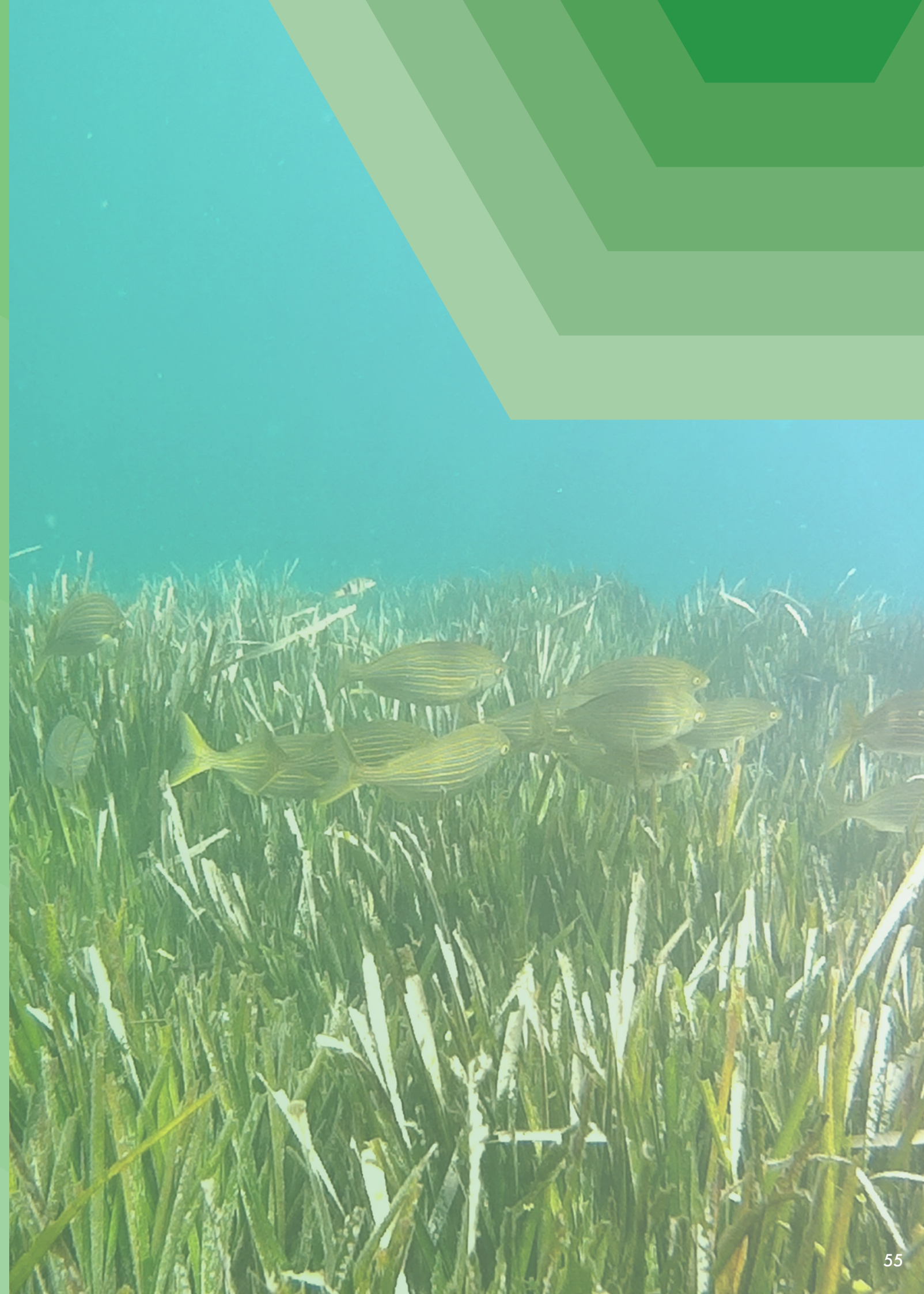
The removal of coastal litter has been another focus in 2023. By cleaning up the beaches these pollutants are prevented from being re-introduced into the marine environment and posing further threat to the aquatic flora and fauna. To this end, AM carried out four coastal cleanups in 2023 in Xemxija Bay and Pwales Valley, Bajja tax-Xema, Armier Bay and Ġnejna Bay. Circa 800 kilos of coastal litter were collected from this series of coastal cleanups.

The removal of marine litter from the seafloor has been a focus for habitat restoration to improve the habitat status in MPAs. In this regard, in 2023, 2.5 tonnes of marine litter were collected from the seafloor in MPAs.

The litter consisted of circa:

- plastic (40%)
- metal (37%)
- mixed waste (5%)
- fishing and boating (5%), wood (5%)
- glass and ceramics (3%) and the
- remaining 5% consisted of rubber, sanitary waste and clothing, amongst other general waste.

The locations included Wied iż-Żurriq, Għar Lapsi, Sirens Bay, Fekruna Bay, Ġnejna Bay, Valletta and Żonqor Point. All the cleanups were conducted through a collaboration between AM and the Professional Diving School Association. On World Ocean's Day (8 June), AM conducted a major seabed cleanup in Valletta near the old fish market in collaboration with the voluntary organisation, Calypso SAC.



While the aforementioned cleanup initiatives reflect salient hands-on efforts targeted at preserving and restoring ecosystems, education plays an equally important role in maintaining the health of such environments. In this regard, the following educational initiatives were undertaken in 2023:

- In 2023, a new Directorate was formed within AM which focuses on Environmental Education. In 2023, 16,560 primary school children have been reached. This amounts to all the school children at primary level in Malta. Of these 733 were in direct contact through school visits. In order to ensure that all the children would be exposed to the importance of a healthier natural environment, an online seed planting programme to all primary schools in Malta was done earlier during the year. This activity included prior preparation by distributing seed packets, compost and pots to all the schools nationwide. On the day of the activity, each class could follow the senior educational officer on screen.
- In 2023, AM has also launched the Buskett Educational Centre aiming to improve awareness of the main woodland area in Malta. By the end of the year, the centre has already hosted circa 1200 visitors ranging from children, active aging groups and other organizations.
- A partnership between Globe and AM invited schools to an outdoor educational outreach activity held at San Tumas. This activity covered the same learning outcomes as school visits. Children were from primary school. The number of targeted participants totalled to 385.
- The running campaign related to the Tree4U Campaign saw the planting of circa 200 trees from private stakeholders and private citizens.
- As part of the process to increase information in Natura 2000 site, works conducted by the Environmental Rangers continued throughout the year.
- AM installed two information signs related to MPAs at Ramla il-Ħamra and two at Comino. In addition, it conducted nine snorkel trails addressed to the public at Golden Bay and Riviera. Both of these actions were in line with the Conservation Objectives;
- AM organised a total of five boat trips within MPAs in the Maltese islands, two of which consisted of a roundtrip around Filfla, a trip on the western coast of Gozo, Inwadar and Comino;
- Further to the above, four coastal walks were organised consisting of roundtrips in Natura 2000 sites and MPAs, namely at Selmun, Majjistral Park, Hagar Qim and Comino;
- In 2023, the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) collaborated with Nature Trust Malta to create the first marine park in Ċirkewwa and also collaborated with University Institutes on Citizen Science to create awareness of jellyfish and alien species;
- Skolasajf events were organised during summer focusing on marine litter, turtles and other forms of damage that can be caused to the environment via human interaction such as anchoring, marine biodiversity, Do's & Don'ts as well as informative sessions about turtles and turtle nesting; and
- SCH joined an international consortium under the EU-funded project Art4Sea, which highlights issues related to climate change, rising sea levels, and marine pollution. The project aims to promote healthy seas and the marine environment through artworks that will be selected in a competition and exhibited in three islands around the Mediterranean, Ustica (Italy), Alonissos (Greece) and Gozo (Malta).



1.4 Developing Sustainable Food Systems to Achieve Food Security and Ensure Environmental and Socio-Economic Welfare

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
2.1	By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular, the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round
2.2	By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons
2.3	By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, and provide secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment
2.4	By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, help maintain ecosystems, strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and progressively improve land and soil quality
2.5	By 2020, maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species, including through soundly managed and diversified seed and plant banks at the national, regional and international levels, and promote access to and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilisation of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge, as internationally agreed
2.c	Adopt measures to ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets and their derivatives and facilitate timely access to market information, including on food reserves, in order to help limit extreme food price volatility
3.9	By 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination
7.a	By 2030, enhance international cooperation to facilitate access to clean energy research and technology, including renewable energy, energy efficiency and advanced and cleaner fossil-fuel technology, and promote investment in energy infrastructure and clean energy technology
8.4	Improve progressively, through 2030, global resource efficiency in consumption and production and endeavour to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, in accordance with the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production, with developed countries taking the lead
9.5	Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries, including, by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per 1 million people and public and private research and development spending
12.2	By 2030, achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources

12.3	By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses
14.1	By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution
14.4	By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics
14.6	By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognising that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidies negotiation
14.a	Increase scientific knowledge, develop research capacity and transfer marine technology, taking into account the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Criteria and Guidelines on the Transfer of Marine Technology, in order to improve ocean health and enhance the contribution of marine biodiversity to the development of developing countries, in particular, small island developing states and least developed countries
14.b	Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets
14.c	Enhance the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law as reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which provides the legal framework for the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources, as recalled in paragraph 158 of “The future we want”
15.8	By 2020, introduce measures to prevent the introduction and significantly reduce the impact of IAS on land and water ecosystems and control or eradicate the priority species
15.9	By 2020, integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts

1.4.1 Sustainable Agriculture

Malta has been negotiating in various fora in the EU, both at a technical and also at ministerial level in relation to enhancing the resilience and growth of the European farming sector and improving food security in the face of challenges such as climate change. Therefore, in line with new policy developments taking place at EU level, throughout 2023, Malta introduced several policies and regulations, including the publication of the first ever National Agricultural Act (NAA), which provides for the new legislation framework for all regulations related to agriculture whilst repealing and replacing all previous agriculture-related legislation. This Act shall thus contain all sectorial-related subsidiary legislations, whilst clearly delineating the responsibilities of the Director of Agriculture under this Act and the Director’s administration.

The NAA, which was approved by Cabinet in December 2022 and entered into force on 1 January 2024 through L.N 02 of 2024, lays down articles of the development and implementation of the National Agricultural Policy (NAP), the measures that may be used by the Director of Agriculture for the protection, conservation and sustainability of the agricultural land and livestock and products, the collection of data on all aspects of the production and processing of agricultural products, and the regulatory provisions for land fragmentation and consolidation. The Act also regulates the issue, variation, suspension and revocation of permits and licenses for agricultural operations together with the related collection of fees for such permits and licenses.

Further to the Act, Malta drafted its Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plan, in line with the CAP 2023-2027, which is an EU instrument that promotes greener and sustainable practices while ensuring food security and a decent income to European farmers. All farmers benefitting from financial support under area-based interventions falling under Malta’s CAP Strategic Plan were subject to ‘Conditionality’, which is mandatory for all types of agricultural activity, including farmers and/or breeders. Conditionality encompasses two obligations, namely Statutory Management Requirements (SMRs) and Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAECs), whereby any breaches of such obligations may lead to payment reductions. In this context, SMRs refer to conditionality requirements for Maltese farmers to safeguard biodiversity, including water; wild birds; natural habitats; and wild fauna and flora; as well as requirements relating to food hygiene; the prohibition of the use of hormones; and the use of plant protection products. GAEC obligations, on the other hand, address the protection of wetland and peatland; the ban on burning arable stubble; the establishment of buffer strips along water courses; tillage management; minimum soil cover; crop rotation on arable land; as well as the share of agricultural area devoted to non-productive areas or features.

Malta’s CAP Strategic Plan has various measures, one of which is to encourage young farmers pursue a career in the sector, thereby ensuring the sustainability and viability of agriculture in the country. In addition, Malta sought to reinforce its agricultural and environmental commitments through measures such as AECC 1 A, B (Integration and Maintenance of Autochthonous Maltese Species) & C (Conservation Indigenous Species including Carob and Mulberry trees), which were launched in 2023. These focus on conserving Malta’s biodiversity and are consistent with the priorities of Malta’s National Biodiversity Action Plan, where they are expected to, not only have a positive impact on biodiversity, but also enhance the countryside and promote practices that work in harmony with our unique ecosystems.

AECC 2, on the other hand, relates to the maintenance of trees and is assisting farmers in maintaining indigenous trees, including Carob and Mulberry trees, in good condition, whilst AECC 3 is incentivising farmers to control weeds growing in vineyards and orchards between 15 October and 28 February, using mechanical means. Additionally, other measures such as AECC 4 and AECC 7 focus on strengthening the apiculture sector by incentivising farmers to set up bee boxes on their holding, and promote the adoption of organic farming practices respectively.

Further to the above, during 2023, the Agriculture Consultative Council (ACC) organised seven official meetings addressing the more pressing issues concerning the agricultural sector in line with its obligations. The ACC has been entrusted with the task of advising the government on issues relating to:

1. Agriculture, horticulture, floriculture, and viticulture;
2. Breeding and rearing of livestock;
3. Keeping of bees;
4. Processing of agricultural products; and
5. Formulation and implementation of sustainable agricultural policies.

The main issues discussed were the implementation of the land reform, mitigation measures to assist farmers, the mitigation of adverse climate conditions, the classification of farmers, the implementation of the CAP Strategic Plan and the Organic Action Plan, as well the implementation of unfair trading practices, which serve to ensure proper and fair trading of agricultural products.

In addition to the CAP Strategic Plan, Malta published the NAP for the Maltese Islands 2018-2028, which is a 10-year plan earmarked to steer the agricultural sector into a more sustainable direction by providing the means along which it can develop and flourish, whilst remaining within the parameters of the CAP and other pertinent regulations. It aims to provide a clear direction to all relevant stakeholders ranging from public entities involved with certification, permitting and decision-making, to private entities directly involved in the agricultural scenario who intend to invest or diversify their business. To achieve the vision, the following six strategic objectives have been identified:

1. Food presentation, labelling and traceability;
2. Consolidation of land holdings;
3. Sustaining water and key resources;
4. Competitiveness and diversification;
5. Adaptation to and mitigation of geo-climatic conditions; and
6. Research and development.

Seventy policy measures have been developed from a set of four operational objectives, based on economic, social regeneration, resources, and governance aspects. These measures, aiming towards increased sustainability in agriculture, are to be implemented throughout the 10-year timeline between 2018 and 2028.

1.4.1.1 Soil Conservation and Land Management

One of the main focuses of the NAP is soil conservation. Therefore, Malta, through specific plans and legislations, is ensuring that the fertility and quality of Maltese soil are maintained. In view of this, the Fertile Soil Preservation Act specifies the protection of fertile soil within the context of any activities that may result in soil displacement. The controls performed serve to regulate and negate the negative repercussions of transportation, deposit, mixing and covering of soil on its quality.

Further to this, in 2023, a measure was launched through which farmers are required to prepare and implement a soil management plan (SMP) on their parcels targeting three primary soil-related threats on a parcel level, including erosion, compaction and low soil organic matter. The SMP must be drafted and signed by a competent person whose name is published on the website of the Plant Protection Directorate (PPD).

The obligations specified above are further being complemented by the work carried out by ERA, which is currently being tasked to assess documentation prepared by the EC and Convention bodies in relation to soil sustainability and climate adaptation. In this regard, ERA has conducted a preliminary impact assessment which included gathering feedback from all the competent entities and drafting Malta's considerations for the new EU Soil Strategy.

Such efforts directed at soil conservation are crucial in ensuring good soil quality, however, this cannot be achieved unless there is proper land management practices in place. In view of this, in November 2023, the government unveiled the establishment of Riżorsi Agrikoli Malta (RAM), which is a key component of the comprehensive reform in arable land management announced in October 2022. The primary objective of this Agency is to bolster the sustainability of farming, enhance food production, and protect the rural environment, with the registration of ownership of agricultural land being one of its main responsibilities. Moreover, the Agency aims to encourage private land acquisition by farmers leasing the land. These farmers will be granted the right of first refusal when the landowner decides to sell the land which is being cultivated by the farmer. Additionally, the Agency will acquire land from owners for redistribution to farmers, distinguishing between active farmers, hobbyists, and newcomers entering the agricultural sector. The new Agency is set to implement various measures to safeguard arable land. Notably, it will introduce incentives for young farmers, providing financial instruments to aid them in purchasing agricultural land. Furthermore, the establishment of RAM also incorporated the responsibilities which the Agency for Governance of Agricultural Bioresources was responsible for, namely, to update, coordinate and implement the Agricultural WMP prevalent at the time.

Throughout 2023, the Agency had been actively involved in discussions between livestock farmers and WSC regarding the treatment of livestock slurry, as this material cannot be applied to land as fertiliser before meeting specific prescribed criteria due to limitations imposed by the Nitrates Directive and local legislation. The urban wastewater collection network and treatment plants are not meant or designed to cater for discharges of this waste stream. An interim agreement was reached with WSC whereby a plant at Sant'Antnin Marsascala was adapted to accept and dewater slurry generated from livestock farms in Malta. WSC further treats the resulting liquid fraction, and the solid fraction is utilised as a fertiliser during the open period stipulated in the Nitrates Action Programme between 15 March and 15 October.

Further to the above agreement, most livestock farmers entered into a contractual agreement with WSC to deliver their farm slurry to WSC's plant. This initiative kicked off in March 2023. By the third quarter of 2023, the respective farmers started delivering the slurry generated on their farms to the Sant'Antnin Waste Treatment Facility. This measure is considered a stopgap solution, paving the way for a longer-term plan where farm waste management is completely decoupled from that of urban wastewater. The long-term solution is a prerequisite to Malta's compliance with the EU Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive.

During 2023, WSC also secured €20 million of EU EAFRD Funds to expand the Malta South reclaimed water (New Water) production capacity and extend the distribution network to cover the Southwest of Malta. This project will extend the provision of the New Water supply to an additional 223 hectares of agricultural land by the first quarter of 2026.

In addition to the above, a new legislation was published, this being L.N. 212 of 2023, which is expected to introduce new legal provisions to empower the Rural Leases Control Board to fix the rent in a manner related to a fair rental price. This should take into account the estimated value of the land as agricultural land for agricultural use which can be obtained from the open market taking into consideration the means of the lessee, the circumstances and condition of the land, and any burden which may be proportionate to the lessor and not only in relation to adjacent fields. The main principles on which the proposed amendment is based are the following:

- Agricultural land shall be valued as agricultural land and not according to the market economy of the land in general; and
- The amount of compensation due to the lessor shall be objectively estimated and shall relate to the land in question without being bound by the conditions of other nearby fields which may also be subject to unfair conditions to create a vicious circle at the expense of the owner.

Moreover, this amendment's scope is the retention of agricultural land by farmers who rent out their land privately by requiring a review of the conditions and value of the rent before the eviction. This is also in line with the white paper on the reform of agricultural land, which was launched for public consultation in October 2022. The aim of the reform is to protect the land in the public interest legitimately and proportionately to do justice to all parties, including the owner, reduce over-speculation, protect areas and above all, support agriculture in the wake of its importance for guaranteeing an ample food supply. In this regard, in 2023, through the formation of RAM, an entity has been designated to be responsible for the agricultural land reform. This would ensure the proper allocation of human resources and the Ministries' commitment to implementing this reform.

1.4.1.2 Organic Farming

In 2023, Malta's National Action Plan for Organic Food was launched following a consultation process. This action plan promotes organic farming and highlights the fact that organic crop production is known to have higher long-term soil fertility and maintains 30% more biodiversity compared to conventionally farmed land. Organic farming is different from conventional farming as it takes a systemic approach, deploying onsite resources, improving the soil structure and quality, reducing excessive tillage, and thus improving biodiversity and soil-water retention.

The action plan also provides financial support for organic farming conversion and maintenance. When converting from conventional to organic farming, farmers will have to adopt new technologies and change the processes they employ in their agricultural work. Organic farming is much closer to natural ecosystem processes and, therefore, the use of artificial technologies remains limited. Examples of novel technologies which are being utilised in organic farming are the use of green manure or enhanced fertilisation, thus decreasing the burning of fossil fuels and reducing climate change.

The three pillars upon which the action plan is based include:

1. Pillar 1, which focuses on creating a favourable ecosystem around producers, these being the ones at the heart of the local organic sector. Actions include increased financial support and incentives for organic production conversion and maintenance, coupled with support programmes that provide farmers with knowledge and hands-on mentoring and advice to guide them through this process. This pillar also highlights key policy actions that are intended to strengthen the organic ecosystem such as giving preferential access to agricultural land and financial aid on condition that there is the conversion to organic farming, the potential designation of bio-districts and the promotion of producer organisations as vehicles to function in the organic sector with a strong voice and the right structures.
2. Pillar 2, which focuses on creating the right government capabilities, structures, and infrastructure for the organic sector to develop and flourish. This includes dedicated investments in human resources and physical infrastructure to enable the organic certification of livestock, meat, and animal products, as well as fruit and vegetables. Farm advisory services will be strengthened through the Agricultural Knowledge and Information System, while the research centre at Għammieri Farm will pilot various organic production learning and demonstration programmes. The new business development unit at the MFA will collaborate with other entities to provide advisory services to other organic operators in the value chain including processors. The role of the Ambassador for Organic and Sustainable Food will be strengthened to lead the promotion of organic production through consumer education and initiatives will also be launched to collect data and support research in the local organic sector.
3. Pillar 3, which focuses on stimulating the organic market by increasing demand and supporting the creation of new markets for organic products. The actions in this pillar include supporting producers with new direct sales channels which aim to increase producer earnings and raise consumer awareness. Furthermore, the government will also facilitate dialogue with the hotels, restaurants and catering sector and champion organic produce in public procurement. Efforts will be made to support and strengthen traceability and transparency along the organic value chain to further strengthen the sustainability credentials of organic farming and the EU organic logo.

Further to this, Malta's Action Plan for Organic Food is proposing a scheme that offers an incentive to landowners to lease agricultural land to farmers on condition that it is converted to organic farming. This type of private contractual agreement between the landowner and the farmer is now possible because of the recent amendments made to Chapter 199 of the laws of Malta. With this proposal, when the landowner leases agricultural land for organic farming for a 5-year period, they will receive a one-time flat-rate financial incentive that covers the first two years, followed by an annual payment proportional to the land area.

Keeping in line with the above, entities and service providers, such as the Public Abattoir are also increasing efforts to opt for more organic practices. The Public Abattoir launched the process to obtain organic certification for the slaughters line as well as for its cutting and deboning plants. This will ensure that all its operations are environmentally sustainable as well as enable local farmers who opt to invest in the organic rearing of their livestock, to be able to sell organic meat, at a premium. Complementing such efforts, the Public Abattoir has added a new species to its portfolio, cervids, enhancing the services it renders to farmers and enabling local farmers to invest in the production of higher value-added products. The Public Abattoir has also consolidated investment in an in-house chillers and refrigeration plant as well as a generator accompanied by a backup system to ensure that the chillers and refrigerators are continuously running and avoid the risks of outages or technical faults damaging local produce.



1.4.1.3 Agricultural Projects and Schemes

During 2023, the MFA continued with the implementation of the Pitkalija Reform. This involved consolidating the Sales and Marketing Agents by assigning refurbished sales areas, implementing new processes, and applying enforcement through the Surveillance Unit. The office of the Surveillance Unit was officially established and inaugurated within the MFA at the Ta' Qali Pitkalija on 23 June 2022. The priorities of the Surveillance Unit include fraud on local agricultural products (Pitkalija & Farmers Market), farmers market management, and marketing standards implementation. Throughout 2023, the MFA also worked on the design of a new farmers market which shall have all the necessary facilities both for the sellers and the consumers. Finally, the MFA is also actively involved in the design of a new Pitkalija, for which it engaged consultants, visited state-of-the-art markets similar to the Pitkalija and worked directly with architects and engineers to compile the first design of the new Pitkalija.

Further to this, during 2023, the MFA re-opened the Farmers Market at Kottonera, in the southern part of Malta. The Farmers Market is a place where local and seasonal produce is sold directly from farmers and producers to the consumer, aiming to bring affordable and fresh products to the consumers whilst maintaining a just income for producers. The Farmers Market at Kottonera stands not only as a marketplace but as a celebration of local agriculture and a commitment to supporting sustainable, farm-to-table practices. Complementary to this, the MFA also collaborates with the Home Economics BSc Course of the UM to organise events, produce material and transmit information on nutrition and healthy lifestyles by organising an annual event at the Farmers Market to reach out to the final consumers.

In addition to the Pitkalija Reform, MAFA and MEYR announced the launch of the second edition of the Let's Talk Farming Programme in 2023, 'Empowering Future Generations for a Sustainable Food System'. Building upon the resounding success of the first edition, this programme continues to be a crucial initiative aimed at promoting farming and food production in primary schools, further empowering future generations, and fostering a sustainable food system and culture. By delving deeper into the dynamics of food systems, the programme strives to enhance students' awareness of the interconnections between agriculture, nutrition, and environmental sustainability. Students will be encouraged to adopt responsible food consumption habits, contribute to the reduction of food waste, and understand their role in building a more sustainable future. The initiative features interactive lessons to cater to different learning styles and emphasises sustainable and eco-friendly farming practices. Children will also learn about the nutritional value of crops, fostering awareness of a balanced diet and its connection to farming. The initiative includes career exploration in agriculture and adopts an emergent curriculum approach, allowing flexibility based on students' unique interests to make learning more engaging and relevant. A total of forty-seven schools have participated in this programme, with a ceremony awarding the most deserving schools concluding the programme.

Another programme carried out in 2023 is the Pest Survey Programme, which was co-financed by the EC, and was envisaged to cover the monitoring of forty-eight different pests that attack a wide range of plants of agricultural, ornamental and landscaping importance. These pests are considered of importance at the EU level and were classified into three priority groups. Due to restrictions in the EU budget, Malta benefitted from the co-financing of forty pests, the work of which consisted of visual inspections, placing of traps, collection of samples and laboratory analysis of such samples. In 2023, the Agriculture Directorate through, the AgriHub project, launched the first five booklets with guidelines on the management of specific crops using Integrated Pest Management. Through these guidelines, farmers are guided with the best possible on-farm practices to minimise pesticides through rough physical and biological methods. These guidelines are expected to cover twenty-nine different crop types that are traditionally cultivated locally.

In relation to the Pest Survey Programme, during 2023, the PPD carried out nineteen additional surveys, which include *Acidovorax citrulli*, *Apate monachus*, *Citrus Bark Cracking Viroid*, *Tilletia tritici*, *Tilletia indica*, *Phoma tracheiphila*, *Drosophila suzukii*, *Erwinia amylovora*, *Leptinotarsa decemlineata*, *Pepino mosaic virus*, *Plum pox virus*, *Pterandrus rosa karsch*, *Spongospora subterranea*, *Tomato spotted wilt virus*, *Tomato yellow leaf curl virus*, *Paysandisia archon*, *Halyomorpha halys*, EU vectors of *Xylella fastidiosa*, *Xylosandrus compactus* and

Xylosandrus crassiusculus. Surveys include visual inspections, sample taking and testing. With respect to the Pest Survey Programme and plant monitoring, the total number of inspections carried out in 2023 was two thousand, fifty-four, and the total number of laboratory tests carried out in the same year was three thousand, ninety-one.

Apart from implementing programmes addressing pests, during 2023, the government also worked on a project relating to the impact of alien species on Malta's environment and biodiversity. Thus, through the Fight Alien Species Transborder (FAST) Interreg Italia-Malta project, which was co-financed by the ERDF, the PPD, in collaboration with the UM, worked to counteract the introduction, naturalisation and spread of alien invasive species that damage biodiversity in the Maltese archipelago. The interventions of the PPD focused on three selected Natura 2000 sites, namely the areas of Buskett and Girgenti, il-Magħluq ta' Marsaskala, and the areas of Xlendi and Kantra Valley on the island of Gozo.

Apart from the FAST project, European funds have also been used to finance the Self-Sufficient Integrated Multi-Trophic AquaPonic System (SIMTAP) project, which is being co-financed by the Horizon 2020 – R&I Framework Programme (2014-2020). The main aim of this project, which reached its fruition in June 2023, was to develop an ecosystem-based approach to the production of vegetable crops and fish in a circular economy perspective with applicability in different climate and production contexts.

In addition to the above, the government, through the Agriculture Directorate within MAFA is carrying out the Nitrates Action Programme. Through this programme, inspections are being conducted in relation to contamination of nitrates affecting groundwater coming from agricultural sources. Controls pertinent to the Nitrates Action Programme regulation ensure the appropriate management of fertilisers to be applied from organic waste in such a manner that is sustainable and ensures a balance in the input of nutrients so as to prevent waste of excessive fertilisers that will become detrimental to the environment through nitrogen emission.

In line with this, the government has increased its efforts in assisting farmers when it comes to sustainable fertilisation practices, particularly in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has contributed to significant increases in the cost of chemical and synthetic fertilisers. Therefore, the government issued this direct aid to partially support the increase in the cost of all chemical and synthetic fertilisers of land farmers in the context of the sudden unforeseen increased costs in production, in line with the provisions of the Temporary Crisis Framework for State Aid measures to support the economy following the aggression against Ukraine by Russia. Moreover, analysis has revealed that the effects of the Ukraine conflict on the prices of straw and dehydrated hay, which are the two most prevalently used components of forage feed, had led to increases estimated at 36% and 41% respectively in 2022 as compared to 2021. It is for this reason that MAFA is proposing a scheme to provide support to livestock sectors covered by Voluntary Coupled Support mechanisms, namely dairy production, beef production and sheep, as well as goat rearing.

In addition to efforts directed at alleviating difficulties faced by farmers, the government is working to strengthen the agricultural sector by offering schemes that promote the attractiveness of the industry with the younger generations. Agricultural production in Malta is characterised by an ageing farming community hindered by various factors that make a career in the agricultural sector unattractive to new generations. Young farmers face a wide array of barriers to entering agricultural activity, especially in obtaining land due to the high costs of purchasing or renting agricultural land. In Malta and Gozo, fragmentation of land, as a result of succession and inheritance, is another factor that makes the sector unattractive. Difficulties in obtaining loans for business investments, problems in accessing markets, and resistance from older farmers to pass on their experience to non-family individuals also pose struggles for new farmers to enter the industry. To alleviate these modern challenges and facilitate this transfer of knowledge, a training scheme for young farmers was launched, which enables young farmers to enter into an arrangement with an established local land farmer whereby under the coordination, supervision and guidance of MCAST, they will be spending an allocated number of hours assisting in the everyday work planned by the host farmers. The aim is for young farmers to attain the necessary experience both through hands-on training by an experienced farmer, as well as a structured theoretical approach and theoretical learning, and thus encourage potential individuals to enter the agricultural sector.

Further to the above, the government recognises that VET is crucial in preparing individuals for the green transition. To this end, a working group, composed of EU MS delegates, including Malta, was set up and represented by the Director for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and VET Programmes and the Education Officer for Agribusiness. This working group has been established and assigned the task of producing a document titled, VET and the Green Transition. This was published in June 2023, whereby a number of VET best practices, promoting sustainability and resilience, have been showcased including one local project titled, Reducing the Carbon Footprint in Agribusiness Education, which was carried out at Maria Regina College Mosta Żokrija Secondary.

1.4.1.4 Animal Health and Welfare

The Animal Health and Welfare Department has continued working on the implementation of the National Anti-Microbial Resistance Strategy and Action Plan for the Prevention and Containment of AMR in Malta (2020-2028) and tackled the strategic objectives within the strategy. In this regard, many measures have been implemented notably the enacting of legal notices (L.N.s) under the proposed bill amending CAP 437 effective from 28 December 2022. Four legal notices are currently in various stages of development. These are as follows:

- L.N. on Veterinary Medicinal Products (VMPs), which will contain provisions that will support articles in Regulation (EU) 2019/6 and will include provisions on wholesale dealing, prescription and dispensing. These are all essential provisions that provide control over on the use of VMPs, including antimicrobials;
- L.N. on Fees of VMPs;
- L.N. on Veterinary Pharmacies; and
- L.N. on Medicated, which will contain provisions that will support articles in Regulation (EU) 2019/4.

In collaboration with the UM's Agriculture Department, MAFA has implemented a programme to provide lectures on AMR to undergraduate agricultural students starting in 2024. Throughout 2023, AMR awareness was also heightened through various TV and radio broadcasts. Concurrently, educational sessions were conducted for diverse stakeholders, including wholesalers, poultry breeders, feed mill operators, pharmacists, as well as continuing professional development sessions. Internationally, discussion with the European Medicines Agency (EMA) on a promotional video with Maltese subtitles and voice-over in Maltese were concluded in 2023. While the video is about the Union Product Database, it also makes a reference to antibiotics.

The collection of information on the use of VMPs from farms during official inspections continued. The data is being provided in a timely manner and is in line with the stipulated timelines of the EMA for the reporting of data on sales of antimicrobials in animals. In 2023, the EC granted HAHEA funds for staffing the sales/use data collection initiative (SMP-FOOD-2022-AMR tool), resulting in the issuance of staff recruitment calls. Guidelines on the Animal Health Control Programme were also issued in September of 2023.

Furthermore, a project to upgrade of the National Veterinary Laboratory (NVL) is in progress aiming to provide diagnostic services and sensitivity tests for local stakeholders including private practices. Efforts to expand the AMR monitoring programme are detailed in the CAP Strategic Plan. Throughout 2023, the NVL continued working on strengthening surveillance and feedback systems on anti-microbial use and resistance in human and animal health. Work started on the restructuring and upgrading of the NVL extending its scope as per Agricultural Policy 2018-2028. In 2023, PA application PA 01752/23 was under review, with additional documents submitted, as per the PA's request, including fire safety, light and ventilation reports, visuals and transport planning point of view. Collaboration with the Mater Dei Molecular Biology Lab for the whole genome sequencing of Salmonella and Campylobacter isolates is ongoing. Additionally, in 2023 the NVL worked on extending the accreditation scope to include ELISA screening for Lincomycin, Streptomycin, and Gentamycin residues in poultry meat. The validation process for these test methods has reached the final stages.

Finally, in addition to the above, the government also introduced schemes directed at enhancing the wellbeing of animals and livestock on farms. The National Pig Welfare Scheme, for instance, grants aid to farmers undertaking certain specific actions that improve animal welfare on their farm. To be eligible, these actions must go beyond the relevant mandatory standards established under Article 3(1)(b) of the Minimum Standards for the Protection of Pigs Regulations (S.L. 439.02). This scheme will grant aid to swine producers for increased sow spacing allowance considerations for pig farms. The scheme is intended to be based on a multi-annual commitment for a period of up to five years, during which the farmers opting in would ensure that the stocking density and space available for sows would meet such dimensions as will be set out by the Veterinary Regulation Department within these guidelines and grant agreement for the scheme. In return, the farmers receive a predetermined annual payment based on a rate per sow benefitting from the scheme as determined within the grant agreement.

Apart from pig welfare, in 2023, the government also continued to work towards improving the health of bees and the beekeeping industry in Malta. In order to enhance the production and marketing of apiculture products, support is especially crucial to this sector whereby EU funds are sought in aid of beekeepers. The national co-financing rate for these interventions is 50%. Beekeeping is a sector within the agricultural sector, the main functions of which are economic activity and rural development, the production of honey and other products and the maintenance of an ecological balance. The objective of the apiculture interventions is to promote quality in honey production through actions that facilitate the dissemination of information and knowledge to beekeepers, control of diseases and support for the methods of production and quality control. These interventions contribute to the reduction of certain production costs while providing assistance in certain activities, which enable beekeepers to increase the benefit generated by apiculture products, contributing to ensuring a fair standard of living for beekeepers and thus increasing their earnings. In order to improve the production and marketing of apiculture products, support is especially crucial to this sector whereby EU funds are sought in aid of beekeepers. The national co-financing rate for these interventions is 50%.



1.4.1.5 Services offered to farmers

Throughout 2023, the government ensured that services offered to farmers are not only affordable, but also of good quality. The AgriConnect services, which are free of charge, help farmers and livestock breeders tackle any obstacles and technical problems that they encounter in their operations. This is done by providing them with the opportunity to seek specific personalised information and consultative advice, aimed at promoting diversification within their operations, producing higher-quality products and encouraging sectoral innovation. AgriConnect is strategically located within proximity to the relevant authorities whereby it intends to achieve an excellent collaborative approach between farmers and all relevant authorities pertinent to the rural sector, bridging farmers and stakeholders.

AgriConnect, in collaboration with AgriHub, is working to adapt and embrace new practices, processes and technologies that address new and future challenges being faced by the agricultural sector aimed at improving general agricultural methods, and increasing productivity, whilst also safeguarding the environment and biodiversity. AgriConnect is also responsible for conducting one-off projects and assessments in relation to particular events which would have impacted and affected the agricultural sector. AgriConnect also organises seminars on farm management and occupational health and safety training for any stakeholders working in the industry.

In addition, AgriConnect provides a number of farm extension services aimed at both farmers and livestock breeders in order to achieve the necessary expertise and technical knowledge which is continuously evolving. Particular effort is also made to increase their exposure to new and innovative farming products and techniques, aimed at increasing the quality and production of agricultural products whilst also making use of present resources in the best possible manner, safeguarding the environment. AgriConnect formulates tools, in line with legislative requirements, to allow the farmer to better understand the characteristics of their holdings and safeguard soil quality, allowing them to plan accordingly. In view of this, AgriConnect assists farmers when it comes to crop planning, soil testing, fertiliser planning, and record keeping.

1.4.2 Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture

The fishing sector in the Maltese Islands is a diverse one, with several biological, socio-economic, cultural and tourist dimensions. Although the Maltese and Gozitan sectors are small compared to the European fisheries sector, local fishermen play a very important role, in the provision of food. It is of utmost importance that consumers appreciate the contributions made by fishers to ensure the livelihoods of fishing communities and food security. Maltese and Gozitan fisheries are described as multi-gear fisheries, since various fishing gears are used to capture more than three hundred species of fish from Maltese waters, through the use of approximately one thousand vessels. Healthy biodiversity is essential for the fisheries sector to ensure the socio-economic aspect is a thriving one and that various marine trophic levels fulfil their ecological niches.

The Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture (DFA) within MAFA continued with the process of developing a National Fisheries Strategy for Malta. A total of thirty-seven consultations were organised between November 2022 and May 2023, with thirty-five organised in Malta and two in Gozo. Furthermore, as fishers utilise different fishing gears throughout the year and the catch is varied, the DFA is organising a number of consultation meetings (approximately forty-three meetings) in consultation with fishermen covering various topics mentioned below:

- To revise the current local fisheries legislation;
- To consult and create an environment where a healthy discussion can be held with professional and local fishers;
- To explore new methodologies to strengthen education in the fisheries sector;
- To design the National Fisheries Strategy, with the aim of incentivising local fishers and building the professional relationship between fishermen and the DFA; and
- To address and design the strategy in parallel with the work being done at the EU level.

This is also the DFA's mission to ensure the sustainability of fish species in the twenty-five nautical mile Fisheries Management Zone and address the requirements of the involved stakeholders, who work directly in the fisheries sector. Through these consultations, the traditional and ecological knowledge of fishers, as well as the scientific and economic knowledge of the DFA were combined, to ensure that the legal framework governing fisheries in our country promotes a promising and sustainable future for Maltese and Gozitan fishers. The information was collected in the form of qualitative data, while quantitative data from several surveys, onboard observations and projects implemented by the Fisheries Research Unit within the DFA were also compiled to formulate a national plan to manage the sector. Key issues that emerged were:

- Overfishing by some vessels;
- Conflicts with several maritime activities;
- High catch level, illegal sale of fish and lack of proper registration by recreational vessels;
- Employment of immigrant vessels;
- Encroachment of foreign vessels into Maltese waters; and
- The new Marsa Fish Market has not reached its full potential.

The fisheries sector has an ageing population. Several schemes and regulations were outlined together with a time plan of how the former and latter should be implemented, to ensure a better future for the local Maltese fisheries sector.

In 2023, for the fifth consecutive year, the DFA launched the Boat Restoration Scheme. The scheme entailed the provision of financial assistance to MFA (full-time fishermen) and MFB (part-time fishermen) category boat owners that have one of the traditional Maltese wooden vessels, these being *Firilla*, *Frejgatina*, *Kajjik*, and *Luzzu*.

In 2022, the DFA acquired approval from the EC to launch an aid measure to financially assist fishers due to the inflation of fuel prices, caused by the aggression against Ukraine by Russia. The proposed financial aid is considered appropriate to address the challenges presently faced by the fisheries sector due to the increase in fuel prices. In 2023, one hundred seventy-five micro-, small and medium-scale fishers benefitted from this scheme.

Furthermore, through the Sustainable Fishing Incentive Scheme, aimed to encourage fishers to adopt measures for sustainable fishing, fishermen were eligible to benefit from a financial income of up to €700 per vessel for the cost of purchasing environmentally friendly fishing gear. This project was concluded in 2023.

During 2023 work continued on the *Imrejkba* Pilot Project which was launched in 2021. *Imrejkba* fishing practice has been practised for several decades and was invented by local recreational fishers. Apart from other conditions, the recreational fishers had to fill out a logbook outlining their catch (species name and kilograms), their location, number of hooks, hook size and date and time. These logbooks were used by recreational fishers between August 2022 and May 2023. All the data collected from a total of one hundred eighty-three logbooks was analysed in order to include the necessary provisions under S.L. 425.01 to legalise this fishing gear. Discussions also started on creating an online web license to eliminate the use of the *Imrejkba* paper logbooks.

Malta also participated in the EU Horizon project NETTAG+ which aimed to provide a portfolio of three suitable innovative smart and sustainable solutions to prevent, avoid and mitigate the negative impacts of abandoned, lost, discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) on marine life and habitats. These three solutions were tested, validated and demonstrated in real conditions in Atlantic and Mediterranean countries, namely Portugal, United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Croatia and Malta. This project was concluded in 2023.

In the area of aquaculture, Malta continued to participate in the BIORAS (Bio-secure Recirculating Aquaculture System) SHRIMP, ERA-NET BlueBio COFUND, co-financed by Horizon 2020 – R&I programme (2014-2020), which was launched in the forth quarter of 2022 and shall be concluded in the forth quarter of 2024. This project aims to develop and test an innovative bio-secure, land-based sustainable shrimp culture model to minimise waste, enhance productivity and recover energy and nutrients for additional biomass production, in view of a circular economy process.

1.5 Investing in Sustainable Finance for a Greener and Climate-Neutral Economy

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
8.2	Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value-added and labour-intensive sectors
8.3	Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalisation and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services
8.8	Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment
8.10	Strengthen the capacity of domestic financial institutions to encourage and expand access to banking, insurance and financial services for all
12.6	Encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle
13.a	Implement the commitment undertaken by developed-country parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to a goal of mobilising jointly \$100 billion annually by 2020 from all sources to address the needs of developing countries in the context of meaningful mitigation actions and transparency on implementation and fully operationalise the Green Climate Fund through its capitalisation as soon as possible
17.14	Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development

On the 21 August 2023, MSE had the listing of Malta’s first Green Bond, launched by WSC at a value of €25 million, through its subsidiary ClearFlowPlus plc. The proceeds from this bond will be used for financing a range of eco-conscious initiatives, including the reverse osmosis plant at Ffondoq ir-Rummien, the establishment of solar farms, improvements in wastewater treatment aeration, reduction of non-revenue water, enhancements in billing efficiencies and upgrades to water network infrastructure.

Since sustainability poses both a direct and indirect risk to the financial sector and recognising that the EC’s agenda aims towards the attainment of a sustainable financial system as a long-term investment, the Malta Financial Services Authority (MFSA) has identified sustainable finance as a key priority in its strategy plan for Malta’s financial services system going forward. The global dimension of financial sustainability risks, underpinned by interconnected financial markets, calls for coordinated action on all fronts to create standardised reporting and risk management for all financial players concerned. In this context, MFSA supports the view towards the development of a harmonised and efficient international framework on this subject and remains committed to contributing in this area through the relevant working groups set up under the European Supervisory Authorities (ESAs) and other fora as required.

Further to the above, sustainable finance has also been recognised as one of MFSA’s key objectives in its strategic statement issued in January 2023, recognising that this is a globally driven, systemic development that demands priority attention. The Authority’s efforts in the short- to medium-term will continue to concentrate on developing its capacities to meet the supervisory responsibilities in this area, integrate ESG market monitoring and risk assessment into its supervisory processes, and develop the tools to ensure transparency and tackle greenwashing. This is being done in full engagement with the ESAs and the EC to ensure convergence and adopt a best-practice approach in this area.

Sustainable finance is also one of the three cross-sectoral themes in focus as included in the MFSA Supervisory Priorities 2023. In particular, the requirements emanating from the applicable legislative instruments relating to sustainable finance have also been integrated into its supervisory work programme for the year. Other work is being undertaken with a view to adopting a more holistic and strategic approach to sustainable finance for our national context. To this end, in 2021, an internal working group on sustainable finance was set up within the MFSA for overall coordination on the ongoing debate and the requirements that ensue requiring policy input and implementation. This working group is also tasked with identifying current gaps and risks, so as to propose ad hoc measures going forward. It provides advisory and technical assistance to the Authority. Such support is necessary primarily to share expertise, and knowledge and ideally train staff working on the related policy area, in the form of hands-on capacity building and the development of a risk-based approach. It would also facilitate the required feedback at an international level, in formulating positions as well as accompanying the political process paving the way towards a harmonised European regulatory framework on this topic in line with the EC’s strategy. The review of the information collected indicates that despite the willingness of licence holders, both knowledge and resources are yet to be specifically allocated and developed in all sectors and therefore the state of compliance was still fragmented at the time, with a high level of commitment noted amongst investment firms to integrate environment, social and governance considerations in their decision-making in the future.

The MFSA aims to increase awareness of sustainable finance among the entities under its supervision as well as to establish closer partnerships with other regulators. The Authority is working with stakeholders, including other national competent authorities and the ESAs in order to increase awareness and share best practices in the area of supervision.

Earlier in 2023, the MFSA published its assessment of website disclosures made by licence holders under the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulations. The document lays out the MFSA’s findings and observations, highlights examples of good practices and areas for improvement and sets out its high-level expectations in this area. In the meantime, the Authority has also published the results of a research study carried out on Climate Transition Risk quantifying the Impact of Carbon Taxation on the Investment Portfolio of Financial Institutions. This study aims to contribute to the growing strand of literature on climate transition risk and quantifies the financial losses arising on the investment portfolio should a carbon tax be introduced. The study observed that

losses driven by climate transition through various simulations would overall be limited albeit a few Maltese financial institutions could experience noteworthy losses.

In addition, the MFSA together with the national competent authorities of Croatia, Poland, and Romania, is participating in a EC TSI multi-country project, which will provide technical support on supervisory capacity enhancement in sustainable finance. This project is expected to enable the MFSA to continue strengthening its capacity to develop and implement reforms in the area of EU sustainability disclosure and reporting regime while supporting supervisory convergence among competent authorities in the implementation of this framework.

Further to this, in October 2023, the Authority organised a Sustainable Finance Conference. The conference brought together esteemed scholars, industry leaders, and regulatory authorities to delve into critical topics surrounding sustainable finance and the green transition. In addition, the Authority also participated in related events and external forums to engage with stakeholders and discuss upcoming regulations. The Authority remains committed to actively participating in the relevant fora conscious of the fact that only by ensuring the uniformity of rules at the European and International level can the financial markets facilitate cross-border investment and contribute meaningfully towards the achievement of SDGs. To this end, the MFSA has already been participating for some time in various standing committees by the ESAs. In addition, the MFSA also participates in the Network for Greening the Financial System, specifically, in relation to a macro-financial workstream.



Chapter 2

Towards the Preservation of Sustainable Urban Development and Cultural Heritage

The demographic landscape and population dynamics of Maltese society are constantly undergoing changes, especially considering the increase in the proportion of elderly citizens and migrants. In this regard, the gap between different age groups within the community shall be bridged by actively encouraging interactions, learning experiences and mutual understanding between generations. Effectively addressing these shifts presents an opportunity to turn demographic challenges into avenues for sustainable development. Further to this, Malta's ever-increasing population, combined with limited space, have resulted in intensified urbanisation. To this end, Malta is undertaking efforts for ensuring sustainable urban development, enhancing further green infrastructure and spaces and encouraging green mobility.

Cultural heritage provides citizens with a sense of identity, inclusion and unity; in fact, it is now acknowledged as the cornerstone of social cohesion and stability. Malta's cultural legacy and traditions, therefore, play a vital role in fostering the social, environmental, and economic progress of the Maltese Islands. Collaboration between cultural associations, organisations, and entities, both nationally and internationally, to enhance the cultural sector in Malta and Gozo are essential. Expanding cultural relations will open new opportunities for job creation, enhance heritage skills, and contribute to the advancement of various industries, including tourism. This can be seen through the diverse array of cultural events and activities organised over the year. Additionally, implementation of new mechanisms, regulations, and procedures for managing cultural and urban heritage is a prerequisite in order to strike the right balance between preserving cultural heritage and promoting urban development.

Within the framework of the government's efforts in line with the 2030 Agenda, this chapter will focus on actions related to SDGs 1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15.

2030 AGENDA RELATED GOALS



2.1 Placing Culture and Heritage at the Heart of the Development of Our Local Communities

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
4.4	By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
4.7	By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture’s contribution to sustainable development
8.9	By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products
9.4	By 2030, upgrade infrastructure and retrofit industries to make them sustainable, with increased resource-use efficiency and greater adoption of clean and environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes, with all countries taking action in accordance with their respective capabilities
11.4	Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage
12.8	By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature
12.b	Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promote local culture and products
13.2	Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning
14.1	By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution
14.2	By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience, and taking action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans
14.5	By 2020, conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law and based on the best available scientific information
15.9	By 2020, integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts

2.1.1 Hospitality, Tourism and the Film Industry

The then Ministry for Tourism, together with the MTA, continued with the implementation of the National Tourism Strategy 2021-2030 entitled *Recover, Rethink, Revitalize*.

Many actions related to the ‘Economic’ and ‘Governance and Implementation’ themes in the same Strategy have already been implemented while others are in the process of being implemented. Through the assistance

of the EC DG Reform and OECD through the TSI, the National Statistics Office (NSO) has been engaged in the regular production and publication of a Tourism Satellite Account for Malta. Furthermore, the Malta Tourism Observatory was established on 29 September 2023 and the Annual Tourism Conference took place on 6 December 2023, both actions sought by the Strategy. With regard to actions which are still in progress, a number of specialised studies related to human resources, Gozo, Geographical mark plan, accommodation, KPIs and Segmentation amongst others have been commissioned.

The Malta Tourism Observatory, in collaboration with MTA’s Research Unit, is also working with the French company Murmuration in the creation of a dashboard providing real-time data on a number of air, land and sea- related variables linked to identified SDGs which are impacted by tourism.

In terms of sustainable tourism growth, the UN World Tourism Organization World Tourism Barometer confirmed that the tourism industry around the world was back on track and recovered almost 90% of pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2023. In fact, Europe welcomed five hundred fifty million international tourists over the period, which makes up 56% of the global total and represents 94% of pre-pandemic levels. In Malta, official data shows that by the third quarter of 2023, there was an increase of 20% in bed nights when compared to the same period in 2022.

The Extended-Stay Incentive Scheme for the accommodation sector in Gozo offers an incentive to tourists to visit Gozo during the low season and spend a minimum of ten nights in one of the participating accommodation properties. This sustains efforts in promoting Gozo as an experiential destination as opposed to a day-trip visit. Moreover, the scheme has the intention to sustain operators within the tourism industry who encounter decreased business activities in certain periods of the year. A total of thirty applications were received where financial disbursement will take place in 2024. To further incentivise tourism in Gozo, another scheme is in place supporting the adventurous tourism industry through Hiring Equipment Refunds. This scheme provides operators within the adventurous tourism niche with a partial cash grant to stimulate further investment in eco-friendly and zero-emissions equipment hired by clients. The then MGOZ covers up to 50% of the eligible equipment pertaining to the eligible activities, up to a maximum of €5,000 for each approved application per calendar year. In 2023, a total of €14,423.50 was disbursed from funds allocated under this scheme.

Furthermore, the scheme ‘Restoring and Upgrading Venues with the Capacity to Host MICE Events’ in Gozo aims to provide aid to private undertakings and voluntary organisations in restoring and upgrading venue facilities to enhance the capabilities of hosting qualitative MICE events in Gozo. The overall maximum that applicants can obtain is capped at €50,000 and €25,000 for voluntary organisations and private businesses respectively. In 2023, a total of €47,261.81 was disbursed from funds under this scheme.

Similarly, the ‘Supporting Marketing Initiatives for Specific Niche Markets in Gozo’ Scheme promotes and kindles investment in particular niche markets through marketing campaigns by increasing awareness of the niche market and related activities, developing applicants’ brands on an international level, enhancing Gozo’s branding value and further stimulating investment in the quality of the local product. This scheme supports marketing initiatives falling under two categories: participation in specialised fairs/events abroad and/or advertising on an international level, covering up to 75% of the eligible expenditure capped at a maximum of €3,000 or €4,000 if falling under either one or both categories respectively. In 2023, a total of €26,000 was disbursed under this scheme.

The ‘Supporting Marketing Initiatives for the Accommodation Sector in Gozo’ Scheme supports domestic and international digital marketing initiatives by accommodation providers in Gozo. Accommodation providers are encouraged to invest in continuous and intensive professional digital marketing for the attraction of sustainable high-quality tourism and the overall promotion of the VisitGozo brand. The then MGOZ covers up to 65% of the eligible expenditure for undertaking a digital marketing campaign, up to a maximum of €8,000. In 2023, a total of €54,506.59 was disbursed from funds allocated under this scheme.

To further incentivise tourism in Gozo, another scheme is in place supporting the adventurous tourism industry through Hiring Equipment Refunds. This scheme provides operators within the adventurous tourism niche with a partial cash grant to stimulate further investment in eco-friendly and zero-emissions equipment hired by clients. The then MGOZ covers up to 50% of the eligible equipment pertaining to the eligible activities, up to a maximum of €5,000 for each approved application per calendar year. In 2023, a total of €14,423.50 was disbursed from funds allocated under this scheme.

To meet the needs of the growing tourism industry continuous investments must also be made in those working in such sectors. For instance, ITS embarked on a project to construct a new campus for tourism studies. This will contribute to increasing the quality of education provided whilst investing in the future generation of people working in the tourism industry. The excavation stage is nearing completion and currently, a process is underway to assess the various options with respect to the issue of tenders. This is being done in conjunction with the professional services contractor. Other actions undertaken by the MTA during the year 2023 to address investment in HR include Safety and Security (S&S) Training. This is a fundamental aspect to ensure the wellbeing of both the employee and the tourist. An adequate number of employees need to receive S&S Training such as first aid courses and fire warden courses, to ensure that at least one member of the staff per shift is adequately trained in S&S. In 2023, First Aid Courses were coordinated by the MTA in both Malta and Gozo and offered to employees working in hotels, restaurants, visitor attractions and destination management companies.

The diving industry is an important niche in Malta as it attracts high volumes of tourists to the island throughout the year, particularly due to Malta's favourable weather conditions. Divers are always on the lookout for new underwater attractions, and the Hephaestus tanker, which ran around Malta in 2018, was an ideal vessel to be scuttled in Maltese waters. The Hephaestus vessel was cleaned from fuel, lubricants, and equipment, and eventually scuttled off ix-Xatt L-Aħmar in Gozo in August 2022. The 855-tonne vessel is now resting at around 40m below sea level, making this an ideal wreck for advanced-level divers, accessible both from shore and by boat. This new artificial reef is expected to attract sea life and will act as a nursery for smaller fish while allowing marine life in the area to thrive.

Furthermore, the then MGOZ commissioned a technical study to assess the potential development of a Sculptural Underwater Museum in Gozo. This study was finalised in the fourth quarter of 2023 and further technical studies are required to ensure that a decision to proceed or otherwise is based on the utmost scientific and diligent method.

With a view to further consolidate the local tourism product, the MTA is working to identify lesser-known areas which can be regenerated for tourism. Furthermore, the MTA is also currently reforming the eco-certification label for tourism accommodation. This certification aims to improve the sustainable performance of tourism accommodation on the Maltese Islands and the MTA has already signed MoUs with Green Key International and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council in December 2023.

In 2023, the Continental Shelf Department worked on a guidebook for geological walks around the Maltese Islands.

In addition to the tourism industry, over the past four years, investments have also been made to drastically improve the infrastructure of the Malta Film Studios, namely, the ongoing measures pertaining to the building of the new offices, the procurement and installation of new compressors and the building of a new soundstage. The Malta Film Commission is also working and collaborating with various educational bodies, entities, and institutions to ensure that this sector has clear training and continuous professional development pathways. In view of this, during 2023, a number of courses were offered.



2.1.2 Culture, Traditions and Arts

In 2023, cultural, traditional and entertaining events continued to be organised across Malta and Gozo. One such event is the Imnarja festivities. The main scope of the Imnarja festivities is to continue reviving the activities and agricultural festivals that serve as a showcase of local products. In 2023, the Imnarja programme was filled with several activities between 24 June and 29 June.

The 2023 edition of The Malta International Fish Fest was held in Mellieħa and Marsaxlokk in September 2023. This event is dedicated to celebrating Maltese and Gozitan traditions related to fishing. The Malta International Fish Fest was held at Fisherman's Wharf, Marsaxlokk on 30 September 2023, and in Mellieħa near the Museum of Tuna Catchers on 1 October 2023. Similar to past Malta International Fish Fests, the 2023 event entailed the sale of fish, and even the cooking and promotion of traditional fish typically caught in local waters, such as sea bass, sea bream, tuna, dolphinfish (*lampuki*), dogfish (*mazzoli*), and rays. The local communities of Marsaxlokk and Mellieħa participated in this event through the setting up of a number of educational stands. The priority of such events is to preserve our fishermen's skills and history and to have a healthy aquaculture sector, which in turn helps strengthen the product in hotels, restaurants, and other industries.

The then MGOZ launched a cultural programme with various cultural activities including the Gozo Arts Weekend, Valentine's in Gozo, the Regional Carnival, Easter in Gozo, the Spring Fair, the Honey & Bee Festival, Gozo Pops & Rocks, Lejl Imkebbes, Summer in Gozo, the Film Festival, the Ceramics Festival, Rock Legends, Opera in Gozo, the Kite Festival, the Sweet Tooth Festival, the Mixegħla tal-Qaddisin, Christmas in Gozo and the New Year's Eve celebrations. A number of *għana* activities were also organised around the villages in Gozo. These events provided opportunities for several Maltese and Gozitan singers and guitarists to entertain people in the main squares on Sunday mornings.

A scheme has been launched to sustain Carnival as a cultural activity that attracts an audience from Gozo, Malta and abroad, through which designers and organisations were financially assisted to rent a facility in which to build carnival floats.

In addition, the Gozo Cultural Events Fund has also been re-launched. This is a measure incentivising creative and artistic activities led by the community in Gozo. The fund co-finances projects that encourage active cultural participation, promote local talent and boost the creative expression of the community or the appreciation of its identity. Building on the work done in previous years, exchanges between Maltese and Gozitan artists, the production of creative initiatives and the organisation of an Artists' Residency Programme were carried out in 2023.

Furthermore, Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ (AŻ), as part of its Empowerment Programme, developed a programme through which young people are empowered to nurture their artistic and cultural talents. During 2023, the agency had quite a diverse programme consisting of:

- 'Chiasmus', a project created to encourage young people who love English literature and writing in English to develop their writing skills and talents;
- 'Kjażmu', which had the same objectives as Chiasmus but targeted Maltese literature enthusiasts;
- 'Young Composers', a joint initiative between AŻ and Pjazza Teatru Rjal that provided young people with the opportunity to be mentored by some of Malta's leading composers and professionals in the field of the music industry who will, in turn, act as a source of inspiration for a selected number of young composers;
- The 'Konkurs ta' Kitba – Letteratura għaž-Żgħażaġħ', which was a writing contest that selects, rewards and publishes Maltese novels written for young adolescent readers between 13 and 18 years. This programme is organised in collaboration with the National Book Council Malta;
- 'ideARTI', a project-based programme offered in collaboration with the Malta School of Arts intended to support young creatives in developing a final artwork that reflects their personal artistic language;
- The Malta Youth Film Festival, a joint collaboration of AŻ and the Malta Film Foundation that offers a platform for young film-makers to encourage them to submit their films for awards;

- Songcraft, a joint collaboration between AŻ and Spazju Kreattiv that was developed to encourage young singer-songwriters to develop their creative skills and preparedness for the music industry through mentorship and guidance by established and successful artists in the field; and
- Shifting Contexts, which is another collaboration with Spazju Kreattiv. This is a visual art project aimed at exploring the critical role of art in responding to a rapidly changing world and to contribute to contemporary discourse. Shifting Contexts encourages young artists to develop a creative proposal responding to a specific theme.



2.1.3 Restoring and Preserving Malta’s Heritage

During 2023, the Cultural Heritage Directorate within the then MGOZ continued to implement a number of projects targeting the tangible and intangible cultural heritage in Gozo. To give more importance to the intangible heritage (musical heritage), an investment in digital and interactive tools was made whereby six musical benches were placed in Villa Rundle, in Victoria. Additionally, an on-the-road cultural exhibition involving totem displays was launched. This exhibition toured every village in Gozo to increase awareness of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of its villages.

Several restoration projects across Gozo continued, including those at Għar Gerduf, the ancient 3rd/4th century Roman burial site excavated in the rock in the limits of Kerċem and the Aqueducts, located outside the limits of Victoria, which were built by the British between 1839 and 1843 to transport water from the springs in Għar Ilma to the reservoirs under the Citadel. Additionally, projects have been undertaken at Sdieri Bridge, leading to the Sanctuary of Ta’ Pinu, in Għarb and the Citadel, where a geological study of the Citadel ramparts is underway and restoration work has been carried out on the outer walls that surround the Cultural Centre. Furthermore, the Cultural Heritage Directorate continued the exploration of the remains and findings of the Punic treasure outside Xlendi as part of an agreement with the UM. The EcoGozo Directorate within the then MGOZ designed an additional scheme in 2023 whereby Gozitan LCs and Administrative Committees will be awarded grants to carry out projects leading to the restoration of structures and other immovable monuments of historic and/or artistic value and/or projects for rejuvenation through enhancement, resurfacing, embellishment, lighting and greening of existing alleyways that are located within their delineated boundaries.

Another important restoration project is the one undertaken by the Mediterranean Conference Centre (MCC). This project, co-financed by the EU, involved the restoration and upgrading of the MCC to enhance the visitor experience and increase tourism attendance at this location which is one of Malta’s foremost historical sites. During 2023, refurbishment and restoration works were carried out in the Slaves Halls, combined shelter and overlying piazza. Mechanical, electrical and extra-low voltage works of the La Valette & Slaves Halls at the MCC were also carried out during 2023.

In addition, the SCH continued with its works to promote the rehabilitation, restoration, conservation and sustainable use of the Maltese-built heritage. The protection of external spaces is also an ongoing practice within the SCH. Furthermore, through its role as the regulator for cultural heritage, the SCH oversees the updating of the national inventory of movable and immovable heritage, which is sustained through various data capture exercises and research. The SCH is also a stakeholder in the PA and is consulted on all development applications and endeavours to promote sustainable uses of traditional houses and recommends buildings for scheduling to the PA. The SCH also engages with local clean-up crews and NGOs, assisting and providing guidance when any cultural heritage assets are discovered during their activities. The SCH also provides guidance to applicants, architects, and conservators on best practices and promotes the reuse of traditional building materials, such as dressed limestone blocks and *deffun*, which are sustainable and eco-friendly. This limits the reliance on manufactured materials, whilst promoting local craftsmanship.

Additionally, the SCH in conjunction with the Malta Competition and Consumer Affairs Authority issued several standards related to cultural heritage. These standards relate to conservation, archaeological investigation, and museology and aim to increase awareness of cultural heritage and achieve standardisation across this sector. The SCH also issues Guardianship Deeds and loan agreements wherein immovable and movable cultural heritage is leased out to local cultural NGOs for them to care for, restore, and make these sites and artefacts accessible to the public.

The PA periodically issues schemes whereby it grants financial aid to restore facades and even properties that have a certain value so that we can preserve buildings of a certain value. This will improve and protect the urban and historical image and characteristic setting of Urban Conservation Area (UCA) within our cities and towns. A new scheme for Grade 1 and 2 Scheduled Buildings was issued in November 2023 which will affect some seventy scheduled residential properties, whilst the number of applications received was one hundred sixty-two.

The other scheme for UCA facades (including historic balconies) will affect some four hundred four UCA habitations. The applications received for this scheme for the rehabilitation and renovation of facades consisted of approximately eight hundred applications.

The PA also dedicated funds for the restoration of heritage and historical features around Malta and Gozo, given that these form an integral part of the character of the traditional towns and villages. The following projects commenced in various towns and villages:

Project Ref	Proposal	Applicants	Amount
LCF/91A/18	The Construction and setting up of a cultural and info centre in Ġnien l-Istazzjon.	Attard LC	€199,758.67
GS/50035A/2021	To carry out repairs at the back garden wall – no alterations or changes proposed.	Socjeta Sant’ Andrija and Lija LC	€5,723.00
GS/50036A/2021	Maintenance of timber balcony, apertures and wrought iron.	Socjeta Mużikali San Pio X and Lija LC	€6,490.00
GS/50006A/2022	Restoration of Parish Church of St Sebastian Qormi using an external protective coating.	Parrocca San Bastjan and Reġjun Nofsinhar	€82,128.00
GS/50040/2021	Restoration of the façade of Bishop’s House and Church Belfry.	Holy Trinity Anglican Church – Sliema LC	€34,754.00
GS/50014A/2022	Installation of lift as part of the setting up of Victor Pasmore Gallery and the promotion of education and facilitation of community initiatives in relation to the Maltese modern art movement of the 20 th century.	Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti	€20,000.00
GS/50034A/2021	Joint application: Restoration of the wooden balcony, timber apertures and iron railings. Replacement of stone balusters and timber flagpole to fibre.	Lija Athletic FC and Lija LC	€9,794.00

GS/50027/2022	Joint application: Restoration of external walls and parvis, and internal restoration and arcade (arch) by the parvis - Knisja tal-Kunċizzjoni L/o Rabat Malta.	Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Kulturali tal-Arċidjoċesi ta' Malta – Rabat (Malta) LC	€196,900.00
GS/50007/2023	The restructuring of a residential and a pedestrian area which is located very close to the main historic attraction in Pjazza l-Għejun, Fontana. The project will enhance the unique characteristics of the typical alleys in Fontana.	Fontana LC	€17,000.00
GS/50037A/2021	To excavate the existing cellar to achieve clear internal height and cleaning of internal walls, rendering of internal walls and installation of new lighting system to the oratory building.	Arċikonfraternita tas-Santissimu Kurċifiss, Valletta	€5,145.58
GS/50009A/2021	Construction of entrance hall for lift at ground floor level; Installation of a four-storey lift; and construction openings on each floor. The project includes the installation of a stair lift on the second floor.	Għaqda Mużikali Marija Bambina Vittorja, Naxxar	€67,500.00
GS/50007A/2021	Project at Teatru Sależjan Sliema, which includes the installation of new apertures, maintenance façade which includes two balconies, to the metal works surrounding the existing garden and moving of trees.	Teatru Sależjan and Sliema LC	€230,072.07
GS/50005/2023	Joint application – Valletta LC - St Paul's Shipwreck Parish. Restoration of the main façade of the Parish Church of St Paul's Shipwreck.	Knisja Kolleġjata – San Pawl – Valletta LC	€194,776.57

GS/50016/2023	Joint application to construct and finish the second floor, install a comprehensive security system and improve facilities to create a safer environment.	Għaqda Immakulata Kunċizzjoni - Ħamrun LC	€203,200.00
GS/50030/2023	Joint application for internal alterations to existing band club including proposed installation of lift proposed Class 4D at ground floor and roof level, minor alterations and lounge area.	Għaqda Mużikali San Gużepp - Kalkara LC	€32,000.00
GS/50031/2023	The joint application between Birkirkara LC and Soċjeta Filippu Borgia to erect two statues on either side of the church, commemorating the founding members of St Helen Kolleġjata. This is an upgrade to the full application of LCF/27/2020.	Soċjeta Dun Filippo Borgia and Birkirkara LC	€139,240.00
GS/50012A/2021	The joint application between Mosta Parish Church and Mosta Gunners for the redevelopment of that part of the complex was identified as the 'Cathecism Wing' within the Oratorju Qalb ta' Gesù complex.	Mosta Bażilika and Mosta Gunners ASC	€388,500.00

When it comes to the Maltese culinary heritage, the valorisation of Malta's meat-based culinary and gastronomic heritage is one of the key pillars being undertaken by the Public Abattoir to support the local agri-meat sector. This is being done through several work strands including a team of four history students working on various historical aspects related to the meat industry in Malta and other aspects of intangible heritage related to Maltese culinary traditions and the cultures which surround food consumption in Malta. Aside from traditional research in the archives, which also included digitisation of files, a variety of Oral History interviews were conducted to be stored in the Memorja Archive to be preserved for future generations.

Similar work is being undertaken on a whole range of products such as *kirxa*, *animelli*, *mindil* and *tuguni*. A collaboration was entered into with the Malta Chef Society to help valorise traditional Maltese meat-based products, including through the aforesaid facilitation of dedicated competitions in Malta Kulinarja. An article on traditional Maltese *mazzit* also appeared on the Michelin Guide website. The Public Abattoir led the participation in various events across the Maltese Islands to help encourage the rediscovery of traditional local meat dishes which were at risk of being lost and enabling younger generations as well as tourists to taste and appreciate Maltese culinary heritage.

2.2 Sustainable Urban Planning and Development for Liveable and Resilient Towns and Villages

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
1.5	By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters
6.b	Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management
8.1	Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries
9.1	Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and transborder infrastructure, to support economic development and human wellbeing, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all
9.4	By 2030, upgrade infrastructure and retrofit industries to make them sustainable, with increased resource-use efficiency and greater adoption of clean and environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes, with all countries taking action in accordance with their respective capabilities
11.1	By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums
11.2	By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons
11.3	By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanisation and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries
11.5	By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations
11.6	By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management
11.7	By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities
11.a	Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning

11.b	By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and development and implementation, in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, the holistic disaster risk management at all levels
13.1	Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries
13.3	Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning

While acknowledging Malta's increasing population and urbanisation trends, the government is committed to continue creating sustainable and resilient urban spaces. To this end, several efforts have been made with particular focus on spatial planning, greening of buildings and infrastructure, creating green and accessible open spaces, and maintaining clean urban spaces.

From a spatial planning perspective, the PA is currently carrying out a review of its Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development (SPED) which will provide the basis for future planning and development for the use of the land and sea. The SPED makes proposals for the future spatial distribution of development and the protection of the environment, in a manner that is consistent with national policies, and integrates the government's social, economic and environmental objectives. The SPED is thus an enabling plan to increase the competitiveness of the Maltese Islands in a manner where socio-economic development assists the achievement of national environment objectives. It also forms the primary basis for decisions on development, transport and environmental permit applications.

In terms of regulating urban environment, ERA, together with PA, is in the process of developing guidelines for the reduction of light pollution. Furthermore, between 1 November 2022 and 15 August 2023, ERA's Environmental Assessment Unit processed various consultations from other public authorities/entities, as follows:

- On a strategic level, Strategic Environmental Assessment consultations (whereby public authorities preparing draft plans and programmes screen their policies, in liaison with ERA, in view of their potential environmental impacts) were processed. Where the environmental impacts are considered to be major, more detailed environmental studies are carried out to mitigate such impacts at the policy stage, i.e., before the design and materialisation of more specific projects. During the same period, three additional scoping consultations for the preparation of an Appropriate Assessment (a study of potential significant impacts on Natura 2000 sites) in connection with an emerging plan, were processed.
- On a more case-specific project level, ERA received a total of five thousand, three hundred eighty-eight consultations on applications for development permission from the PA. Two thousand, two hundred thirty-eight consultations required a more in-depth evaluation of their environmental impacts, some of which required more detailed environmental studies. ERA's EIA screening procedure entailed the processing of Project Description Statements (sixteen cases) and reviews on the basis of criteria in Schedule III of the EIA Regulations (twenty cases), some of which also required Appropriate Assessment screenings (five cases). During this period, ERA requested two new EIA studies. ERA reviewed two EIA reports and concluded another case with an EIA final assessment. ERA was also involved in reviewing and providing early feedback to applicants on their development intentions at the pre-application stage i.e., before the planning application is formally submitted to the PA.
- The Authority also processes other types of consultations involving direct interventions on land. These include TM's consultations for proposed road works, trenching operations and related works, ranging from minor localised interventions to major infrastructural works. During the stipulated period, ERA processed a total of one thousand, eight hundred eighty consultations from TM.
- ERA also screened fourteen funding proposals given their potential impacts on the environment.

With particular focus on residential units and within the scope of more liveable spaces, in 2023, the HA carried out refurbishment and repair work in approximately sixty vacant residential dwellings. Works were carried out either directly by HA contractors or by means of a financial grant given to the new tenants. Through this renovation work, these properties, mostly situated in urban cores and housing estates, were rendered habitable and fit for allocation to social housing applicants. In 2023, the HA carried out regeneration projects in various housing estates comprising the renovation of facades, roofs and other improvement works in the common areas and improving the urban environment within these estates. In total, ninety-six blocks were completed with an expenditure of €3.42m.

The then MFE has also continued to implement a scheme which is aimed to assist people buying their first residential property in the Maltese Islands as well as a scheme which addressed the regeneration and restoration of abandoned and dilapidated properties. Additionally, S.L. 364.19 aims to provide an exemption of duty on the purchase of vacant properties in UCAs or of properties built in a traditional style. First-time buyers who purchase a property which has been built for twenty years or more and vacant for at least seven years either in a UCA area or which shall be built in traditional Maltese architecture will be entitled to receive a grant.

Aligning with the government's goals of achieving a high-quality living environment and having well-maintained towns and villages, in 2023, the Cleansing and Maintenance Division (CMD) embarked on a project to procure a number of energy-efficient street-sweeping vehicles. In total, twenty-three pedestrian sweepers, ten compact sweepers, four city sweepers, fifteen electric robot floor scrubbers, and five electric robot floor sweepers were procured. The aim is to gradually replace the existing fossil-fuel-powered sweeping vehicles with fully electric equivalents to allow atmospheric emissions of CO₂ and other gases to be reduced to an absolute minimum.

These sweeping vehicles allow for more targeted cleaning of roads at a longer distance range. CMD sweeping equipment is fully mechanised and can take various shapes, from smaller pedestrian sweepers to truck-mounted versions, depending on their use and the kind of roads being targeted for cleaning. During the last five years, the Division has also been making use of compact sweepers which fall in the medium range of this equipment. Compact sweepers are especially useful for use in town and village squares, as well as in secondary roads, because their size renders them efficient in sweeping without being invasive to the area where they are operating. The city sweeper is a new category of equipment which the CMD has purchased for the first time and which is slightly larger than a pedestrian sweeper but smaller than a compact sweeper.

During 2023, discussions also progressed on the reconstitution of the Town Centre Management (TCM) Committee for Paceville. The scope of this committee is to coordinate with stakeholders regarding the management of the area to provide a better place in terms of safety, cleanliness, internal movement of people and vehicles and the mix of services offered. As part of the efforts by the TCM to improve the general ambience in Paceville, information was collated, and the application document was prepared for the UK-based accreditation of the Purple Flag. This accreditation process will provide best practices for the entertainment and leisure hubs, thus aiming for a general improvement in the area that shall affect over three hundred service providers in Paceville and the several thousands of visitors to the area. It is expected that the formal application for the Purple Flag accreditation will be submitted in 2024.

2.2.1 Urban Green and Embellishment Projects

In 2023, AM continued to oversee the implementation of the twelve Urban Greening projects which were earmarked under the 2021/22 LC's Urban Greening Scheme. AM is co-financing 50% of the costs of these projects, while the remaining are being funded by Project Green. AM is also setting up a botanic garden that links the historic gardens of Argotti, San Filippu, the Mall, Sa Maison and the Pinetum. In 2023, the upper level of San Filippu Garden was restored with new paving, lighting, benches and bins and a new electrical and sewage system. Planting was carried out in this area of the garden, as well as in the gardens of Argotti and the Mall. As regards environmental landscaping, AM has invested circa €8.3m in the maintenance and upgrading of circa one thousand, six hundred sites consisting of roundabouts and artificial areas. AM has also installed a prototype of a Maltese Green bench at MCAST consisting of a green wall with indigenous plants, water tanks and the use of sustainable recycled materials. In addition, it has a solar panel to supply electricity to a battery. Maltese tiles have been used to give it a traditional Maltese look.

Throughout 2023, Project Green completed a number of projects introduced over 40,000sqm of new green spaces and planted more than four thousand trees across Malta. Some projects achieved include 'Ġnien iż-Żagħżagħ' in Gudja, 'Sunshades Picnic Area' in Sant'Antnin Family Park situated in Marsaskala, a new dog park and picnic area in Safi, two new extensions in San Klement Park in Ғaż-Żabbar, which include the introduction of a new picnic area as well as Malta's first public obstacle race, the opening of 'Bengħajsa' Family Park in Birżebbuġa, 'Ġnejnet iċ-Ċkejken Ziam' which is a community space in Kalkara, 'Ġnejnet Nikol Aquilina' in Mqabba as well as the opening of a Green Open Campus in Mosta.

In addition, the Agency has also introduced the 'Community Greening Grant' which is set to fund sixteen new greening projects across Malta and Gozo. This grant is set to transform sites which are derelict into vibrant green spaces in the next few years. These sites will be equipped with educational and/or sports activities which will be tailored to the community's needs. The sixteen localities set to benefit from this grant are Santa Venera, Mtarfa, Birkirkara, Mosta, Mellieħa, Ғal-Għaxaq, Msida, San Pawl il-Baħar, Marsaxlokk, Gżira, Għargħur, Bormla, Paola (Raħal Gdid), Żurrieq, Pietà and Għajnsielem. These spaces provide a number of factors that mitigate issues such as flooding and biodiversity loss, improve urban ecosystems as well as encourage positive social interactions that cultivate social cohesion in ways that enhance health and wellbeing.

ERA continued working on the Regeneration Project of Spencer Garden in Marsa. Spencer Garden is being regenerated to be more sustainable and serve as a greener lung to the area. The garden has a total area of over 10,300sqm and currently attracts abusive activities. The works include the excavation and construction of a water reservoir, the improvement of many access points to the garden, the installation of new CCTV systems and the removal of IAS replacing them with local species as part of an extensive planting plan. New paving will replace the existing tarmac, new garden furniture will be installed, and sound barriers will be installed along the perimeter to reduce traffic noise. Implementation of this project began in the second quarter of 2023. To ensure the long-term sustainability of this project, a number of measures and design aspects were included. Rainwater will be harvested both from within the garden as well as the surrounding areas, through a catchment system that includes an innovative Bioswale. This water will be stored in underground reservoirs and reduce the external water demand for irrigation and maintenance of the garden. To complement this, the species selected for planting are either indigenous or well adapted to the Maltese conditions, reducing irrigation requirements. Irrigation will be done via drip irrigation to further reduce unnecessary losses. An extensive solar panel array will provide much of the power required by the garden's sustainable lighting and electrical systems, including new EV chargers to be installed outside the garden. It is expected that, following the garden's opening, it will serve as an example of sustainable garden design, and host events that promote sustainability and environmental awareness.

Following the successful implementation of two embellishment projects, the renovation of Romeo Romano Gardens and Ġnien Victor Calvagna in Mosta during 2022, GreenServ continued working on other greening projects in 2023. Three embellishment projects were concluded in Żabbar in Triq is-Santwarju, Triq Biċċieni, and Triq Santa Duminka. The scope of these projects was to create a greener environment without hindering the current use of the space. In Triq is-Santwarju, an existing parking space was repaved, and an area where residents can spend their free time in a relaxing environment was created. The works consisted of water feature walls, green walls, the planting of mature trees and plants, and benches made from recycled materials. An existing water reservoir was integrated into the project so that it could be used for irrigation purposes. Umbrellas were also installed to offer shade and collect rainwater in special tanks. In the other projects, two parking areas in Triq Biċċieni and Triq Santa Duminka were roofed over with green roofs. Although on a small scale, the introduction of green roofs planted with different plant species will be a source of biodiversity, especially for this urban area that lacks greenery. Another greening project was carried out in Ғal Qormi, where an area was converted into a green space with recreational facilities. This included the planting of vegetation, pedestrian bridges, seating areas, a 200m running track, a water irrigation system and a rainwater harvesting reservoir. The project made use of as many recycled materials as possible to offset the carbon footprint. These projects provide sustainable recreational spaces whilst improving the landscape and the wellbeing of the general public.

Further to the above, several LCs and other organisations have also been given the opportunity to embellish green and other public spaces in their localities and improve other areas of communal interest. The following projects were all financed by the PA through the Development Planning Fund:

Project Ref	Proposal	Applicants	Amount
GS/50019/2022	Joint Application submitted between Xgħajra LC and Xgħajra Tornados FC for the replacement of playing field equipment, street furniture, and rubber mats. Other sanding works (sanding of stone, cleaning of stone etc).	Xgħajra LC	€152,791.66
LCF/25/2020	Embellishment and Upgrading of the Belveder at Triq Santa Marija.	Żebbug Gozo LC and Gozo Region	€126,637.78
GS/50017/2023	Upgrading and replacement of soft floor tiles and playing equipment at Ġnien iż-Żgħożija.	Qormi LC	€30,692.83
GS/50023/2023	School Project (San Anton School) is located on three fields which include: wooden walking paths, flower beds and trees. The site is located within St Paul's Bay LC.	San Anton School	€67,000.00
GS/50026/2023	To upgrade Munxar's main entrance at Triq Santa Dminka in an environmentally friendly manner.	Munxar LC & Gozo Region	€147,927.31

Similar green projects are planned to replace Sant'Antnin Waste Treatment Plant in Marsaskala, which was shut down in December 2022. The site is set to be transformed into a green recreational space, giving back to the community an area spanning circa 23,800sqm. The transformed urban greening space will be dominated by mature trees, water bodies, various educational facilities and other amenities. An underground parking is being proposed, also servicing Marsaskala with an e-park and ride, encouraging sustainable mobility. Moreover, this project aims to yield a vast environment for local fauna, both land-based and freshwater and is also intended to serve as a rehabilitation site for various species. It also seeks to incorporate the educational aspect to continue stimulating the required transition towards a better environment, based on sustainability and circular economy principles. In 2023, WSM started the permitting process with the PA.



2.3 Sustainable Demographic Development for the Creation of Resilient Communities

Government is committed to ensuring that all individuals, including the older population, can live healthy lives and are able to participate in, and contribute to, Malta's socio-economic growth. In this regard, throughout 2023, the then Ministry of Active Ageing (MFAA) was committed to fostering intergenerational solidarity, as exemplified through the implementation of the National Strategic Policy for Active Ageing 2023-2030.

This strategic approach encompasses a multifaceted initiative, where programmes are designed to bridge the gap between different age groups within the community. By actively encouraging interactions and mutual understanding between generations, the Ministry aims to create a social fabric that values the experiences and contributions of both the older and younger members of society. Objective one, Social Inclusion, within the same Strategy was segmented into various themes and assigned to respective entities within the same Ministry. The Active Ageing Community Care (AACC) is currently working in collaboration with various entities to participate in the grannies' project. Currently, AACC is also working in collaboration with LCs, schools, and the police force to engage older persons as volunteers in the School Grannies Project.

In parallel, the then MFAA placed a strong emphasis on reinforcing residential and community care services. This commitment ensures that citizens, especially those who may be more vulnerable, receive the necessary support and care within their living environments. By identifying and addressing the integration needs of vulnerable groups, the Ministry seeks to create an inclusive society where everyone can actively participate and contribute to the community's wellbeing. Additionally, the AACC will hold talks within the community and together with different stakeholders (which will include, LCs, church organisations, and NGOs such as Solidarity Overseas Services Malta), will focus on self-care, loneliness, and positive ageing. Furthermore, during this pilot project, AACC will research and identify services offered based on the demographics of the same locality. Furthermore, to ensure outreach is accomplished, the Ministry implemented group sessions within community and residential homes tasked to AACC who conducted psychotherapeutic support group sessions both within the community and also within residential settings. In 2023, fifty group sessions were held in the community in collaboration with LCs in the following localities: Sliema, Mellieħa and Birżebbuġa, where it was proven that individual sessions were considered more appropriate for residents within care homes.

Furthermore, the then MFAA's Information Management Unit (IMU) will be focusing, as requested by the National Strategy, on updating the centralised active ageing website to inform older persons of their rights and guidelines to access legal aid if or when necessary. This project is currently still in the discussion phase with the then Ministry for Justice (MFJ) on a technical level. The time frame to achieve this is currently forecasted to the second quarter of 2025.

In essence, the comprehensive nature of the Ministry's strategy demonstrates a holistic commitment to building a society where intergenerational connections are nurtured, vulnerable groups are supported, knowledge is continually shared, and individuals of all ages are empowered to actively contribute to the collective wellbeing of the community.

Various actions were held as part of the *Filiet il-Komunita*, a project co-financed through ERDF 06.996/4 being implemented by Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS), which focuses on the social dimension of the urban regeneration of Lower Valletta. During this reporting period, *Filiet il-Komunita* operations have moved to Dar *Filiet* at 62, St John Street, Valletta and the following project components were implemented:

- Ongoing Community Mapping and Meetings with Community Connectors: meetings were organised on a one-to-one basis, in group form, and also through engagement in certain activities such as community walks and engagement during feasts (Saint Paul's) and other community activities held during the Easter period.
- Engagement outreach during the evening: by being present at the bumping places (places where the residents meet) as indicated in the community mapping exercise.
- Rakkonti tal-Beltin: (Tales of Valletta - Story Dialogue) is a storytelling project which aims to bring together Valletta residents of all ages. Each storytelling session has been inspired by the residents. Participatory Narrative Inquiry methodology was used to elicit personal experience within raw stories to bring out themes that are relevant to the socio-cultural and economic development of the Valletta community. During the period under review, three activities were held. The first activity was held in March 2023 with the other two activities taking place during the *Festival ta' Filiet Vallettani*. Rakkonti tal-Beltin stories were also collected in a publication.
- Community Skills Audit: the community skills audit is now in full force. The scope of the skills audit is to capture the standing talents and skills in the community, to prevail over any under-utilised human capital, to identify areas in which further training and education may be provided, and to bring out any gaps in policy and structural services provision. Ninety residents have participated.
- L-Għeruq tal-Komunita` : a community-based projects' board which aims to involve the residents/ community from the grassroots through active participation, co-designing, and co-production.
- Il-Belt mil-Lenti taż-Żgħar: a community project with the aim to involve the younger generation of residents through active participation, co-designing, and co-production. It also aims to give a safe space to the younger generation of Valletta through the concept of placemaking, whilst also promoting the cultures and traditions of Valletta. This is done through the various activities and sessions held weekly, for example, organising a train ride around Valletta. During this session, the participants had the chance to not only have fun but also admire the buildings and landmarks located in the city. During this activity, the participants also had the opportunity to take pictures of what they saw and present them afterwards. This project is being organised in collaboration with Valletta Community Services. Twenty-four young residents have participated in this project.
- Tikka Żebgħa ma' Paul: to nurture the skills and talents of the Valletta community, Paul Caruana, an artist born and bred in Valletta is offering art lessons free of charge. The sessions take place every Wednesday at Dar *Filiet*. Fourteen participants have participated thus far.
- Colouring Book: a colouring book developed together with Paul Caruana to be distributed to the younger generation in Valletta. It has the intention to present the asset-based approach to the younger generation through drawings based on the socio-cultural heritage of Valletta and encourage community cohesion through the sharing of personal gifts of head, hands, and heart for the benefit of the community.
- Punt Hjata Għal Dar Aħjar: this project aims to address sustainability looking both at the environment as well as skills such as homemaking, creativity, and dialogue. Two participants have participated so far.
- Ktieb u Tazza Te: a literacy project focusing on making reading more accessible to the residents which involves staff dropping off and picking up books at the resident's home with the intention of encouraging the community to read at least one book a month. Ten participants have participated thus far.
- Kelma bejn Tnejn: this project was created in light of a suggestion made by L-Għeruq tal-Komunita. This project aims to use the telephone to engage with residents who have mobility challenges and are feeling lonely and isolated. The telephone calls between social mentors and the residents are aimed at giving emotional support and encouragement.
- Collaboration with Saint Augustine Parish Church regarding catechism: during the first six months of 2023, the sessions continued each week with three groups. The sessions ranged from interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, practical skills, and exploring new assets and talents.

- Collaboration with Saint Augustine Parish Church regarding Fbieb Beltin: supporting the parish church in the senior citizen community group that is held every Thursday morning. It is a social space for older people whereby they socialise and participate in active citizenship and hands-on activities through non-formal education. Around ten participants participated during the first six months of the year. Some sessions were in collaboration with the Foundation for Information Technology Assistance (FITA), Primary Health Care, Aġenzija Sedqa (AS), and the residents themselves.
- 'Henri u Ġuża' Community Theatre: a community theatre aimed at promoting sensitisation and mobilisation of this community on matters affecting the community. Thirteen 10-minute video clips were shared on social media to engage the Valletta community and spark discussion on relevant social issues such as financial capability, employment, education, parenting and community life while also offering supportive suggestions about existing services. The show aspires to weave entertainment with the objective of the project, that is, to engage with the community and create awareness of needs whilst challenging the community to identify and implement its assets. The needs discussed in the show were elicited from the community mapping participatory research carried out in 2021. 'Henri u Ġuża' also conducted thirteen street theatre/live performances.
- Mental Health First Aid: building a mentally healthier community is important to pave the way for a competitive and sustainable economy. The mental health first aid course ensures that Valletta residents are equipped with such skills. During the period under review, a procurement exercise of one cohort of mental health first aid for community leaders took place. Five participants attended.
- Cultural Community Outings: the cultural community outings are tour-based outings where historical, educational, or key buildings in Valletta, are visited. This idea was derived from the various conversations undertaken with the Valletta residents when they explained how there are physical assets within their own community which they scarcely had access to. Three cultural community outings were carried out until June 2023, two in collaboration with Heritage Malta to the National Museum of Archaeology, and Fort Saint Elmo, and the other one in collaboration with the Parish Church of Saint Paul to Domus Pauli. This project started in March and the last cultural community outing in this period was in May. The maximum number of participants was nineteen and the least was eleven.
- Collaboration with FITA: to organise one-off sessions related to digital literacy during the Fbieb Beltin sessions. Moreover, a digital literacy workshop was delivered to the catechists of Saint Augustine doctrine.
- Collaboration with RISE: Filiet il-Komunità adopts asset-based community development and restorative practices to build safer and sustainable communities.
- Festival ta' Filiet Vallettani: the scope of the festival was to (1) bring attention to local talent and resources, (2) promote the importance of learning throughout life, (3) create space for intergenerational and family learning and (4) create a platform where everybody can contribute to the common good. The activities included seminars on Community-Based Lifelong Learning and Adult Education on 25 May 2023 at the Valletta Design Cluster, a Trade and Hands Craft Workshop (Intergenerational Learning, Older Adults with children) on 1 June 2023 held at Santu Wistin, a Handcrafts and Hobbies Exhibition on the 2 and 3 June 2023 at the House of Catalunya, and a Family Learning Event focusing on inspiring a love of shared learning through fun and curiosity on 3 June 2023 at Peacocks Garden.
- Awareness Course in Safeguarding Minors and Vulnerable Adults: held at the Valletta Design Cluster.
- Elevator Pitch Coaching (Valletta Design Cluster/Dar Filiet): In October 2023, a group of residents and representatives of festa groups and other community stakeholders including representatives from the LC, Heritage Malta, Cultural Directorate, UM, Jobs Plus, Primary Health Care, FITA, Mental Health, Malta Police Force (MPF), ĠEMMA, and FSWS participated in a five-day-practice-exchange in Dublin. The scope of this practice exchange was to learn about different aspects of sustainable development and methodologies supporting collaborative practices of community/place-based projects.



Chapter 3

Ensuring Healthy Lives and Wellbeing for All

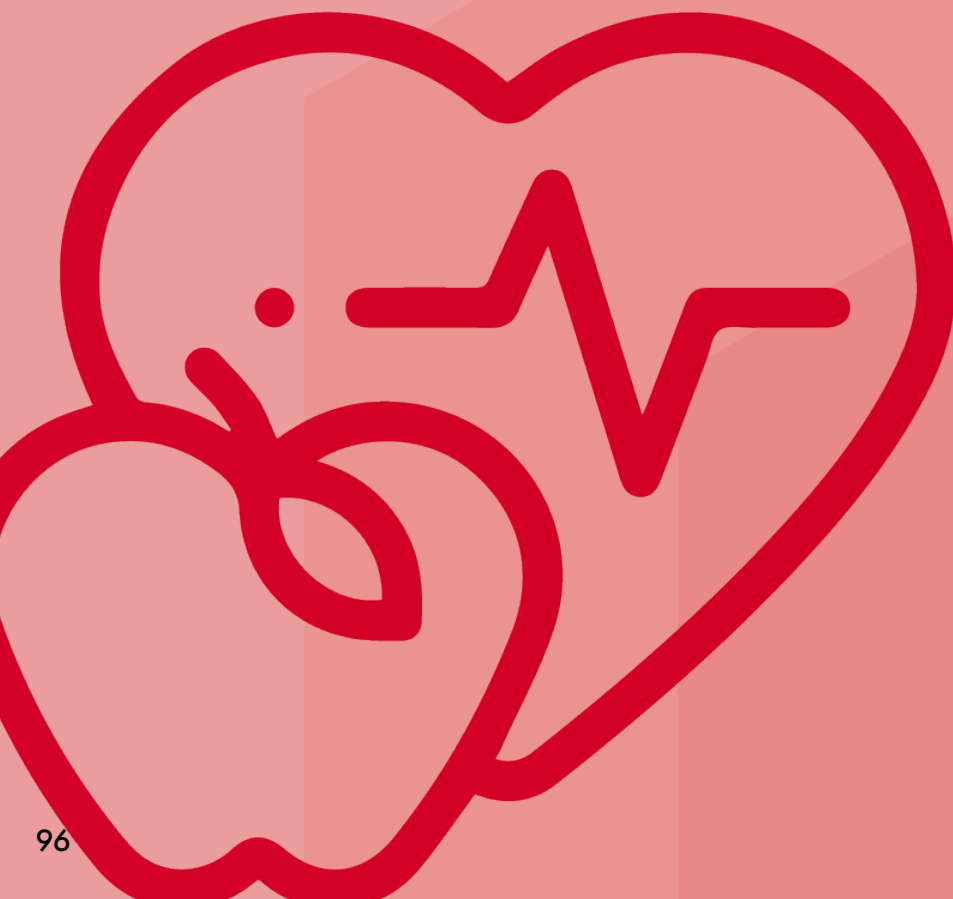
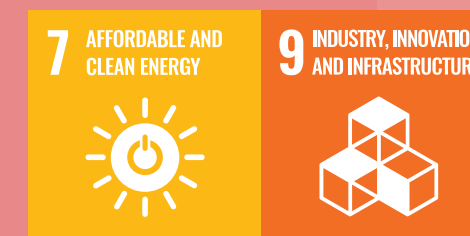
Maintaining the wellbeing of communities while fostering sustainable economic growth relies significantly on ensuring the accessibility and affordability of high-quality health services for all citizens. The advancement of society is built on the foundation of good health. When health systems improve, further development and growth will follow. Therefore, one of the main pillars of the government's agenda is that of nurturing an environment that ensures access to an efficient and effective healthcare system for all while supporting initiatives that promote physical activity and the consumption of healthy food to promote active and healthy lifestyles.

Additionally, through stronger preventive measures to reduce the occurrence of diseases, illnesses and health inequalities, the government is ensuring a healthier and improved quality of life for all. This also involves educational programmes that communicate the importance of leading healthy lives. Moreover, it is crucial that people are made aware that certain determinants of health, such as attitudes toward the environment, lifestyle choices, and consumption patterns can potentially hamper the long-term sustainable development of the country. The government is also introducing new schemes and programmes to address areas like mental health, injury prevention, drug and alcohol abuse, and sexual health. The government is resolute in urging health professionals to enhance their skills to address the evolving health needs of current and future generations. To achieve this, several initiatives are underway to recruit, train, incentivise, and retain healthcare providers and professionals, leading to a substantial increase in the workforce and allowing for the effective handling of the health needs and challenges of all citizens through the provision of high-quality medical assistance and interventions.

The Maltese government is also making significant investments in primary care, expanding the healthcare workforce, and developing specialised clinics to ensure affordable and timely access to curative medical treatments to promote further sustainability.

This chapter will highlight measures, projects and initiatives undertaken by the government linked to the 2030 Agenda: SDGs 3, 4, 5, 7 and 9.

2030 AGENDA RELATED GOALS



3.1 Fostering Good Health for All by Strengthening our Public Health System

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
3.1	By 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births
3.2	By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births
3.3	By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases
3.4	By 2030, reduce by one-third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and wellbeing
3.7	By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes
3.8	Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential healthcare services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all
5.6	Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences

The then MFH has been active at an international level using all opportunities to work towards affordable and equitable access to medicines, particularly by acting as a strong advocate for joint procurement within the EU Council of Ministers as was done for Covid-19 vaccines and medical device supplies post-Brexit.

Furthermore, an electronic patient leaflet pilot project, in collaboration with the EC, is underway to provide patient information in Maltese and English, as is required by law, allowing medicines to be procured from more countries. The inclusion of new medication on the Government Formulary List is ongoing, ensuring better access to medication for the wellbeing of the general population.

In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) medication will be made available to all prospective parents through POYC. This measure was announced in the Budget speech in October 2023 and will be implemented in 2024. HIV medication was decentralised and is being dispensed through POYC Pharmacies. The deliverable of this is the elimination of stigma and discrimination as patients can benefit from the convenience of community-based care.

The DoH is currently working with a private company engaged through an EC TSI project. This research project in policymaking has provided an inception report giving an in-depth analysis of the current Allied Health System and recommendations for improvement which can be made. Further surveys will be conducted with staff and clients/ service users. Malta has also requested to join the Genomic Data Infrastructure initiative of the EC as an Onboarding MS.

The Allied Health Services Directorate is working on a staff development strategy in line with lifelong learning, whilst facilitating gender equality and empowering all women. POYC empowers to acquire new skills and adapt to evolving demands. The understanding is that the acquisition of new skills results in better job satisfaction. All staff including clerical staff are trained in Good Distribution Practice and Good Documentation Practice. POYC also thrives to nurture its public officers and develop their skills by encouraging them and/or sending them as required to training programmes organised by Institute for Public Services (IPS). An onboarding buddy practised by Allied Health professions is intended to facilitate the integration of new employees into the professional working community thus enabling recruits to quickly become contributing members in any department. This is expected to increase the engagement and retention of employees.

The People Management Division with the then MFH launched a Health Workforce Strategy in October 2022. This strategy focused on many areas of the health workforce to ensure that a holistic approach is taken to deal with various aspects of a plan for the current and future health of employees. One of the objectives of the strategy is to address the various aspects of training for current employees, to improve their competences according to the industry’s developing needs. This is being done through continuous collaboration with educational institutions to ensure that the level of healthcare provided is of a high standard. In addition to this, the then MFH follows a central policy issued by the Public Service where better working conditions are always included through various sectoral agreements.

The Correctional Services Agency (CSA) continued to ensure equal access to health services and medicine. Bilateral Joint Controllership Agreements were established between the CSA and POYC to allow prison doctors access to prescribing rights to Schedule V medications. This allowed for inmates to be discharged to the community with simpler discharge plans with their permits and prescriptions already in hand. Furthermore, the engagement of an on-site pharmacist at the CSA allowed for more fluent procurement of government formulary medications. In addition, inmates have the option of purchasing private medications outside the government formulary upon prison clinic recommendation.

On-site prison Infectious Diseases Clinics were established in 2023, with Infectious Diseases consultants visiting on a once-monthly basis. Inmates with active Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and HIV are being regularly reviewed in the prison clinic. This reduced the number of medical escorts whilst maintaining these patients’ privacy. After discussions with the National Screening Programme, eligible female inmates undergo regular mammogram breast screening. Colorectal, cervical and abdominal aortic aneurysm screening is conducted with equivalent frequency as individuals in the community. Residential agreements were established between the CSA and Church Homes for the Elderly for elderly inmates with comorbid illnesses and dire medical need. This allows for prompt referral and transfer of these medically vulnerable inmates, with care expenses covered by the CSA.

The CSA is also addressing communicable diseases in the prison setting. For instance, in 2023, bilateral agreements were reached between the CSA and the National Immunisation Service whereby sharing of data was allowed whilst respecting GDPR regulations. This allowed the medical staff of the prison clinic to access the vaccine data history of new inmates to ascertain and administer any vaccinations that may be overdue. In addition, it created accountability and transparency of any vaccinations given to inmates during their incarceration.

When it comes to children’s health and wellbeing, the Sensory Integration Therapy Programmes provided by occupational therapists is helping children improve their processing and integration of sensory inputs to gain appropriate adaptive responses to everyday stimuli. The service is monitored, and continuous support is provided to professionals engaged in this project. Furthermore, a voucher system was introduced to reimburse out-of-pocket payments made by the public for children requiring occupational therapy services. Evaluation of the outcome of the Neonatal Screening Programme was carried out with the aim of identifying and addressing additional needs and gaps in the programme. A webinar was organised at the end of October 2023 entitled, Child Mental Health and Wellbeing: A Roadmap for Parents and Guardians. An expert Consultant Psychiatrist in Child and Adolescent Mental Health was invited to speak at this webinar which sought to educate parents and guardians about pertinent issues in the realm of mental health, whilst sharing practical tips and strategies with the participants.

In 2023, the MSPC increased the Carers' Grant, from €500 to over €4,500 per year, paid every three months, benefiting 450 persons during the year.

The then MFH also continued working on the development of the Second National Diabetes Strategy (SNDS), which included several stakeholder meetings and focus groups to determine the current state of affairs with respect to services offered to diabetic patients, the current gaps in the system and challenges being faced by healthcare professionals, patients and caregivers with the intention of coming up with a set of recommendations to mitigate current and foreseen challenges, keeping in mind the projected increase in diabetic patients and changes in our current population.

Furthermore, the process to map out the various care pathways that patients living with diabetes can follow once they enter the healthcare system, starting from primary care and ending with tertiary care commenced in 2023. This pathway aims to approximate the three main entities providing primary, secondary, and tertiary care, particularly with respect to communication between the entities to ensure seamless patient movements between entities. Current IT systems will be updated to ensure that they can communicate with each other. A triage system and a new ticket of referral will ensure that patients are referred according to their needs, prevent duplication of resources and reserve highly-specialised and timely care.

Furthermore, various investments were made in the area of elderly care. In SVP, investment was made in an ultrasound machine to strengthen its digital imaging services. Plans are set for SVP's extension of essential services within the community to provide comprehensive health solutions and fostering inclusivity. The SVP Garden was opened within the residency promoting sensory engagement and fostering a sense of wellbeing among residents, with an investment of €1 million. It will be opened for people with dementia within the community.

Further investments made involve the continued renovation project of St. Joseph's Hall, within the residency, worth half a million euro and the comprehensive renovation of St. Joseph Ward 1. With a dedicated investment of €1 million over a planned five-year period, a total of eighteen halls underwent substantial enhancements including private accessible bathrooms, the lounge area, and the courtyard were redesigned to ensure enhanced accessibility and safety for all residents. Medical equipment was refurbished with new electric beds, lifters, trolleys, and other essential tools crucial for the direct care and comfort of the elderly.

New facilities were also opened at the Outreach Clinic at Dar Padova in Għajnsielem Gozo, including a vascular clinic, podiatry, occupational therapy, psychotherapy and other interventions.

The Social Care Standards Authority's Regulatory Standards request that staff of licensed service providers within the Residential Services for Senior Citizens need a valid Mental Health First Aid certification. Training workshops on mental health have been coordinated for Active Ageing Hub staff, where staff working within the Active Ageing hubs, attend Mental Health First Aid scheduled for supervisors within the AACC. Apart from the staff, AACC is also organising support groups within the community for persons aged 60 years and over living in the community. Furthermore, a new service launched by AACC was the New GP Service for the Elderly in the Community, offering a GP service for the elderly who have complex health problems and live in the community.

In addition, educational material on how to maintain physical fitness and health and wellness talks in order to educate older persons about different physical abilities depending on the type of exercise that they can do were carried out. Moreover, the Allied Health Unit worked on promotional material, carried out physical activity sessions in collaboration with the LCs, and organised a sports day between residential homes.

Access is an important aspect of healthcare, therefore continued support is given to schemes aimed at assisting access to equipment which aids mobility such as specialised beds, hoists, and lifters. In respect to this objective, AACC launched a new service of leasing motorised beds to people in the community aged sixty years or over, who require this service due to physical difficulties. In this regard, the Allied Health Team will be responsible for outlining the client's eligibility and will guide them on how to apply for the leasing of such (partially subsidised) equipment.



In line with the Mental Health Strategy, Mental Health Services (MHS) continues to invest in Community Services providing a whole spectrum of services with a lifelong approach. The emphasis on care focuses on the shift from an institutional model of care to more person-centred care in the community. By the end of 2023, MHS was supporting 302 patients in various residential settings in the community. The number of outsourced beds in the community now exceeds the number of inpatients beds at Mount Carmel Hospital. MHS continues to invest in various forms of sheltered accommodation and residential care in the community. Mental Health Care is also being integrated with other Health Services, both at the Primary Care Level and the secondary care at MDH, with a liaison team, and an expertise is also offered to Karin Grech Rehabilitation Hospital, and the SVP for the Elderly and Active Ageing. The Outpatient model has been replaced by multidisciplinary teams in the community. Additionally, an increasing number of service users are supported by these specialist teams.

Another initiative related to mental health is the Wellbeing 360 project, a collaboration between community occupational therapists working in five Mental Health Community Rehabilitation Centres and other entities such as NGOs and MHS professionals. The project is an online monthly webinar series for service users and the public, aimed towards engaging, educating, and raising awareness on mental wellbeing.

Furthermore, a National Mental Health Campaign ‘Fu Hsieb’ was carried out in 2023. This was a collaboration in the then MFH and included the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Directorate, MHS, Primary Health Care, and MDH. This campaign sought to educate and enable the population in Malta with respect to key habits that are beneficial for both physical and mental health covering thematic areas of diet, sleep, mindfulness, meaningful social connection, mental and physical self-checks, and work-life balance. This national campaign was delivered in phases that focused on targeting several vulnerable groups in the Maltese population. Thus, the beginning of the campaign focused on the general population, and the latter three months focused on workplace wellbeing, the population aged 60+, and children and their parents. Additionally, a face-to-face programme was delivered in collaboration with Flamrun’s Active Ageing Centre to persons aged 60+ to begin targeting this age group, with intentions to continue with other active ageing centres in the coming year.

Preparations were also carried out by the then MFH and health entities, such as hospitals, vis-à-vis heatwave emergency preparedness that are underway jointly with the Chief Medical Officer and Superintendent of Public Health.

3.2 Promoting Good Nutrition and Active Lifestyles for a Healthy Society

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
3.d	Strengthen the capacity of all countries, in particular developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks
4.7	By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture’s contribution to sustainable development
7.3	By 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency
9.1	Develop quality, reliable, sustainable, and resilient infrastructure, including regional and transborder infrastructure, to support economic development and human wellbeing, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all

The DoH has drafted the Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA) Strategy, which is currently in the consultation phase. The HEPA Strategy employs a life-course approach, spanning from pregnancy and early years to the elderly. Recommendations which address greener towns and active lifestyles include measures such as the installation of bicycle racks and lockers in schools and workplaces. The strategy advocates for the active involvement of children in national walking and cycling programmes and promotes alternative modes of transport through incentives to employees who opt to choose public transport, thereby contributing significantly to reducing emissions and improving air quality. Creating environments conducive to a modal shift to walking, cycling and public transport, attracts people to adopt greener choices. Furthermore, the draft document advocates for the enhancement of social spaces to be made more attractive with the use of green infrastructure to counteract the urban heat island effect. Encouraging the establishment of additional pedestrian zones and bicycle-friendly roads plays a pivotal role in fostering micro-mobility, ultimately reducing pollution, and opting for a lifestyle that benefits the overall natural environment.

During the European Week of Sport 2023, SportMalta emphasised post-pandemic recovery support for physical activity and the sports sector, and the promotion of healthy lifestyles integrating sport, physical activity, and healthy eating. The themes included education, home, workplace, outdoors, sports clubs, and fitness centres. SportMalta hosted a Flagship Event, showcasing various sports in a village setup, and the #BeActive Night, celebrating fitness with a festive atmosphere. SportMalta also coordinated several events in collaboration with various entities, namely sports organisations, educational institutions, fitness centres, workplaces, outdoors organisations, municipalities, and youth organisations. A campaign to promote the #BeActive Awards was initiated to encourage organisations to apply for these awards and a helpdesk was set up to assist the applicants with the application. Furthermore, a vigorous marketing strategy was formulated to enhance SportMalta to act as a multiplier of the #BeActive campaign through its existent national network, considering it is the national entity for sport.

In order to promote active lifestyle amongst school-aged children, the Foundation for Educational Services (FES) incorporated a sports manual of activities into its programmes. Specifically, during Skolasajf, Sports Playworkers are engaged to facilitate sports activities that encourage healthy living.

In 2023, Gozitan athletes participated in the International Island Games in Guernsey, promoting Gozo internationally and fostering sports and physical activity among youths and adults. This contributes to healthier lifestyles and enhanced healthcare sustainability in Gozo. Concurrently, progress on the Gozo Aquatic Centre and Sports Complex advanced rapidly, including the commencement of M&Es and finishing works.

The development of a walking, jogging, and cycling trail at Ulysses Grove in Xewkija, Gozo, has begun. This ERDF co-funded project will enhance Gozo’s open and green spaces and contribute to a family park’s creation. During 2023, the EcoGozo Directorate within the then MGOZ started works on the railing around the perimeter of the grove. In 2023, the EcoGozo Directorate also completed the installation of a new turf system at the newly constructed Qala Ground. The works involved the re-levelling and compacting of the existing aggregate sub-base to create a stable and permeable platform for the football turf system.

In order to support athletes, the national sports school provides physiotherapy services including screening of athletes through Anthropometric Measurements, Peak Height-Velocity Calculations, Velocity-Rate of Growth and Maturation, Physical testing (speed, power, endurance, flexibility, body composition analysis), assessment and treatment and sports physiology lessons (Years 7-11).

FSWS promotes active lifestyles, safe and healthy food, and education on healthy choices through services and projects like iTeen Summer project and Heroes of the Earth. Furthermore, the Agency for Community and Therapeutic Services (ACTS) organises capacity-building events, including the Qawra Community Sports Day which aims to connect children, teenagers, and families, who seem to feel excluded or isolated. The activity features games designed to enhance teamwork and community bonding. It offers a free, enjoyable morning for financially challenged families, allowing minors to participate while parents cheer on and network, fostering social connections, community integration, and support networks. The event aimed to foster an active, healthy community and advocate for the benefits of physical activity and a healthier lifestyle.

Throughout 2023, AS has continued its commitment to the provision of tfal 3, tfal 5, and teen outside the box programmes for year 3, year 5, and year 8. These programmes were delivered in all state, church, and independent schools in Malta and Gozo. Following the collection of data for the European School Survey Project (ESPAD) in 2019, further work was conducted in 2023 in preparation for the next round of data collection which will take place in 2024. ESPAD gathers comparable data every four to five years on substance use and behaviours like social media, gaming, and gambling among 15 to 16-year-old students in Malta and 35 European countries, using a standardised methodology for cross-country and temporal analysis.

Furthermore, MEYR has implemented actions at compulsory education level to encourage healthy food consumption, impacting health, the environment and natural resources. These initiatives aim to enhance economic development and Malta's population wellbeing by reducing non-communicable diseases. Through school curricula, children learn about the relationship between food, health and the environment from a young age.

The Home Economics curriculum in Middle and Senior Schools, updated in 2023, now emphasises sustainable development and SDGs related to nutrition, food security, and poverty, covering sustainable living, responsible consumption, and food waste. Topics discussed in terms of poverty and inequalities mainly concern sustainable living (transportation, energy consumption and diet), responsible consumption and production, use of sustainable food (seasonal, local and organic) and tackling food waste.

The Home Economics Seminar Centre (HESC), within the Department for Student and Vocational Preparation continued to extend its services by catering for different community members including children, adolescents, parents and adults. Through the execution of its duties in schools and the community, throughout the scholastic year, the HESC team focused on positively influencing the health behaviours of individuals by helping them to acquire the right knowledge and understanding as well as skills and attitudes central to the endorsement of a positive health behaviour change. HESC sought to:

- Improve the quality of everyday life of students, their families and the community, through capacity building in the efficient, effective and sustainable management of their resources;
- Create and maintain supportive environments which promote healthy eating and living;
- Address the determinants of health through policy involvement to enable students, families and other family members to make informed healthy life choices; and
- Implement food standards and policies which seek to promote healthy school food environments through school support to ensure that national and school food policies are translated into tangible outcomes.

The services of the FES, namely, Klabb 3-16, Skolasqif and its childcare centres promote healthy lifestyles. Therefore, the programmes of activities carried out in these three services always incorporate a cooking component. It is ensured that recipes given promote healthy food and are thus in line with the the *Whole School Approach to a Healthy Lifestyle: Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Policy*. In addition, children's records are consulted to be vigilant of any food allergies. A list of prohibited and permissible food is also forwarded to FES staff for guidance. Moreover, the FES offers a healthy breakfast to children attending its twelve childcare centres.

In 2023, Malta continued to implement the School Scheme as part of the normal scholastic year. The overall objective of the School Scheme in Malta is to organise and implement a focused national campaign aimed at increasing the awareness of the need to substantially increase the share of fruit, vegetables and milk in children's diets when their nutrition habits are still being formed. This shall be achieved primarily by providing school children with regular portions of fruit, vegetables and milk for their consumption and by promoting, with the use of various educational and publicity measures, the consumption of such products.

A new initiative implemented in 2023 was the piloting of a child weight management programme. The aim of the pilot was to establish a healthy lifestyle programme for healthy weight management in children, by focusing on healthy habits and behaviour change in targeted children with a high BMI and their families. This programme addresses important concepts such as the components of diet, physical activity, and behaviour change. This targets children and their parents with sessions specially designed for both audiences by nutritionists to address the dietary aspect, a physiotherapist to address the aspect of physical activity and sedentary behaviour, and a

health psychologist to address behavioural change. The heads of school within a specified community identified children with high BMIs and their parents who could potentially benefit from such a programme. The programme is currently being evaluated and will be continued in 2024.

Meanwhile, the 2023 'Let's Talk Farming' programme promotes good nutrition, provides safe and healthy food, and educates healthy food choices and lifestyles to students.

The food distribution under the FEAD (Fund of the European Aid to the Most Deprived) and SFFD (State Funded Food Distribution) schemes continued throughout 2023. There were four distributions in all:

- i. FEAD February - March 2023: 2019 persons collected from 2693 eligible.
- ii. SFFD May – June 2023: 12145 persons collected from 17908 eligible.
- iii. FEAD July 2023: 1821 persons collected from 2521 eligible.
- iv. SFFD December 2023 - January 2024.

With respect to the SFFD scheme, the remaining uncollected boxes are distributed amongst the various entities in Malta and Gozo that are in direct contact with vulnerable families. These include the food bank and Djakonia in operation in various parishes in Malta and Gozo.

3.2.1 Active Ageing

In the beginning of 2023, the then MFAA launched a National Strategy for Active Ageing 2023-2030. Government commits itself towards achieving a society for all ages and ensuring that our nation adopts specific measures that will transform Malta into an age-friendly nation.

The then MFAA's incorporation of initiatives promoting an active lifestyle, safe and healthy food, and education on nutritious choices within the National Strategy for Active Ageing 2023-2030 underscores its commitment to fostering a holistic approach to the older person's wellbeing. By emphasising an active lifestyle, the Ministry recognises the pivotal role physical activity plays in maintaining overall health and preventing chronic conditions. The inclusion of programmes advocating safe and healthy food aligns with the understanding that nutrition is a cornerstone of wellbeing. Moreover, the educational components on healthy food choices and lifestyles empower individuals with knowledge, enabling them to make informed decisions about their health.

The National Strategy highlighted the importance of improving the safety of public spaces. The Commissioner for Older Persons is ensuring the implementation of safer public spaces for such activities to take place through the 'Slow Streets' programme. This initiative in Malta and Gozo, which is being carried out by the LCs' Association in partnership with TM and the PA, aims to enhance walking, cycling, and public transport accessibility, making streets more accessible and welcoming for all ages and modes of transport, including foot, wheelchair, and bicycle.

The SCSA ensures that older persons in residential care homes receive a varied, appealing, wholesome, and nutritious diet, tailored to their specific needs. This is covered within the Residential Services for Senior Citizens Regulatory Standards, namely Standard 3.1 and Standard 3.1.19, ensuring that food options are given to all residents, including those with different dietary and food consistency requirements. The same entity is responsible for conducting an audit of care homes and long-term-care facilities to evaluate the extent to which residents are provided with sufficient and high-quality food and nutrition care. SCSA was responsible for a meal exercise which ensured that residents were satisfied with what was being presented.

The organisation of information sessions to inform older persons on the benefits of a healthy diet, food allergies, malnutrition, diabetes and obesity, nutrition and dementia, and safe handling of food was assigned to AACC in 2023. In 2024, the Allied Health team will be working on this objective where the focus is to discuss together with the Health Directorate and issue informative booklets on healthy eating for adults. Apart from these booklets, the Allied Health team will deliver educational talks regarding healthy eating in the community. AACC also offers a Meals on Wheels service, to senior citizens and other persons who are still living in their own homes but are unable to prepare a meal. One chilled meal per day is delivered so that the meal can be heated and consumed at one's own convenience.

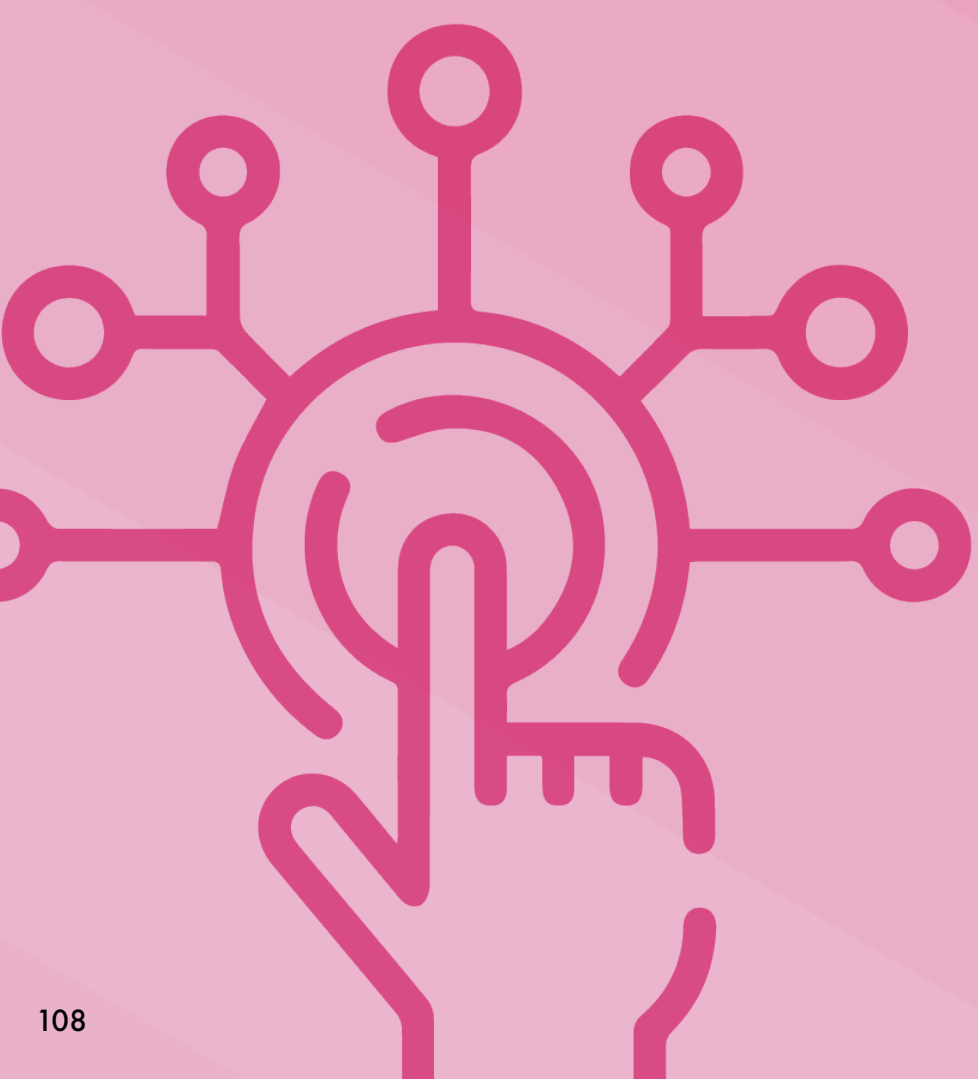
Through AACC, active ageing centres have been set up with the aim of encouraging practical and skills-based activities, such as carpentry, manual crafts, and gardening among the older population. AACC is also actively working to diversify activities within its centres, these ranging from crafts to gardening and others, such as cooking, painting, music, beauty sessions, language learning, exercise and dancing sessions, cake decoration, fishing, knitting, and pottery.

Additionally, ongoing training allows older individuals to explore new interests and hobbies, promoting a sense of purpose and fulfilment in their lives. It can lead to a renewed sense of self-confidence and accomplishment, thereby fostering a positive outlook on life during the later stages. From a societal perspective, encouraging lifelong training for older persons also supports the idea of active ageing. By tapping into their wealth of experience and knowledge, older individuals become valuable contributors to their communities, sharing insights, mentoring others, and participating actively in various aspects of civic life.



Chapter 4

Accelerating Digital Transformation, Smart Mobility and Connectivity



Digital industries and technologies play a key role in shaping Malta’s economy and modern society’s wellbeing. The government is taking a central role in setting the necessary measures to achieve efficient and inclusive digital transformation. This entails the provision of robust education and training systems aimed at enhancing individuals’ technical abilities and managerial skills, enabling them to thrive in digital economies.

The government is also working towards the reduction of administrative barriers faced by start-ups, facilitating job transitions, reducing financial burdens hindering digitalisation, and increasing digital government services and public data availability. Among other goals, the government strives to further increase investment in digital transformation, maximise the use of smart technologies, and adopt smarter policies suited to changing economic patterns. This way, it will make strides in productivity, stimulating economic growth, and addressing possible inequalities.

Malta’s Roadmap, highlighting key measures towards achieving EU’s commitments in relation to the Digital Decade policy programme, has been adopted by the government and was submitted to the EC in December 2023. The National Roadmap is the result of extensive inter-ministerial consultations and is subject to revision every two years. It provides an analysis of the state of play of digital transformation in Malta, looking at Malta’s current state of affairs, resources, comparative advantages or strengths, recent developments, and challenges. It also provides over sixty-six measures and actions to achieve the digital targets, including details on the adopted and planned policies, measures and actions that are intended to help achieve the targets set.

Furthermore, Malta will continue striving towards smart mobility and connectivity by optimising transport and communication infrastructures and consolidating new standards of sustainability, efficiency, safety, and air quality. As a result of such efforts, citizens will benefit from inclusive and safe travel, diversified alternative and green transport, and reduced congestion. Meanwhile, strengthened implementation of R&I policies and programmes will cater to the development of sector-specific skills, thus narrowing the gap between supply and demand in the labour market.

This chapter will highlight measures, projects and initiatives undertaken by the government linked to the 2030 Agenda: SDGs 3-5 and 8-11.

2030 AGENDA RELATED GOALS



4.1 Towards a Digitally Empowered Economy and Society

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
4.4	By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
5.b	Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women
8.2	Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high value-added and labour-intensive sectors
8.3	Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services
9.5	Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries, including, by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per 1 million people and public and private research and development spending

4.1.1 Digital Transformation of the Public Administration and the Public Service

In 2023, Malta Information Technology Agency (MITA) published the tender for the purchasing of the Corporate Electronic Document Management System (CEDMS) and it is envisaged that two pilot ministries will move to the CEDMS in early 2025. The aim is to move towards an ‘as paperless as possible’ approach to eliminate the paper files and the way the public service works and move towards a digital environment. The implementation of the CEDMS will be managed by the Document Management Unit within the Coordination and Implementation Division in the Office of the Prime Minister. The implementation of a CEDMS will offer the following benefits to the government:

- **Improved document organisation:** centralised storage and organisation of electronic documents, making it easier to locate and retrieve information.
- **Enhanced document security:** access controls can be implemented to restrict document access to authorised personnel, ensuring confidentiality.
- **Efficient document retrieval:** eliminates the time-consuming process of manually searching through physical files and folders, resulting in improved productivity and reduced frustration.
- **Version control and document tracking:** maintains a record of document versions and changes, allowing users to track revisions and maintain document integrity.
- **Streamlined collaboration:** enables real-time collaboration on documents, allowing multiple users to access and edit files simultaneously.
- **Interoperability, standardisation, and increased agility:** implementing a single solution across different government departments promotes interoperability, and standardisation of processes, procedures, and systems.
- **Data analysis and reporting:** corporate solutions can provide a centralised repository of data, enabling easier data analysis, reporting and performance monitoring.
- **Disaster recovery and business continuity:** electronic documents can be backed up regularly, ensuring their availability even in the event of hardware failures or other unforeseen events.
- **Cost savings and space efficiency:** by transitioning to electronic documents, the government can save on paper, printing, filing cabinets, and storage space costs.

- **Compliance and regulatory requirements:** allows for the implementation of access controls, document retention policies, and audit trails, which help demonstrate compliance during audits and investigations.
- **Workflow automation:** allows the government to streamline and automate document-centric processes.
- **Environmental sustainability:** reduces reliance on paper and printing, contributing to environmental sustainability efforts.

4.1.1.1 Servizz.gov

In 2023, the servizz.gov Agency spearheaded several initiatives aimed at leveraging advanced technologies and innovative solutions to enhance citizen services, optimise operations, and promote sustainability. These initiatives collectively underscore servizz.gov’s commitment to sustainable development through digital transformation, emphasising enhanced service delivery, operational efficiency, and a more user-centric approach towards citizen engagement. As the Agency moves forward, these initiatives will play a pivotal role in achieving a digitally empowered economy and society.

The first project undertaken was voice recognition on Freephone 153. The exploration of AI-driven voice recognition technology for Freephone 153 aligns directly with the strategic objective of fostering a digitally empowered society. Leveraging this technology streamlines citizen interaction by enabling automated call transcription and voice-based authentication, as well as intelligent call routing using natural language processing to intelligently interpret voice requests. Furthermore, customer calls will be analysed for quality assurance purposes, to identify training needs.

In April 2023, servizz.gov upgraded its on-premises Microsoft Dynamics Customer Relationship Management to a cloud-based Microsoft 365 Dynamics solution hosted on the MITA’s Azure Hybrid Cloud. The objective of this project is to optimise agents’ interactions with citizen requests by providing a more intuitive interface and analysing AI historical/real-time data to identify patterns, trends, and insights that can help agents make better decisions to offer a personalised service. CoPilot and AI-powered insights will thus facilitate faster, more consistent, and more efficient services, furthering the goal of a digitally empowered society. The implementation of an Electronic Queuing Ticketing solution across all servizz.gov hubs shows the Agency’s strategic approach towards operational efficiency and citizen-centric services. By collaborating across multiple departments within the Agency and conducting comprehensive testing, servizz.gov ensures that the solution not only enhances the user experience but also optimises the Agency’s resources. It is envisaged that the implementation of this solution will be completed by the end of the second quarter of 2024. The then MGOZ also introduced a ticketing system that automatically assigns a ticket for each query placed by the citizen about a service offered by the then MGOZ.

The upcoming revamp of servizz.gov’s portal showcases the Agency’s commitment to employing the latest AI trends and user-centric design principles. The envisioned personalised service delivery aligns with the strategic objective of creating a digitally empowered platform. By integrating cutting-edge AI, the revamped portal aims to cater to diverse citizen needs, offering a seamless and tailored experience. This initiative emphasises the Agency’s focus on fostering a digitally inclusive environment for citizens. A Call for Tenders for the design and production of the new portal is envisaged to be published in the second quarter of 2024.

4.1.1.2 Electronic Voting System

In 2023, the Voting Document Tracking System was developed to facilitate the delivery of voting documents throughout all three phases of the delivery process, by implementing a digital system, through an Android mobile application, for the delivery of these documents. The application will track the delivery of voting documents on a door-to-door basis (Phase 1), from police stations/LCs offices (Phase 2), and from the Naxxar Counting Hall/Gozo office/housebound voters (Phase 3). It will then verify and record the voting document recipient and location of the transaction in real-time and provide access to the voting documents distribution progress, by date, district, etc. The testing of the system is in its final stages.

In addition, the Electoral Office has also formed an Address Management Unit (AMU) to strengthen and synchronise the various processes across the Public Service and the Public Sector that currently make use of address details as part of their line of business. As part of the efforts to launch the new national Address Register, the AMU/Electoral Office is in the process of creating the legal basis for the Address Register and subsidiary registers. The initiative includes the procurement and development of the technical platform for the maintenance of records as per the logical data model created as part of the National Data Strategy. The work undertaken also involves the cleaning and filtering of the present/de facto address register as currently there are too many existing systems through the Corporate Data Repository web services.

4.1.1.3 Tax and Customs

During 2023, MyTax, the taxpayer's direct online contact point with the Malta Tax and Customs Administration (MTCA), continued to improve and further services were added to it. New enhancements were carried out in the personal online filing of the Income Tax Return leading to an increase of online submissions from 40.87% to 53.44% up to mid-December 2023. Three final withholding tax forms were included in the MyTax to simplify the process for the taxpayer: Part-Time Self Employment, Part-Time Employment and Rental Income.

As of 2023, the 15% tax was decreased to 10% for part-time employment and electronic applications were enhanced together with legal updates. The MTCA has also introduced ten forms through the Workflow Automated System, a system where the applicants can view the process of the applications through bus stops. These forms refer to both Income Tax and VAT.

In collaboration with servizz.gov, a Chatbot for taxpayers was introduced in 2023 to help citizens with their queries and help them ad hoc from their homes/offices. A further enhancement was also carried out in the VAT online system and as of February 2023, the VAT registered persons, under Article 10, were asked to file their VAT Return Mandatory using the online services.

A new EU directive named Central Electronic System of Payment Information came into force as of 1 January 2024. During the year 2023, the Operations Department together with other MTCA Departments worked intensively to organise the necessary platforms for payment service providers.

4.1.1.4 Digitalisation in the Agriculture and Food Sectors

In the age of technology, the MFA is committed to staying ahead by placing digitalisation as one of the main pillars. By leveraging digital tools and platforms, the Agency is enhancing accessibility, efficiency, and transparency within the food industry. From digital registries of local products to the seamless management of processes, digitalisation serves as a bridge, connecting producers, consumers, and markets in ways that were once unimaginable.

In 2023, a number of digital projects were implemented by the MFA in order to ensure transparency, traceability and access to information to stakeholders. The Agency is committed to providing mobile and web apps to growers and buyers, and through these apps, the stakeholders can see their information. Four apps were developed in 2023: Farmers App (ilbidwi.gov.mt), Hawkers App (ixxerrej.gov.mt), Online payment enhancement (ixxerrej.gov.mt) and Iddashboard.gov.mt. Furthermore, improvements were made to the Pitkaliija Management System.

Further to the work done by the MFA, Agriculture and Rural Payments Agency (ARPA) has developed a mobile app for farmers 'BiedjaCam' in the past years and has continuously evolved and adapted this app as needed to increase its utility and functionality to the local farming community, as well as to the administration. In 2023, Malta endeavoured to further such technologies by increasing their scope and uptake, while also establishing such use as an essential component in Malta's implementation of the CAP Strategic Plan over the coming years.

The Public Abattoir continued in its ongoing efforts towards digitisation of its processes. This involved a number of complementary efforts including the: investment in a computerised maintenance management system, the development of an Online Stock Management system which also cut down on the use of paper and investment in various cloud-based monitoring systems, and an energy monitoring system and temperature monitoring systems. Additional efforts include the digitisation of various HR processes and access control and commencement of the process to radio-frequency identification tag all livestock in Malta as part of the effort to enhance traceability as well as monitoring of herds in the Maltese Islands. In terms of digitisation of the production process, the Public Abattoir inaugurated an AI-based system for the scanning and grading of pig carcasses.

4.1.1.5 Digitalisation in the Health Sector

During 2023, the then MFH through its IMU and Directorate General Health Informatics, implemented governance changes to align its digital health and health data priorities with national and international standards. Furthermore, the National Health Systems Strategy launched in 2023, highlights the importance of 'Incorporating Digital Health into Innovation, Technology and Research for Better Health' as one of its strategic objectives. The strategy outlined how digital health and health data can enable better integration, coordination and collaboration across the health system and support innovation, technology, and research for better health outcomes.

Furthermore, significant updates to the myHealth Portal, the main reference point for Malta-based citizens and their doctors to view their medical records, have been carried out.

POYC has implemented several new developments and enhanced existing digital processes with the overarching intent of consolidating siloed processes and increasing efficiency. During the past years, the introduction of automated messages disseminated instantly to the patients to notify them about the status of their applications has been developed to help instil a sense of empowerment and ensure transparency. Furthermore, the recently introduced Medicines Use Reviews require pharmacists to engage in face-to-face discussions with their registered patients to review their medical treatment. This marked an important step towards patient-centred care. The deliverable of this measure is a comprehensive healthcare approach that helps to prevent pharmaceutical care issues such as adverse drug reactions, lack of adherence to treatment and lifestyle changes and drug interactions.

Moreover, the Physiotherapy Department together with the Chief Information Officer, with the support of the Directorate Allied Health Services, has designed a digital referral and online scheduling system tool which is to be implemented in the near future. Other examples include the paperless Schedule V application system coupled with an electronic prescription system integrated within the POYC interface which is being developed and will be implemented in 2024.

Malta, through the IMU and other stakeholders, is also actively participating at the regional level in discussions on digital health and health data in multi-national bodies such as the EU and the World Health Organisation.

4.1.1.6 Digitalisation in the Education Sector

At the compulsory education level, under the One-Tablet-Per-Child (OTPC) project, students continue to enjoy the privilege of having personalised tablets, fostering the development of their digital skills within an educational context. Additionally, learners with conditions like dyslexia benefit from exam reader pens provided as part of OTPC. These assistive tools are available to students facing challenges in accessing the curriculum, offering support throughout their five years of secondary school, both during regular studies and exams.

The Directorate for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills (DDLTS) also actively involves itself in annual events such as Playcon and European Maturity model for Blended Education (EMBED) which celebrate the good practices of teaching and learning with the smart use of digital tools. Regular support is provided through one-to-one sessions, group sessions, video tutorials, courses in various formats, digital resources, initiatives like EU Code Week, SELFIE, eTwinning, Family Coding, Digital Citizenship Education, resources and tutorials on websites and social media. Furthermore, Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) sessions are provided in schools according to the schools' requests, needs and requirements whilst promoting CoPE themes such as 'open educational resources', 'digital citizenship education', 'using technology to enhance creativity,' and 'using digital technologies for communication, collaboration and professional development'.

In terms of administrative processes, during Skolasajf 2023, the process whereby staff submitted their programme activity plans, was digitalised. This had the advantages of the FES Head Office having the required information in real-time and reducing the use of large amounts of paper for such a task. This digitalisation process was similarly carried over to the Klabb 3-16 programme.

Towards the end of 2023, a digitalisation exercise was also initiated whereby programme coordinators started to write their support visit reports directly onto a tablet instead of using pen and paper. This has the advantage of sharing information in real-time without emailing the same information to the various FES departments. Additionally, the FES Business Support Department initiated a pilot project to introduce a punch clock system that works through a mobile application. This will be piloted amongst two Klabb 3-16 centres and eventually introduced across all centres. This will drastically reduce the amount of paperwork involved in the processing of timesheets and will make the payroll process more efficient. Furthermore, the HR Department within FES completed a project whereby all employees' files were migrated online. This helped to reduce the consumption of paper and encourage environmental sustainability. Moreover, the HR Department implemented a system where all contracts and required documents related to the onboarding of employees are being signed digitally.

In addition to the above, the FES has an online portal system where parents can apply online if they wish to avail themselves of the service of Klabb 3-16 and/or Skolasajf.



4.1.1.7 Other digitisation initiatives by various Ministries and Entities

In 2023, the then MGOZ introduced a web-based system and mobile application, Events in Gozo, to showcase all events taking place in Gozo split according to the preferences of the users. Through this system, users who want to advertise and promote their events can directly upload information about the event from a backend and once vetted, the event will be published on the Events in Gozo portals. Furthermore, this platform allows tourists as well as citizens to have a central portal to view upcoming events which are of interest to them.

In 2023, the process also started on the tendering process for a Document Management System (DMS) at the Malta HA. The DMS is intended to replace the use of physical files. To assist in the preparatory work for the implementation of the DMS, two cross-departmental teams were established in the second half of 2023. The first one (project management team) tasked with the implementation of the DMS, while the second one (data governance team) responsible for the centralisation and integration of all data from the various departments of the HA allowing the Authority to harness the full value of its data assets.

Furthermore, the Treasury Department was involved in advocating for paperless workplaces and attaching documents in CFMS, including the minimisation of the use of cheques by making payments via the Single Euro Payments Area or online. Cheque payments have been restricted to a few exceptions.

The Registry and Archives of Malta also underwent a digitisation process whereby documents ranging from 1934 to 1950 were scanned, digitised, and stored in folders on SharePoint to ensure proper management of files, increasing accessibility. The plan is to digitise the remaining files ranging from 1951 to 2022. Archival material is also being digitised to ensure plans, maps, reports, and notebooks are organised and accessible for those performing research on historical and archaeological sites. This process will streamline the retrievability of files and eliminate the handling of files which are often in a fragile state, ensuring their conservation and preservation for future use, making achievable national as well as global access.

The PPD also launched a new electronic system where MORs (registered professional operators) may issue digital certificates replacing the paper certificates.

Additionally, the FIAU in collaboration with MITA, have improved the core infrastructure by adding further resilience and robustness to its infrastructure design through improved communication links, and additional energy-efficient server equipment. Further investments in E-Systems have been made to promote remote training and outreach events through the new event management system and core web streaming tools.

In collaboration with MITA, the structure and IT system of the Office of the Commissioner for Voluntary Organisations (OCVO), under the then Ministry for Inclusion, Voluntary Organisations and Consumer Rights (MIVC), will also be strengthened so that services offered to the associations through this platform begin to reflect a process that assists the work of the voluntary organisations. In 2023, a review of the systems available was carried out. Furthermore, the processes related to funds and grants for voluntary associations are being further simplified. At present, applications are submitted online through a dedicated platform which leads to the adjudication stage. The use of the platform will be extended for the life of the projects so that voluntary organisations benefitting from any scheme issued through MCVS and/or any other funding bodies can submit documentation related to the implementation of their projects (e.g. receipts and final reports) through the same online system.

Moreover, in 2023, the Gaming Malta Foundation entered a contract with UNITY, which was launched in January 2022. UNITY, a 2D and 3D game engine established in 2005, has developed the Unity Products — a game creation system and rendering engine widely utilised by millions of developers across various platforms. Unity is providing Gaming Malta Foundation with Unity Learning Credits, for access to the Unity Certification preparation self-study courseware and exams for up to 400 students. These learning credit vouchers are currently being assigned to students at MCAST and the UM.

4.1.1.8 Enhancement of digital public procurement processes and tools

From a digital perspective, the DOC continued to strive to digitise procurement processes, thus, enhancing sustainability and the transition to digitisation. In 2023, a drastically revamped government's national e-procurement system (Electronic Public Procurement System – ePPS) was deployed to make it more user-friendly and address the needs of Contracting Authorities/Entities.

In line with the EC's Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1780 establishing standard forms for the publication of notices in the field of public procurement (eForms), Malta, has now also integrated and implemented the e-Forms in 2023. Through Contracts Circular 16-2023 and Contracts Circular 20-2023, the DOC provided the necessary information on eForms implementation in Malta to Contracting Authorities/Entities, thus ascertaining that public procurement is at the fulcrum of the digital transformation. In fact, eForms are deemed to be instrumental in significantly yielding quality and analysis of data, resulting in good governance through data-driven decisions about public expenditure as well as reduction of administrative burden.

4.1.1.9 The use of digital technologies for compliance and monitoring purposes

In 2023, ERA hosted the plenary meeting for the National Focal Points (NFPs) on the European Environmental Information and Observation Network (Eionet), bringing together officials from the European Environment Agency (EEA), representatives across the EEA members and cooperating countries as well as the European Topic Centres. During the two-day plenary meeting, which was held between 10 and 11 October 2023, attendees discussed and reflected on potential ways to enhance country-level engagement between national stakeholders and how to increase the uptake of environmental information and data across Europe.

In 2023, ERA conducted over 35 drone surveys for either compliance or monitoring purposes. ERA also extended its efforts in the development of in-house web-GIS (Geographic Information Systems) applications using ESRI services to enhance ERA's monitoring and assessment regime. Such applications include the creation of digital field maps which strengthen the capability of ERA's officials during in situ surveys and inspections. More than 40 reports were submitted by ERA on behalf of Malta to fulfil international and European reporting obligations. By 2023, more than 60 datasets owned by ERA were made available on the Malta Spatial Data Infrastructure (MSDI) with no restrictions for access and use. Statistics indicate that in 2023, there were more than 75 instances where ERA-owned datasets were downloaded by the general public from the MSDI.

Furthermore, ERA continued to expand its Management Information Systems to include a number of core functions. This digitalisation exercise enables a more efficient approach, enhanced communication, and an increase in performance and services provided both within and outside ERA. The Environment Permitting Unit is fully dependent on the system developed as all the forms that the public needs to make use of are present within one system, Environment and Resources Information System. Apart from this, the customer care system within ERA was digitised which enabled cross-unit communication through one platform. This enabled ERA to have one point of reference when it comes to feedback, submission of illegalities, and requests for information.

When it comes to the fisheries sector, the DFA received funding for a project entitled, Operation B Tender for the Supply and Delivery of 720 Energy-Efficient Military Grade Electronic Tablets. The aim of this project was to allow the Department to further digitalise its services and increase connectivity with fishers. This was partly achieved through the provision of smart waterproof tablets to each vessel that is currently registered with DFA as MFA and MFB. These tablets are also being used by the fishers to electronically log their catches, renew their vessel licenses, store electronic copies of licenses and authorisations, and apply for the necessary authorisation/s to fish for Blue Fin Tuna, Swordfish, and Dolphinfish. Although, before this scheme, fishers were already able to perform some of these functions electronically, most lacked the necessary smart devices required to perform these functions remotely without physically going to the DFA's premises. The project was part-financed by the EU European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).



4.1.2 Enhancing electronic communications services

Malta Communications Authority (MCA) has a central role in ensuring that consumers and businesses obtain the maximum benefit in terms of choice, price, quality, and safety of electronic communications services. The MCA does this by ensuring that markets can work effectively through regulations that promote efficient investment, encourage innovation, facilitate the sharing of infrastructure, and empower consumers to choose and use electronic communications services with confidence. The core focus of the MCA's work is to promote and safeguard competition, creating an environment conducive to increased investment in very high-capacity networks (VHCN). The MCA works with industry to ensure that Malta's vital electronic communications networks are safe, secure, and resilient. High-quality digital infrastructure, based on VHCN, underpins almost all sectors of a modern and innovative economy. It can provide innovative services, more efficient business operations and smart, sustainable, digital societies while contributing to achieving Malta's environmental sustainability goals and the twin digital and green transition.

The MCA promotes VHCN deployment through, among others, collaboration with other competent authorities, notably through its involvement in the Utilities Services Coordinating Committee, which serves as a catalyst towards the establishment and maintenance of a joined-up approach to passive infrastructure deployment. In addition, the MCA is carrying out a nationwide mapping exercise, aimed at providing information on the location and extent of coverage of the nation's broadband infrastructure and services. While the MCA remains dedicated to facilitating VHCN deployment, it is also vigilant about the resilience and security of electronic communications networks throughout the value chain. Recognising that network resiliency involves factors such as redundancy, flexibility, and scalability (largely within the operator's responsibility), the MCA acknowledges its role in overseeing the interdependency of resiliency and security. Addressing the escalating concern regarding the security and integrity of electronic communications networks, in 2023, the MCA consulted on minimum security requirements and reporting obligations for operators. The final decision on these measures, coupled with implementation, is planned for 2024, aligning with the eventual framework implementing the EU Directive on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union (NIS2 Directive).

4.1.3 Enhancing Digital skills

In 2023, Jobsplus extended the offer of the Youth Guarantee to cover those Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs) aged between 15 years and 29 years. Participants are provided with financial and non-financial support to optimise their employability through individualised training and mentorship opportunities. To achieve its objectives, the scheme provides ICT courses, free SEC revision classes, NEET Activation Scheme II and MCAST Preventive Classes. This scheme systematically reduces the rate of early school leavers and, over the longer term, the number of unskilled and low-skilled workers in the workforce.

A 2nd NEET census covering youths aged 15-29 launched in 2023 was finalised in December 2023. The aim of the census was to map the target group in a post-pandemic reality and gauge the skillsets including digital skills, awareness of the green transition, interest in entrepreneurship and in carrying out a work placement abroad through the ALMA (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve) initiative, and, through qualitative research. The ALMA initiative is designed as a social empowerment initiative for disadvantaged young people aged 18 to 29 NEETs. The Youth Guarantee Unit has also started linking initiatives to create specific pathways for both youth and employers. A bespoke digital platform has been built specifically for the Youth Guarantee Unit to convert all training modules online for future training actions.

A scientific digital profiling tool has also been developed based on the DigComp 2.2 framework (Information and data literacy / Communication and collaboration / Digital content creation/ safety/ problem solving). The profiling tool has been tested with the Youth Guarantee Unit target group covering both age brackets 15-24 years and 25-29 years as well as relevant professionals such as trainers, mentors, and employment advisors. The profiling tool includes basic, medium, and high-test levels based on the academic levels of the youths. The tool will further provide downloadable insights on the strengths and weaknesses in particular areas and provide a general recommendation for improvement.

The eSkills Malta Foundation has developed the Maltese Digital Skills and Jobs Portal, codenamed LISP, which is an EU co-funded project which is a single point regarding digital and education skills. This project aims to support the Maltese National stakeholders to share their digital skills and jobs-related activities and content with the EU Core Service Platform and other relevant national coalition networks of actors in the MSs of the EU. It is meant to be a central point for anyone in education, industry, and society to get innovative inspiration, knowledge, easy access and overview on digital skills initiatives, courses, funding, events, best practices, intelligence reports, careers, and initiatives at both the national and European levels. Additionally, an Annual Digital Skills Bootcamp for specific target groups in Malta was held. The Bootcamp consisted of both events and courses.

In collaboration with All-Digital, a Generative AI online course for teachers and trainers meant to expand the knowledge on how these stakeholders can use Generative AI to make their teaching and tutoring more effective was developed. Furthermore, in collaboration with EY, a hackathon named Klimathon was held, about technology and sustainability where tertiary students formed teams to identify global or national problems about the environment, and then present solutions to the issue. A collaboration was also undertaken with JA Malta in an initiative to instil digital skills and knowledge in youth entrepreneurs. A number of coding events were also organised by the eSkills Malta Foundation including the EU Codeweek in Malta, an annual event where Malta excels in providing events and sessions to popularise coding or computational thinking for anyone who would like to experience coding in a fun way.

Furthermore, a global initiative entitled, Hour-of-Code, similar to EU Codeweek, was also championed in Malta. eSkills Malta Foundation also collaborated with MEYR on the 2023 Codesprint Youth Hackathon. A collaboration with the Cottonera and Kalkara LC was also formed in order to reach citizens through the various activities organised by the eSkills Malta Foundation. Robotics sessions at Skolasajf were also organised in collaboration with the FES where kids learn about the benefits of robotics and how to programme such devices. Career guidance was also provided through participation in the iChoose event, organised by MEYR. During this event career guidance was provided to secondary school students and youth in general through a number of career sessions provided by the eSkills Malta Foundation. ICT Industry Visits for secondary-level students coming from public and church schools were also organised.

MITA is also working to strengthen collaboration with educational institutions, community organisations and industry to mainstream eSkills in school curricula and lifelong education so that all cohorts of society, regardless of age or background, can engage with and benefit from digitalisation. In this regard, MITA is supporting UM to start offering a Cybersecurity Masters Course, in line with the industry requirements, as of the year 2024. MITA will be sponsoring a specialised cybersecurity lab that will facilitate practical cyber modules essential to securing cybersecurity knowledge and skills. MITA also consulted MCAST in the definition of the Cybersecurity Degree Course and will also be providing specialised training to the lecturers within this course to ensure that they are well-armed with the latest technology and trends in this evolving domain.

In 2023, MITA also launched the Cyber Skilling Programme addressing Security Operations Centre Analyst. The course was compiled in such a way making it accessible to anyone having an interest in cybersecurity or wanting to make a career change. This was developed in response to the need to address future requirements of the labour market in supporting digital skills development and job transition.

In 2023, Tech.mt developed a project entitled Women4IT, a multi-stakeholder partnership funded by EEA Grants and the Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment. The project was supported by 9 partners from across Europe and will be implemented in Malta, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Spain. Women4IT is aimed at raising awareness of digital skills and the gender gap and promoting concrete, innovative partnerships and solutions to increase the numbers of EU vulnerable girls and young women in the digital agenda by assisting 1,000 young women to take successful steps into digital job-related employment.

98 women enrolled in the Women4IT project in Malta, and 87 successfully completed their chosen courses. The courses included amongst others Customer Service Support, Junior Web Development, Digital Media Specialisation, Project Coordination and Software testing.

Through the Business Re-Engineering and Transformation Scheme, in 2023, ME offered support to SMEs to realign their business activity, restructure their employees, and product/or service portfolio, optimise the use of technology and embrace green technology and practices. Support may be awarded towards the adoption of digital technologies and further support of digital innovation within the beneficiary’s operating processes. Aid is granted in the form of a cash grant covering 50% of the costs incurred up to a maximum of €5,000 per advisory service. This Scheme is being revised and extended to reflect the new State Aid rules.

4.2 Building Sustainable Communities Through Smart Mobility and Connectivity

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
3.6	By 2020, halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents
9.1	Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and transborder infrastructure, to support economic development and human wellbeing, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all
11.2	By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons

Addressing sustainable mobility challenges requires prioritising alternative transport methods to reduce carbon emissions and promote environmentally friendly transportation options. The plan must strengthen transport links and connectivity reflecting the government’s commitment to a sustainable, efficient, and interconnected transportation system for environment and public benefit.

The Silver T Service, operating weekdays from 7:00 am to 2:00 pm, provides free local transport to seniors, enhancing their independence by facilitating access to essential services. The government is committed to the service’s ongoing enhancement, with AACC tasked with evaluating and improving its efficiency, coverage, and amenities. This focus on the Silver T Service reflects the government’s dedication to adapting to the needs of the aging population and fostering an inclusive environment for older citizens.

In 2023, the then MGOZ made significant progress on the Sustainable Multi-Intermodal Transport Hubs Project in Xewkija at tax-Xħajma area with construction works progressing well. The terminal building is nearing completion and the basement for HT cables and a substation with two 1600kVA transformers are completed. This multi-modal hub will also offer parking for racecourse visitors and aims to alleviate congestion at Mġarr harbour while enhancing outdoor recreational facilities for the public.

In collaboration with the MEYR Transport Unit, the FES facilitates transport for Klabb 3-16, an after-school service available in 33 different centres across Malta and Gozo. The FES also arranges holiday transport for children attending Resource Centres and during Skolasajf, ensuring access to services in localities with low demand. This supports parental work-life balance and contributes to traffic reduction.

The government aims to introduce 1,200 new public EV charging points, with a €20 million budget over three years, installing 600 new pillars with two charging points each across Malta and Gozo. These will include medium power chargers and fast chargers. During 2023, the project structure was formalised and consolidated, tenders for the works, supplies and services were drafted, the ongoing site identification exercise and stakeholder consultations, which are integral to the site identification exercise were continued, and a project management and other technical services contract were signed. Preliminary site clearances led to the start of the permitting process, and development began on a national EV charging infrastructure digital platform for user convenience.

In September 2023, Malta Public Transport (MPT) expanded its sustainable transportation efforts by adding 30 new zero-emission electric buses and launching its first electric bus charging depot. This investment will enhance service frequencies on key routes, reduce passenger wait times and increasing bus capacity, supporting the goal of reducing traffic congestion and pollution through sustainable transportation alternatives.

MPT’s new electric buses, featuring modern amenities like accessibility options, air conditioning, USB chargers, and free Wi-Fi, offer passengers a quieter, smoother ride. With advanced batteries allowing up to 300 kilometres per charge, these buses provide efficient service and can be charged overnight or quickly at the depot for continuous operation. They are expected to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 70% and reduce CO₂ emissions by 1,800 tonnes annually. The electrification initiative began with a pilot in January 2020, followed by two electric buses in 2022, and now includes an electric minibus trial for low-demand routes. Moreover, following the introduction of free public bus transport to all persons holding a personalised travel card (Tallinja card) on 1 October 2022, the number of unique users continued to increase from 196,151 in the period October 2021 to September 2022, to 265,378 in the period October 2022 to September 2023. Following the first year of full implementation, 54,986,401 passenger trips were conducted.

The Enforcement Directorate within TM increased its efforts in conducting roadside and roadworthiness checks, as these are an integral aspect of ensuring compliance with road safety regulations. This year, TM enhanced its operational efficiency, by consolidating two operational units into one cohesive unit. The primary objective behind this consolidation was to streamline efforts and increase focus on conducting more effective patrols of designated localities to address road illegalities. During the past year, the enforcement unit demonstrated commendable dedication and diligence by performing a total of 3,017 roadside inspections. These inspections played a crucial role in identifying and addressing various road-related offences, contributing to the overall improvement of road safety in the designated areas. Furthermore, the TM enforcement team conducted a total of 7,718 checks for roadworthiness, encompassing inspections both at TM premises as well as on the roadside. These thorough examinations aimed at ensuring that vehicles complied with the necessary safety standards, thereby mitigating potential risks and hazards on the roads.

4.3 Investing in Research and Innovation for Sustainable Growth

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
8.2	Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value-added and labour-intensive sectors
9.5	Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries, including, by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per 1 million people and public and private research and development spending

The National R&I Strategic Plan 2023-2027, was adopted in November 2023. The Strategic Plan acts as the flagship strategy for the strengthening of Maltese R&I and enhance its directionality with regard to tackling enduring social and economic issues through R&I.

Under the ERDF Regulation, Malta strategically directs its investments in R&I based on the thematic priorities established in its Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) 2021-2027. The Smart Specialisation Strategy 2021-2027 focuses on existing local R&I areas, prioritising them for additional investment to stimulate further R&I activity and increase Malta’s economic growth. Following the adoption of Malta’s RIS3 2021-2027, six thematic committees were formed, each aligned with a specific RIS3 area. These committees are in the implementation phase as they engage relevant stakeholders from the quadruple helix (government, academia, industry, and civil society) to provide valuable input and guidance on operationalising key actions.

When it comes to national funding programmes that drive and support local R&I, the Research Excellence Programme (REP), managed by MCST, is intended to fund projects which are still in the early stages of research, but which nonetheless boast a high degree of scientific excellence as well as national and international relevance. The programme provided grants of up to €80,000 in 2023. The REP makes up part of the FUSION portfolio which aims to support Maltese entrepreneurs to develop their concepts into a market-ready reality. Under the 2023 call, sixteen projects were awarded with respect to sustainable development.

The Technology Development Programme is another programme within FUSION, with the aim of providing state financing in the form of grants for research, development and innovation in science and technology. The focus of the Programme is to fund the actual development of the R&I proposal with the possibility of having a prototype of the proposed solution. The TDP provides grants of up to €295,000 to a consortium of at least two Maltese partners. Three projects have been provided with funding under the 2023 call with regard to sustainable development.

The aim of the Technology Extension Support Programme (TESP) is to incentivise the industry to seek technical support from Higher Education Institutes, to ensure incremental product or process improvement. This support measure provides a grant of up to €40,000 and is designed to incorporate R&I at all stages of product or process development, as well as support collaborations between private and public entities. One project has been awarded under the 2023 pilot call with respect to sustainable development.

The Space Upstream Programme was a one-off thematic call released in 2023 within FUSION. This fund aims to kick start Space Upstream activities in Malta since this is a sector that is currently not being addressed through a specific funding strand. This theme is pertinent to the Maltese government’s agreement to upgrade its current status with the European Space Agency (ESA) to a ‘European Cooperating State’. This fund has been customised to suit the upcoming upgrade of the agreement made with ESA with the intention of creating a space infrastructure in Malta. The scheme provided grants of up to €125,000. Two grants were provided to projects related to sustainable development.

In 2023, the EcoGozo Directorate within the then MGOZ in collaboration with the Institute of Space Sciences and Astronomy of the UM, installed Malta’s first National Optical Astronomy Observatory at il-Qortin Ta’ Soppu, Nadur. Such an observatory will be used both for scientific research purposes and as a training facility for physics and astrophysics students. It will also serve to raise scientific awareness amongst the general public through outreach activities.

A call for application was issued in 2023 under the Malta Digital Innovation Authority (MDIA) AI Applied Research Grant. This grant aims to increase the capacity for AI-related research in Malta, investment in AI-related R&D activities, adoption of AI technologies by the public and private sectors and the collaboration between academia and commercial.

The Takeoff Seed Fund Awards (TOSFA) is a joint initiative between the then Ministry for the Economy, European Funds and Lands and the UM, supported by the Knowledge Transfer Office, Centre for Entrepreneurship and Business Incubation and the TAKEOFF Business Incubator. A total of €100,000 has been earmarked for distribution between start-ups and academics to enable the next phase towards the commercialisation of their business or research idea. Grants between €2,500 and €25,000 are to be awarded to the selected projects. In 2023, the MDIA also joined this initiative with a further input of €50,000 to support research projects in the area of AI. Researchers at the UM will be eligible to apply for Proof-of-Concept funds which can help to bring their research closer to commercialisation. Seed Funding is available for entrepreneurs to move their venture closer to securing their first customer or investment. Five projects from the 2022 cycle are still in progress, while in 2023, eight projects were selected to benefit from the TOSFA grants, with a selection of two proof-of-concept and six seed fund ideas, two of which are based on AI.

The SINO-Malta Fund emanated from the framework of the Agreement on Science and Technological Cooperation between the Government of Malta and the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and subsequent agreements by the Joint Commission on Science & Technology between the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) of the PRC and MCST. MCST and MOST launch annual calls for funding to support bilateral R&I projects between Maltese and Chinese researchers. The two-stage 2022 call was concluded in 2023 and supported four projects on digital technologies, health, and green transitions. In 2023, the call was launched as a one-stage call for a more efficient and concise call process, and a total of six projects on digital technologies and blue and green transitions were supported.

The Horizon Europe National Contact Point within MCST continued disseminating information about Horizon Europe, the EU's key funding programme for R&I, and its various calls for proposals by providing guidance to potential applicants, helping them navigate the programme's complexities and how their projects can align with the SDGs.

Horizon Europe takes an integrated approach to R&I, encouraging projects that contribute to multiple SDGs simultaneously. This ensures that the programme's activities have a meaningful impact on sustainability, environmental protection, social equality and economic development. National Contact Points (NCPs) also facilitate networking and consortium building for such multidisciplinary projects targeting the SDGs. Since the beginning of the programme in 2021, Maltese entities have received more than €36 million in net contributions from Horizon Europe.

Esplora Interactive Science Centre is the benefactor of the National STEM Community Fund which provides grants of up to €8,000 per project, with a total of €24,000 distributed in 2023 across five projects. The primary aim of the fund is to enable the implementation of participatory STEM projects that are based on the theoretical and practical aspects of STEM, and which involve citizens and STEM professionals working together.

With regard to its Education Programme, Esplora offers an array of activities linked to the SDGs, targeting school groups and members of the general public. Activities include workshops such as Climate Conundrum, which investigates the present-day impacts of climate change on our local environment and explores practical solutions for a sustainable future, especially in relation to the role of citizens in climate action and Akkwatiku, during which participants explore the importance of maintaining balance for a healthy aquatic ecosystem in relation to overfishing, aquaculture and eutrophication.

Moreover, Esplora acts as a science communication hub, providing a platform to bridge the gap and foster dialogue between scientists and the general public. One notable event was Esplora's 7th Anniversary Event, which brought together environmental NGOs, dedicated researchers, and scientists actively working to combat the climate crisis and build a more sustainable future. This event, held at the science centre, allowed visitors to learn about the latest advancements in climate science, discover practical ways to reduce their carbon footprint and engage with local research initiatives, including citizen science campaigns aimed at recording and preserving our natural environment.

4.3.1 R&I projects in the field of environmental sustainability

The Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership (SBEP) is a Horizon Europe partnership that enables an unprecedented effort to pool R&I investments and align national programmes at a pan-European scale, taking into consideration the sea-basin and Atlantic Ocean dimensions. The SBEP launched its first annual call in the first quarter of 2023, and a positive result was achieved for Malta as two projects involving Maltese beneficiaries have been selected for award.

MCST actively participates in the Joint Programming Initiative Healthy and Productive Seas and Oceans (JPI Oceans). Through participation in this intergovernmental platform, Malta is currently involved in 3 actions. Malta is co-leading the JPI Oceans Joint Action – Science for Good Environmental Status (S4GES) in collaboration with Italy and Belgium to adopt an innovative approach to the evaluation of the marine 'Good Environmental Status'. The Action seeks to better understand marine ecosystems, how multiple activities impact the environment and how the requests of the MSFD can be fulfilled.

During 2023, a workshop was organised in Malta on 'Science to Policy: Appraising Concepts for the Marine Good Environmental Status'. On the first day, scientists discussed the current state of scientific support for defining and evaluating 'good environmental status' while on the second day, scientists, policymakers and practitioners discussed the progress of implementing the MSFD and the effectiveness of scientific support to policy in marine challenges, acknowledged the crucial role of the EU in addressing blue sustainability worldwide, and proposed future actions to efficiently and effectively fulfil the MSFD.

In April 2023, a scoping exercise, the JPI Oceans Management Board adopted a new Joint Action on Blue Carbon, led by Ireland with France as co-lead and Malta as a partner. This action focuses on leveraging 'blue carbon' for climate mitigation and supporting environmental and climate policies at a national, EU and international level. As a first step, the joint action will be developing a platform and network to facilitate the synthesis, exchange and integration of knowledge on blue carbon ecosystems across Europe and a joint call is foreseen later, in 2025.

The Malta ClimAccelerator Programme, focusing on sectors like clean energy and agriculture, emphasised startups' roles in achieving net-zero carbon economies. The programme for 2023, with MCAST's support, focused on providing tailored support and funding opportunities to a number of startups active in various thematic areas, including Clean Energy, Clean Industry, Circular Economy, Mobility and Transport, Air and the Environment, Energy Efficiency and Storage, Water, and Agriculture. The programme aimed to scale cleantech startups to rapidly reduce carbon emissions, thereby contributing to the transition to sustainable societies and net-zero carbon economies.

Malta also participated in the Mediterranean Island Cleantech Innovation Ecosystem (MICIE), financed by the Horizon Europe Programme. The MICIE Project was created with the aim of strengthening the contribution of R&I in achieving the climate and energy targets of Malta and Cyprus as defined in their National Energy and Climate Plans (NECP).

The BlueMissionMed project was launched in January 2023 and was funded by the EU. This project is a comprehensive initiative with the goal of revitalising and preserving the Mediterranean Sea by 2030. The project's focus on depollution and regeneration involves collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including research institutions, NGOs, industrial associations, and SMEs from Mediterranean MSs and associated countries. The key components include a multi-actor consortium, a MED Lighthouse for innovative solutions, an interactive digital platform, coherence and alignment of policies, the establishment of an innovation ecosystem, robust societal engagement, and the deployment of Mission objectives by 2025. The MCST has actively contributed to various tasks and participated in the kick-off meeting in Rome, Italy, in January 2023, the first BlueMissionMed Stakeholder Forum in Palermo, Italy, in May 2023, and the launch event of the BlueMissionMed Maltese Hub in Kalkara, Malta, in December 2023.

The Youth for Sustainable Mobility and Inclusion (TRAILS) project, funded by the EU (EIT Urban Mobility) and conducted in 2023, aimed to foster innovation in electromobility education in Bulgaria and Malta. The project began with an assessment of the local needs in electromobility and new vehicle technologies and subsequently worked on an enhanced EV education programme, while also seeking feedback from lecturers, students, and industry. MCAST's participation facilitated this innovative electromobility education, which is vital for sustainable urban mobility systems. Meanwhile, as the academic partner of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) Urban Mobility Regional Innovation Scheme Hub Malta, diverse projects, such as the upskilling of a number of academics and public service employees on urban mobility, underlined MCAST's commitment to sustainable cities and communities, as highlighted in the EIT Urban Mobility's 2023 Highlights Report.

MCAST participated in the Higher Education Innovation Growth and Training: Heightening Sustainable Innovation in our Higher Education Institutions and Societies (HEIght) project. This project, which was funded through EIT Climate-KIC and was finalised in 2023, focused on lifelong learning and capacity building in innovation. HEIght was aimed at building innovation and entrepreneurial capacity within the participating higher education institutions, as well as contributing to broader societal innovation.

4.3.2 R&I projects in the field of cultural heritage

In 2023, SCH sought funding through the IPERION HS (Integrating Platforms for the European Research Infrastructure on Heritage Science) scheme for a research project on Punic and Roman Malta called: 'Tracing Populations in Punic and Roman Malta' (TRAPPROM). The project seeks to establish a chronology, biological profiles, and the diet of the Punic and Roman diaspora in Malta. The project is centred around a Punic necropolis excavated between 2018 and 2020 by SCH. With these funds, the SCH Research Team is using the facilities of the Science for Life Lab (SciLifeLab) in Sweden, the National Institute for Nuclear Physics Florence in Italy, and the Department of Archaeology at the University of York in the United Kingdom, wherein samples were sent for DNA testing, isotope testing, and C14 testing. This is the first research initiative combining these tests for the period under study in Malta, which will lead to a major publication of this archaeological site.

Furthermore, SCH also forms part of the Horizon 2021-2027 project titled BCTubs: Blue Culture Technology (BCT) Excellence Hubs in EU Widening MSs. The BCTubs project is set to run from January 2023 to the end of December 2026. It involves 15 partners from Greece, Bulgaria, Italy and Malta, including the ITS. BCT promotes innovative technologies developed to support underwater cultural heritage in terms of scientific research, accessibility, and valorisation. This project will establish permanent hubs in Malta, Greece, and Bulgaria as well as in other future participating countries to provide cutting-edge scientific and innovative solutions and products in areas of sustainable Blue Economy and Culture. Its overall objective is to empower SMEs' innovation capacity, maritime clusters and networks, public authorities, and other key actors to boost BCT within the Mediterranean.

4.3.3 R&I projects in the agricultural and food sectors

The 4-year EXCEL4MED project, funded by the EU under Horizon Europe, aims to enhance innovation excellence in the Mediterranean. Focused on nutritious food production and the valorisation of food industrial side-streams, it involves a cross-border collaboration among 14 organisations in Greece, Malta, and France. The MFA is one of the partners of the project. This collaboration aims to strengthen Mediterranean food added-value chains through interconnected innovation ecosystems involving company organisations, research institutions, governmental bodies, and societal actors. Living labs organised in Malta and Greece facilitated discussions with stakeholders and consumers to evaluate and promote green technologies for the Mediterranean agri-food supply chain. Throughout 2023, project partners participated in conferences and fairs, fostering idea exchange. A comprehensive consumer survey conducted in Malta was held by the MFA, while other partners carried out the consumer survey in their respective countries. The aim of the consumer survey was to assess consumer acceptance and willingness to purchase agricultural products and foodstuff being produced and their willingness to pay a premium for them.

Malta's Action Plan for Organic Food is a research and development-related strategy that emphasises the need to boost the local organic food R&I ecosystem through MAFA's R&I Centre, the AgriHub. This boost will occur through collaboration with relevant government entities, such as MEYR, MCST, and MCAST, as well as by promoting Maltese involvement in pan-European programmes such as the Horizon Europe Cluster 6 which in turn improves the competitiveness and productivity of the organic farming sector. The key role will be to engage in research, trials, and development across organic production. The purpose will extend to collecting and disseminating knowledge and solutions about organic production to organic farmers and advisors.

Additionally, the PPD continued working in conjunction with other relevant stakeholders on the establishment of a National Gene Bank for the ex-situ conservation of indigenous agricultural crops and trees as well as wild indigenous and endemic plant species (plant genetic resources) both of which are of importance to Malta's natural and cultural heritage.

Over recent years, the Genetic Resources Conservation Unit within the PPD was established with the aim of researching and conserving plant genetic resources for food and agriculture, including landraces and wild crop relatives of relevance to agriculture. Through this project, Malta's crop wild relatives have been identified for the first time. Resources were allocated to plant tissue culturing to explore the ex-situ multiplication and conservation of plants of agricultural importance including wild plants of benefit to pollinators such as *Phlomis fruticosa*, *Cheirolophus crassifolius*, *Anthyllis hermanniae*, as well as wild food plants such as *Morus alba*, *Morus nigra*, and wild occurring plants with potential use as rootstock such as *Pyrus syriaca* and *Pistacia lentiscus*. A budget of over €3 million from EU co-funding was allocated for the establishment of Malta's national gene bank for the conservation of plant genetic resources, which features herbarium collections, a molecular research laboratory, seed storage vaults and a public museum to help raise awareness on Malta's plant biodiversity. The unit further cooperated with other entities such as the UM for the genetic study of three Maltese endemic plants to further the knowledge regarding local plant biodiversity and has also cooperated with the Argotti Botanical Gardens and Resource Centre to increment the living collections of wild indigenous plants found within the PPD's gardens.

R&I is also an important pillar in the Public Abattoir's efforts towards the valorisation of local agri-meat products. It is underpinning most of the efforts undertaken to date in the area of traditional products, as well as laying the basis for future efforts to establish the long-term sustainability of the local livestock and meat processing industries. A team of historians at the abattoir is currently conducting research on traditional meat-based products in order to rediscover the sustainable approaches and transpose these into modern production techniques in order to ensure further environmental and economic sustainability. Furthermore, in 2023, researchers from the University of Gent conducted research on the classification of pork in Malta whilst facilitating the development of a Malta-based regression equation for the classification of pork. In particular, the research focused on the use of either carcass half for swine classification (as opposed to the usual right-hand side) and the implications thereof on various classification parameters. The Public Abattoir has also supported the UM in conducting research on the historic 'water tank' both in the latter's development of an innovative self-repairing concrete mixture which is more resilient and utilises recycled materials for its production, as well as in facilitating ongoing monitoring and model development.

Research has also been undertaken in order to develop new products which utilise the byproducts currently produced at the abattoir. These include the development of new products based on pork tongue, lard, liver and blood/ *mazzit*. Following the increase in the demand for blood for *mazzit*, and in order to retain key elements of the traditional *mazzit* production process (including timings), a piece of equipment was custom designed for own use. This includes the development of a low-energy system for the stirring of blood and the separation of fibrin, passive filtering and bottling and the non-utilisation of citric acids or other conserving agents as part of the process.

PRIMA (Partnership for R&I in the Mediterranean Area) facilitates collaborative R&I in the areas of water management, farming systems and agro-food value chain. PRIMA operates under two main lines of funding – Section 1 and Section 2. In Section 1 calls are funded through EC funds whilst in Section 2 calls are funded by the countries participating in PRIMA. Consequently, one project including a Maltese entity within its consortium has been selected for funding through PRIMA Section 2 throughout 2023, and this was related to the agro-food value chain.

As part of the PRIMA Section 3, which consists of activities organised, managed and funded by the PRIMA Participating States, in 2020, MCST and the Scientific Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK), signed a collaborative agreement to bilaterally support cooperation in Science, Technology and Innovation between Malta and Turkey. As a result, MCST and TÜBİTAK jointly launched three MCST-TÜBİTAK joint calls for proposal to carry out bilateral R&I projects. The 2023 calls featured the thematic areas of digital technologies, health and sustainable manufacturing in addition to the PRIMA thematic areas (water management, farming systems and agro-food value chain). Five projects were ultimately supported by the 2023 call, and these addressed R&I on digital technologies, health technologies, farming systems and sustainable manufacturing.

Through PRIMA Section 3, the Internationalisation Unit within MCST administered the PRIMA Training and Mobility Award for the first time in 2022, which supports Maltese entities in forming collaborative links with at least one foreign counterpart from any of the PRIMA participating states. Through this award, applicants can develop cross-border collaborations, and undertake research activities or training activities in the PRIMA thematic areas, leading to the submission of a proposal to any PRIMA-related call. This call was relaunched in 2023, and two Maltese entities were supported.



Chapter 5

Achieving Social Fairness and Prosperity for All

A just and equitable society is a fundamental for sustainable development. This is reflected by several government measures and initiatives aimed at fostering a fair economic system aimed at fighting poverty and social exclusion, to ensure a dignified life for all generations. Efforts are being made to guarantee access for all to the necessary resources and services which contribute to individuals' growth which in turn promotes the prosperity of the whole community. The government will therefore continue to mainstream diversity and inclusion within a wide range of policies and administrative practices, with the goal of eradicating all forms of inequalities and discriminations. The government will also continue to prioritise the creation of safe spaces and buildings, designed to be accessible for all, regardless of race, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender, ethnic origin, religion, ability, and economic background.

At the same time, the improvement of the justice sector remains at the top of the government's agenda. This is achieved by ensuring an accessible path to justice to support and protect victims, as well as holding offenders accountable, and enhancing and introducing measures that strengthen all institutions and regulations for the protection of the public's freedom, order, safety, and peace.

Moreover, investing in a high-quality education system that is responsive to the evolving needs of the labour market is crucial. This is achieved by fostering strong partnerships between educational institutions and industry leaders to ensure curriculum development which reflects current and future job market demands.

The government is also adamant to promote equal opportunities and fair, safe, and secure working environments. This commitment ensures a level playing field for all, fostering a diverse and inclusive workforce. This is achieved by eliminating discrimination, promoting work-life balance initiatives, and establishing robust safety regulations and enforcement mechanisms. These actions will empower individuals, cultivate a positive work culture, and contribute to a thriving and sustainable economy.

This chapter will highlight measures, projects and initiatives undertaken by the government linked to the 2030 Agenda: SDGs 1-5, 8-13, 16 and 17.

2030 AGENDA RELATED GOALS



5.1 Empowering Individuals and Communities Through Policy Instruments and Measures for the Benefit of All

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
1.1	By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day
1.2	By 2030, reduce at least half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions
1.3	Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable
1.4	By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance
1.5	By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters
1.b	Create sound policy frameworks at the national, regional and international levels, based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies, to support accelerated investment in poverty eradication actions
2.1	By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round
2.2	By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under five years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons
3.5	Strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol
4.4	By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
4.5	By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations
4.6	By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy
4.7	By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development
5.1	End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

5.2	Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation
5.3	Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation
5.5	Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life
5.b	Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women
5.c	Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels
8.1	Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least seven per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries
8.3	Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalisation and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services
8.5	By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value
8.6	By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training
8.7	Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms
8.8	Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment
9.1	Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and transborder infrastructure, to support economic development and human wellbeing, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all
10.1	By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom forty per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average
10.2	By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status
10.3	Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard
10.4	Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality
10.7	Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies

11.2	By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons
16.1	Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere
16.2	End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children
16.7	Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels
16.10	Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements
16.a	Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime
16.b	Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development
17.2	Ensure developed countries fully implement their official development assistance commitments, including the commitment by many developed countries to achieve the target of 0.7 per cent of ODA/GNI to developing countries and 0.15 to 0.20 per cent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries; ODA providers are encouraged to consider setting a target to provide at least 0.20 per cent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries
17.3	Mobilise additional financial resources for developing countries from multiple sources
17.6	Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the UN level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism
17.9	Enhance international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all the Sustainable Development Goals, including through North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation
17.13	Enhance global macroeconomic stability, including through policy coordination and policy coherence
17.14	Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development
17.15	Respect each country's policy space and leadership to establish and implement policies for poverty eradication and sustainable development
17.16	Enhance the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilise and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in all countries, in particular developing countries
17.17	Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships
17.19	By 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product, and support statistical capacity-building in developing countries

5.1.1 Poverty reduction and social inclusion

As in previous years, since the launch of the National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion 2014-2024, government has continued to monitor the local situation of poverty and social exclusion vis-à-vis the implementation of this strategic policy on a quarterly basis. Throughout 2023, this monitoring activity not only facilitated the preparation and submission of ad hoc reports to the EC but also contributed to the forthcoming Implementation and Evaluation Report, scheduled for publication in 2024.

Government is committed to continue addressing poverty in a holistic way. In 2023, MSPC intensified its efforts to formulate a renewed National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion for the period 2025-2035. The main target is for Malta to have one of the lowest rates of people 'At Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion' (AROE) in the EU. To this end, the Ministry is collaborating with the main government entities to lead a strategic approach. In 2023, over forty-five bilateral pre-consultation meetings were coordinated with the main stakeholders.

In 2023, ACTS continued to work with individuals and families to address issues contributing to poverty and social exclusion. This was done through targeted interventions such as the GEMMA initiative which aims to equip our society with effective financial knowledge. Through this initiative, educational and awareness-raising activities are designed specifically for different cohorts to reach all spheres of society. Initiatives carried out during 2023 through GEMMA include:

- A series of workshops (which will be continued during 2024) with partners in collaboration with LCs to educate persons aged sixty plus in digital financial literacy (including learning to use banking apps), benefits, scams and frauds;
- Training sessions on various topics as an introduction to financial basics were organised and delivered to SMEs for self-employed or those thinking about becoming self-employed (target group 18+) in collaboration with HSBC Malta Foundation, Ernst & Young (Malta), and Tax and Customs Administration Malta. This was carried out twice in the first and fourth quarters; and
- Undertook the OECD international research through a service provider in order to measure financial literacy and financial inclusion in Malta and compare it to other countries.

Further to the above, MSPC participated in the European Consumer Debt Network (ECDN) Project for the Provision of a European Platform for the Prevention of Over-indebtedness by the Increase of Accessibility and the Improvement of Effectiveness of Debt Advice (PEPPI). Such participation entailed:

- Assisting ECDN in organising an international conference in Malta where MS project participants and local stakeholders contributed;
- Undertaking a series of virtual national network meetings;
- Participating in ECDN-hosted webinars with local and foreign stakeholders and experts to raise awareness and share knowledge in the area;
- Educating children in financial capability through the creation of flashcards for middle-school-age children with financial capability educational themes, the publication of two books in Maltese with financial capability educational themes as well as the participation in the state-run 'Skolasajf' summer school with sessions and a competition for children;
- Educating through social platforms; and
- Participating in media events on TV, radio programmes and other platforms like podcasts, as well as other events.

Furthermore, FSWS within MSPC collaborates closely with the HA to facilitate bank loans for families currently leasing a property or requiring shelter to obtain a loan without having to pay the 10% down payment (deposit). An agreement between two local banks facilitates such referrals and follow-up, and this initiative was ongoing in 2023. The FSWS Research Team also produced a report to examine trends of non-Maltese service users within FSWS and to monitor the primary problems for which they seek support, with the aim of providing services and developing policies, founded on evidence-based data.

In 2023, the HESC Team continued to facilitate 'The Responsible Living' Programme, an EU-funded project that aims to support the educational achievement of school children at risk of poverty and from low socio-economic backgrounds, as well as to reduce the relatively high incidence of early school leavers. The focus of the programme is financial literacy, as well as consumer, environmental, health and food literacy.

5.1.1.1 Community Outreach and Services

The Qawra Community Services carried out several initiatives throughout 2023 including the Winter Wonderland Christmas Event, a free admittance event focused on all locality residents. Furthermore, a Sports Day was organised to connect excluded or isolated and/or vulnerable families within the Qawra Community team. Dawra Durella groups were developed to provide social and basic skills for young people through informal sessions on social subjects that include stopping violence, meeting with community police, and addictions. Another project is that of 'Kif Aħna? Nieħdu ħsieb is-Saħħa Mentali Tagħna'. This is a self-help group for clients who may feel alone in their struggles with mental health, as well as those who feel that they need more holistic support to become more functional in their daily lives.

The Żabbar Community Services also carried out a number of activities, namely, Me Tween. This project aims to provide a safe space for eleven thirteen-year-old adolescents to be themselves and socialise in an informal manner. The Żabbar Community Services also developed a Parents Programme aimed to normalise the need for parents/grandparents to have their own space to grow, refuel, connect with other parents, and learn/reflect on how they can strengthen their role as parents/grandparents.

The Southern Community Services carried out multiple measures in 2023. Superheroes of the Earth (Winter and Summer Camp) aimed to take the social permaculture approach allowing children to learn not only how to sustainably take care of plants and the environment, but also about the importance of other values that can be transferred from gardening to life in general. The Southern Community Services also developed the 'Don't Waste Just Save' initiative in collaboration with the ERA, focusing on energy saving and home economics.

The Valletta/Floriana Community Services also undertook various activities, the first two being Kuluri, a children's programme focusing on basic social skills, active citizenship, and cultural activities and a Support Group used to raise awareness on mental health, and self-care. Charity Begins at Home was a one-day fair held to promote cultural and artistic participation within the community; provide an opportunity to increase self-empowerment, skills, and creativity; understand and appreciate the community's artistic talents; promote community cohesion during the festive season; and collect food donations for the Foodbank Lifeline Foundation. The Valletta/Floriana Community Services also launched the Library of Valletta Community Service, a community library to be used by the residents of Valletta and Floriana. A homework club entitled 'Ikber Magħna' led by the Optimist Club of Malta, was launched. This is aimed at children who need help with their homework. Furthermore, a digital literacy course was organised and provided familiarisation with the use of tablets, Microsoft Teams, Online Shopping, social media, Online Communication, social media, and the use of applications.

Initiatives formed by the Western Community Services include an Outreach Activity where the Western community team participated in the trades fair organised by St. Ignatius College. Teaming up with the college's career guidance department, the team connected skilled tradespeople who were discovered during the Qormi mapping, with the students. Anzjani Teżor was an additional project aimed at identifying elderly persons who are isolated from the community and offering them home sessions delivered by volunteers from the same community. A Community Walk and Outreach in Baħrija, Rabat was organised together with the Obstacle Course Academy, including a community trail walk through the magnificent Blata tal-Melħ scenery.

The Msida/Birkirkara Community Services carried out the following measures in 2023. Attivitajiet 60+ Programme was a project undertaken in partnership with the Msida Parish where informative talks aimed at health and wellbeing, outdoor activities, and physical mobility exercises were organised. The Migrants Festival Malta was also organised to celebrate the diversity of cultures with different community members in Malta.

The Cottonera Community Services carried out various initiatives in 2023. Qawsalla is a group developed with the aim of supporting women in enhancing their support network, potential, and skills, and passing them on to one another and within their community. Sessions are delivered by professional speakers and focus on topics of interest identified by the women themselves. Additionally, iTeens is a project aimed at young people who would like to engage with other youths in a safe environment. Sessions are aimed at building inter- and intra-personal skills. An extension of the iTeens project is iTeens Leaders, an initiative to support six iTeens participants in coordinating the iTeens project. This initiative focuses on conveying leadership skills needed for such a role and also has the aim to support the leaders on a personal level and as a team. The Cottonera Workshop was formed as a space where participants can learn skills related to manual work and meet others with the same interests. Furthermore, the Kids Point Programme is an initiative with the aim of providing children with alternative community activities during the summer holidays, with the intention of boosting children's creative and critical thinking and sensitivity to socio-educational issues. The Cottonera Community Service also organised an Autism Support Group to provide guidance and support to families who are struggling with having children who fall under the autism spectrum. Cottonera Community Services also aimed at establishing new networks with different organisations in the Senglea/Paola communities and promoted its services to the residents.

The Tarxien Social Club is a project aimed at elderly people who live in Tarxien and the surrounding areas. The group is done in collaboration with the St. Augustine Friars, Jean Antide, and the committee of the group. Various activities are organised by the community workers and the committee of the group including educational talks, fun activities, outings and religious activities.

5.1.2 Gender Equality

In line with the Gender Equality and Mainstreaming Strategy Action Plan, a review process of the Maltese legislation is taking place to identify and remove any provisions which needlessly differentiate between men and women.

A study was conducted to explore the access to, and the costs related to menstrual products. A social media campaign was conducted to raise awareness about menstrual stigma, and to promote equality and closing the wage gap, and the criminalisation of virginity testing.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) consolidates a yearly report on developments following the receipt of submissions by government departments on the implementation of gender mainstreaming. In 2023, the NCPE received one hundred and twenty-nine gender mainstreaming reports from government departments and entities. Furthermore, the NCPE is empowered by Chapter four hundred and fifty-six to investigate cases of alleged discrimination on grounds which fall within its remit. In 2023, the NCPE received five complaints with respect to the access to goods and services. Moreover, in 2023, two online training sessions were delivered to forty public sector employees on the gender mainstreaming strategy for better understanding and reporting obligations.

The NCPE continuously raises awareness about the rights and responsibilities related to equality. This is carried out through its communications on traditional and social media platforms, alongside the organisation of conferences and seminars, to effectively transmit the message on the importance of equality and non-discrimination in society to different audiences ranging from stakeholders to the public.

Additionally, in 2023, the NCPE carried out a research study on 'The Prevalent Gender Role Perceptions and Attitudes among Adults Living in Malta' in collaboration with the Faculty of Social Wellbeing of the UM. The research analysed the prevalence and persistence of stereotypes in Maltese society to shed light on the extent to which the patriarchal mentality is still present in society and its subsequent impact on the opinions and attitudes of the Maltese population.

A conference was organised to mark International Women's Day 2023. The discussion focused on 'Strengthening Equality', the proposals for the new directives on Standards for Equality Bodies published by the EC and how they contribute to strengthening the endeavours towards equality for the benefit of society. The NCPE also developed and disseminated leaflets on Standards for Equality Bodies during the conference.

The NCPE continued to administer the Directory of Professional Women. To date, two hundred and seventy-seven professional women are registered on NCPE's online directory.

The year 2023 marks the thirteenth consecutive year of the NCPE's implementation of the Equality Mark Certification which is awarded to organisations that make gender equality one of their core values and whose management is based on the recognition and promotion of the potential of all employees. To date, one hundred and thirty-six organisations with 31,000 employees are certified with the Equality Mark.

NCPE also hosted a business breakfast to launch its Equal Pay Tool, which helps organisations identify and address potential unjustifiable pay inequalities. NCPE also provides guidance to organisations who ask for assistance with respect to the drafting of an Equality Policy and a Sexual Harassment Policy, alongside putting in place or improving the availability of family-friendly measures.



5.1.3 LGBTQ+ Equality

On the International Day against LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer, and other sexually or gender diverse) Phobia on 17 May 2023, the Human Rights Directorate (HRD), hosted a conference to launch the LGBTQ+ Equality Strategy and Action Plan for the years 2023-2027. The launch of the LGBTQ+ Equality and Action Plan 2023-2027 shed light on issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sexual characteristics among other issues. The plan covers ten thematic areas and over hundred measures with a focus on awareness raising and sensitivity, mainstreaming of existing laws and policies, closing the gap to reach 100% equality on the ILGA-Europe's Rainbow Map and tackling disinformation. This strategy and action plan also sets the ground for further commitments into adopting and/or amending policies and legislations to better improve the quality of life of LGBTQ+ persons, particularly taking an intersectional approach in reaching this goal. In the same conference, a panel discussion was held on the use of language that is respectful towards everyone, represented by members of the academia and of the LGBTQ+ community.

In April 2023, the Media Reference Guide and Queer Dictionary was launched in both Maltese and English to support various content writers, journalists and the general audience in making correct and responsible use of the terminology when reporting LGBTQ+ issues. The Maltese version of these documents was the first of its kind, with the glossary of terms serving as an important tool in mainstreaming respectful language in spoken Maltese.

A temporary LGBTQ+ Hub is currently operating in Paola offering the services of the Gender Wellbeing Clinic.

EuroPride 2023 was held in Valletta, Malta in 2023 between 7 and 17 September. Throughout this period, a diverse array of cultural and performative events, conferences, exhibitions and other gatherings were held to support the local and international LGBTQ+ community and amplify its voices. An LGBTQ+ Human Rights Conference was organised by HRD in collaboration with the Allied Rainbow Communities between 13 and 15 September 2023. The conference featured a number of important issues that are relevant to the LGBTQ+ community locally, regionally and worldwide, including the rights of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, the lives of LGBTQ+ in the MENA Region, sports, sexual health, faith, trans and intersex rights, Rainbow Families across Europe and the Pride Movement under attack.

In the run-up to EuroPride Valletta 2023, sensitivity training was provided to officers of the police force and security officers who were on duty during the ten days of EuroPride Valletta. This training was done in collaboration with the Academy of the Disciplined Forces, HRD and members of the LGBTQ+ Consultative Council. LGBTQ+ sensitivity training based on the SOGIGESC Guidelines in the public administration was provided to members of staff of the Public Registry Department. On training, HRD has a long-standing agreement with the Academy for the Disciplined Forces, which provides training on LGBTQ+ topics to members of the Police Force. This training is provided to recruits and anyone wishing to progress in their ranks (from constable to sergeant, and from sergeant to inspector). HRD also provides training to educators and psycho-social support staff in schools. Different colleges can apply for training through their school system, upon which HRD is then notified and tailors a session to the needs of the particular school.

Malta remains an active member of various international and European inter-governmental networks. These include the UN-LGBT Core Group and the European Research Council. HRD also directly participates in the GT-ADI-SOGI of the Council of Europe (COE), the European Governmental LGBTI Focal Points Network and the LGBTQ Equality Subgroup of the EU. In May 2023, Malta reconfirmed its interest in hosting the IDAHOBIT-25 European Forum, which will also give Malta a three-year co-chairing status within the European Governmental LGBTI Focal Points Network. This application was unanimously confirmed by the other MSs of the meeting. Malta also joined a working group of the COE, tasked with drafting ministerial recommendations on the rights of intersex persons. The working group met for the first time in Paris in September and is scheduled to continue meeting until these recommendations are finalised and adopted in 2026. Continuous updates on the proceedings of this working group will be provided in the GT-ADI-SOGI meetings throughout the years to follow.

5.1.4 Anti-Racism and Integration

Throughout 2023, the HRD together with ENAR, Diversit, Kopin, UM, and NCPE (Beneficiaries) and NSO (Associate Partner) continued with the implementation of the project 'Towards the Implementation of the Anti-Racism Strategy in Malta' (END-RACISM-MT), a project co-financed by the EU under the CERV fund. This project, which is being implemented over two and a half years, supports the implementation of key measures in the Anti-Racism Strategy 2021-2023. In 2023, work continued with representatives of each government ministry, nominated by their respective Permanent Secretary, in the Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) established in 2021. The committee met four times in 2023. The Anti-Racism Strategy envisages the creation of intra-ministerial action plans against racism. Through the Anti-Racism IMC, HRD is collaborating with each ministry to design an intra-ministerial anti-racism action plan to address the policymaking, employment, and service provision functions relevant to the ministry and their contribution under each of these functions to achieve intercultural inclusion.

The UM carried out a research study with the aim of deepening the Maltese government's understanding of the experiences of minority groups in Malta. The research was published and presented during the END-RACISM-MT mid-term conference held on 29 November 2023.

On inter-cultural and anti-racism, and in the field of migrant integration, during June 2023, HRD launched a public consultation in preparation for a second national integration governance framework, which by the end of 2023 was at an advanced stage.

Efforts to address challenges linked to integration and to combat exploitation continued. The project 'Online Pre-Departure Integration Measures in Malta,' was launched in July 2023. This eighteen-month project is funded by the EU and implemented by the International Organisation for Migration in cooperation with HRD and the DG REFORM. It aims to continue the reform of integration governance in Malta, specifically through the design and development of a sustainable national system in legal migration for pre-departure integration measures aimed at persons who will be granted the right to live and work in Malta.

The Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS) plays a crucial role in providing reception facilities for asylum seekers, going beyond mere accommodation to offer a comprehensive range of services. These include psychosocial support, information provision, financial assistance and programmes aimed at enhancing employability, all geared towards empowering asylum seekers for independent living. The agency's commitment extends to a community outreach programme, ensuring that its services are accessible to asylum seekers residing outside AWAS-run centres.

In 2023, AWAS took proactive steps to enhance its services through targeted training sessions, covering a spectrum of critical areas:

- Victims of Torture;
- Applicants with Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities, or Sexual Characteristics (SOGIESC);
- Mental Wellness;
- Reception of Vulnerable Persons;
- Training for Guardians of Unaccompanied Minor Asylum Seekers;
- Conflict Management and Mediation;
- Children in the Asylum Process;
- Coaching in Reception Context;
- Social Work and Case Management;
- Female and Gender-Based Violence; and
- Training Modules by the EU Agency for Asylum.

To address the vulnerability of migrant and asylum-seeking women and children to criminal activities such as trafficking and exploitation, AWAS conducted informative sessions. These sessions, part of the All Equal project, were delivered by FSWS in collaboration with AWAS and CSA.

AWAS further raised awareness and support through Migrants Advisory Units, providing information about support structures, processes, NGOs, and counselling groups. TAMA (a local non-governmental organisation) and AWAS's own psychosocial team conducted outreach to female beneficiaries, while Kopin (a local non-governmental organisation) organised weekly family activities in the centres.

A number of educational initiatives were introduced including English classes for beneficiaries in MIRC (Initial Reception Centre), held twice a week on Mondays and Wednesdays from September to November 2023, which were well-received and deemed both interesting and useful.

From January to March 2023, the Jesuit Refugee Service and Dance Beyond Borders also conducted weekly dance activities for women, fostering enthusiasm and interaction among participants.

AWAS also initiated collaboration with Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) to equip the H.O.C (Open Centre) Learning Centre with essential resources, transforming it into a versatile space for various activities, accessible not only to MOAS but also to other NGOs and AWAS staff. Furthermore, in August 2023, Artists in Transit conducted their second series of art workshops across five centres in Malta. These workshops, including jewellery-making and banner-painting sessions, engaged creative children, young people, and adults, further enriching AWAS's holistic approach to supporting asylum seekers.

HRD further encourages migrant integration by providing the I Belong Programme. The Programme is designed in two stages, the first of which includes a beginner's course in Maltese, English and Maltese culture, and the second stage involves further learning in Maltese language and culture. Foundation courses in Maltese and English are being offered to support students with literacy difficulties in coordination with Lifelong Learning. The programme is delivered by the UM and MCAST. Upon completion, students are awarded recognised certifications in all three subjects, which can be used for entry into the labour market. From the beginning of the programme in 2018, more than ten thousand individuals applied. Around three thousand students graduated from Stage 1 and eight hundred students graduated from Stage 2. Around fifty unique beneficiaries graduated from the foundation courses. Between January 2023 to September 2023, the HRD received over two thousand five hundred new applications for the I Belong Programme.

The International Protection Agency, Malta's asylum determination body, has continued to work on the enhancement of the information provision being given to asylum seekers, with detailed info booklets pertaining to all the steps of the asylum procedure (one booklet dedicated to adults and one to unaccompanied minors) being finalised during 2023.

Furthermore, training for anti-racism and integration was provided to over five hundred participants of which a significant number came from community police officers within the MPF. The first training session took place in March 2023 and will continue in 2024. This initiative aims to train law enforcement and immigration officers on human rights and equality standards, to create a culture where racist abuse or failure to meet these standards is regarded as having no place within law enforcement agencies or immigration services and where racism is actively prevented and combatted under all circumstances. In addition, training is being provided to public officers over the span of two years by Kopin in collaboration with the IPS. The aim of the training is to assist public officers in mainstreaming anti-racism across all sectors and support them in fostering change and ensuring respect for anti-racism in key ministries.

In 2023, FSWS (Gozo Branch) also implemented a project entitled Integration Group, in the Marsalforn Community Centre, with the aim of increasing community ties and networking and reducing loneliness.

5.1.5 Empowering Children and Youths

On 20 November 2023, a public consultation was launched for a new Policy Framework for Children 2024-2030. The Policy Framework sets out the Government's agenda and priorities in relation to all children under eighteen years of age for the next years. It analyses the key challenges and future needs facing children, while outlining concrete measures to be implemented to improve their prospects and wellbeing. The Framework's overarching goal is to empower children to become active citizens and contributors towards the enrichment of society, in line with the EU Child Guarantee.

Launched in 2022, the National Action Plan for Child Guarantee is one of the tools used by the government to advance the quality of life of children, particularly those most vulnerable. On 4 December 2023, the MSPC, in conjunction with relevant ministries, launched the 2023 Child Guarantee National Progress Report. The objective was to review the progress made and identify remaining gaps for potential consolidation of policies.

In line with principles of fostering inclusivity at all ages, 2023 saw the development and subsequent launch of an online child participation platform called 'Empoweringchildren.gov.mt'. This platform aims to establish a secure, inclusive, and meaningful space, enabling children to express their thoughts and ideas, and actively engage in national policymaking. The web application includes a dedicated chat feature that provides professional emotional support. A comprehensive media campaign was executed to raise awareness about children's rights through various media channels, including social media platforms, radio spots and interviews, and television appearances. The campaign aimed to foster greater recognition and understanding of children's entitlement to have their voices heard in matters that concern them.

The Office of the Commissioner for Children (CFC) within the MSCP also held a social media campaign during the ESDW 2023. The aim of this campaign was to create awareness about promoting and protecting children's rights through the SDGs to guarantee children's wellbeing throughout all stages of their development. The campaign focused on combatting child poverty, ensuring access to high-quality health services, access to quality education, protection from violence, exploitation, and abuse, and the need for climate action.

With a view to promoting the inclusion of young migrants, AŻ has established the Young Migrant Consultative Forum under the Consulting Youth project. This initiative provides a platform for young migrants to engage with policymakers, ensuring their voices are heard on matters of youth policy. Facilitated by a dedicated youth worker, the forum empowers young migrants to actively contribute to discussions that shape policies affecting their lives and aspirations ensuring inclusivity and representation while fostering a more equitable and responsive youth-focused policy landscape.

Furthermore, AŻ and MHS engaged 3 young volunteers as mental health ambassadors. Acknowledging the critical importance of mental health for today's youth, a dynamic team of young ambassadors embarked on a transformative awareness-raising journey, developing impactful content for a targeted mental health campaign. These young ambassadors played a pivotal role in designing and developing compelling content for a targeted mental health campaign. Collaborating seamlessly with each other and seasoned professionals, they emerged as catalysts for change, amplifying the conversation around mental health among their peers.

AŻ also continued working on tackling other issues encountered by today's youth. Thus, during 2023, it carried on supporting young people, aged between sixteen and twenty-one, to grow and develop their communication skills, judgemental skills and learning skills and become more autonomous and responsible. This was done through Youth.inc where, by participating in this programme, young people gain knowledge, skills and competences to become more independent and to enter the labour market or gain qualifications to continue in further education and/or training.

Additionally, AŻ is also offering a life skills programme. Life skills encompass a wide range of competences that enable individuals to navigate various aspects of life effectively. These skills go beyond academic knowledge and include communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, decision-making, emotional intelligence, time management, and adaptability, among others.

5.1.6 Combating trafficking in human beings

During 2023, Malta improved its leadership and prioritisation of human trafficking, as well as streamlined anti-trafficking coordination and communication efforts among ministries. In June 2023, HRD has undertaken the initiative of setting up the Criminal Justice and Legislative Amendments (CJLA) Working Group within the structure of the Anti-Trafficking IMC the latter established in 2022. The Working Group is composed of IMC members and legal officers from the then Ministry for Home Affairs, Security, Reforms and Equality, the then MFJ and the Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade (MFET). The CJLA Working Group convened for the first time on 19 June 2023 and held three other consecutive meetings in 2023. During these meetings, discussions focused on the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) of the Council of Europe (GRETA) recommendations and any possible legislative changes which would help Malta combat THB more comprehensively and provide further protection to victims.

The Department of Justice (DoJ) is nearing completion of a comprehensive study on statutory compensation for crime victims, initiated following GRETA's recommendations to review the legislative framework in connection with compensation to human trafficking victims. The study assesses the legal and financial implications of implementing these recommendations across various crime types. The study progressed through various phases, with the first phase concluded in 2022 and the second phase completed in 2023. The ultimate deliverable is to draft legislative amendments to enhance the existing framework and facilitate the rights of all crime victims. This aligns with objectives outlined in the EU Strategy on Victims' Rights 2020-2025 and the EU Strategy on Combating THBs 2020-2025.

Other national initiatives were undertaken to increase training for and efforts to pursue financial crime investigations in tandem with human trafficking cases in fulfilment of another recommended by the 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report. The FIAU, together with the Finance Against Slavery and Trafficking, has organised a Public-Private Partnership Initiative on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery Risks and the Financial Sector in Malta aimed at developing human trafficking indicators and red flags.

HRD continued to monitor the National Action Plan on Human Trafficking 2020 – 2023 with a view to finalising the remaining actions. Action 9 of the current National Action Plan on THB was fulfilled through research among victims and survivors of human trafficking in Malta to outline the efficacy of the identification process and assistance provided. A secondary aim was to understand how recruitment into exploitation was taking place in Malta. A detailed research methodology, including a full ethics framework, was developed by the expert engaged by the COE for this research, as part of the project. The researcher also sought input and involvement from experts already working in the field in Malta. The safety, confidentiality, and anonymity of participants were put at the centre of this research. There was a total of nine participants. All participants were adults, third-country nationals, who had entered Malta via the airport on visas, and had either experienced labour exploitation or domestic servitude. The research sample is not a representative sample of all people who have experienced human trafficking in Malta, therefore it was suggested that this research should be continued to gain a fuller picture of the reality of human trafficking.

With reference to Action 10 of the Action Plan, it should be noted that the BeSmartOnline project continues to be implemented through a consortium coordinated by FSWS which brings together the Office of the CFC, the Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes and the MPF - Cyber Crime Unit. All partners work together to raise awareness and educate children and teens, parents/carers, and educators on the safer use of the Internet. The partners also established and promoted www.childwebalert.gov.mt, an online reporting facility for illegal online content, particularly child abuse material and offer support services to respective victims. Action 10 has also been fulfilled through outreach sessions for boys and girls which have been conducted by FSWS, with a primary focus on addressing issues related to cyberbullying, sexting, and online grooming. The target audience for such sessions is all children, however, it was observed that such issues related to online safety are more prevalent during the adolescent years. Therefore, outreach sessions in secondary schools across Malta and Gozo have been prioritised. In addition to raising awareness about the potential risks involved in online

activities, the sessions also aim to promote responsible digital citizenship and critical thinking. The approach taken for these outreach sessions seeks to equip children with the necessary tools to navigate the online world safely and confidently.

With regard to the National Strategy and Action Plan Against Human Trafficking (2024 onwards), the drafting of the upcoming strategy is currently being finalised through the Joint Project 'Supporting Malta in the design and implementation of a new anti-trafficking strategy (2022-2024)' which was launched in December 2022. An online workshop on 13 October 2023, was held regarding the preliminary draft assessment report on 'Partnerships'. During this workshop, the role of the National Coordinator and National Rapporteur were outlined in the local context. Discussions were also held on international cooperation in the investigation and prosecution of traffickers, preventing and combating human trafficking as well as protecting, assisting, and repatriating victims. Between 13 and 16 November 2023, working groups were held as part of the Joint Project. The discussions were based on the following themes: Prevention and Protection, Prosecutions and Investigations, International Cooperation, and the Anti-Trafficking Supporting Framework. The working groups were attended by various government departments and entities as well as civil society organisations.

The HRD undertook the management of an awareness-raising campaign on Human Trafficking which was launched on 1 February 2023. The aim of the campaign is to raise awareness of what constitutes the crime of human trafficking and to ensure that the public is knowledgeable of the indicators of trafficking. The start of this campaign was centred around the tagline: 'Prevent, Protect, Report'. Various forms of trafficking were explored within the campaign, with a particular focus on labour exploitation, sexual exploitation and child trafficking and ways in which victims can seek help. The campaign focused on highlighting the element of intersectionality throughout, but also by emphasising the message 'Anyone can be a victim of trafficking' regardless of gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and ability. Additionally, the campaign also served to highlight the coordination, monitoring and reporting functions and mechanisms under the remit of HRD. The campaign included various initiatives to promote the services available and managed by the national service providers, to ensure that the public is equipped to report any suspicious activity pertaining to trafficking and that victims are guided to the national support services. Most prominently, the campaign promoted the 119 Crime Stop Hotline and FSWS Support Line 179. Further on in the campaign, new resources for reporting and victim support were introduced including the Department of Industrial Relations (DIER), to report working conditions, a Jobsplus form to report abuse and GU Clinics to access sexual health services.

Four billboards were installed in Malta in the locations of Marsa, Qormi and Pembroke, and one in Xewkija, Gozo, as well as forty bus shelters in Malta and ten in Gozo. Additionally, an awareness-raising video on the National coordination, reporting and monitoring functions of the state concerning the field of human trafficking was created and published online in July 2023. Such video focused on the importance of the collaboration and cooperation of all stakeholders as well as a multi-sectoral approval, in the fight against trafficking. The video was produced in both Maltese and English to strengthen its reach to the general public.

On 1 November 2023, a consultation session with civil society organisations was held at HRD regarding the publication of upcoming awareness-raising material on human trafficking. The session was attended by six organisations who provided insights into what awareness-raising is needed on the ground.

A conference was also organised on 25 July 2023 as part of the UN Blue Heart Campaign leading to the UN World Day Against Trafficking in Persons on 30 July 2023. The 2023 theme was 'Reach Every Victim of Human Trafficking, Leave No One Behind', thus prominent national stakeholders from the public service, the private sector, civil society, trade unions and international organisations were invited to the event to strengthen their collaboration and multi-disciplinary approach adopted in the fight against trafficking. Additionally, during the week of 22 and 30 July 2023, various prominent buildings and landmarks were lit up in blue to raise awareness and promote the Blue Heart Campaign.



5.1.7 Gender-Based and Domestic Violence

In 2023, the Commission on Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence (CGBVDV) continued with the development of the third National Strategy on Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence (2023-2028) which was launched during the sixteen Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence 2023. The Strategy, titled, 'UNITE. ENGAGE. ELEVATE', incorporates a national action plan consisting of various measures and actions based on the GREVIO recommendations and the four pillars of the Istanbul Convention; prevention, protection, prosecution and coordinated policies.

Furthermore, CGBVDV continued implementing several awareness-raising initiatives with the aim of targeting the diverse issues related to gender-based violence and domestic violence mainly, addressing specific forms of violence and promoting healthy relationships and gender equality. In May 2023, an award ceremony was organised for students who participated in the creative expression competition held during the sixteen Days of Activism 2022 campaign. Through drawings, compositions and poems, students from primary and secondary schools across Malta and Gozo were encouraged to express their views on respectful relationships.

For Euro Pride 2023, CGBVDV convened a panel discussion titled, 'The Fear of Coming Out & Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence' to focus on the encounters of LGBTIQ+ persons who are at risk of experiencing family violence and intimate-partner violence due to their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. In this discussion, CGBVDV raised awareness of professional support services which aid victims of family violence and intimate partner violence. Moreover, during Pride Week 2023, CGBVDV set up a stand in Valletta to promote informational material related to gender-based violence, domestic violence, and professional support services. To conclude this campaign, CGBVDV published an article to raise more awareness about gender-based violence and domestic violence within the LGBTIQ+ community. Additionally, in October 2023, CGBVDV organised a stand at the UM during the KSU Freshers' Week with the objective of promoting and disseminating diverse informational leaflets, promotional material and business cards with services' contact details.

Furthermore, a national awareness-raising campaign titled, 'Beat the Silence' was held as part of the international sixteen Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence 2023. During the sixteen Days of Activism (25 November-10 December), the following initiatives were delivered:

- 'Beat the Silence' conference for ambassadors and consuls who were invited to an informative discussion on the support services available for persons experiencing gender-based violence and domestic violence within migrant and expat communities;
- A sports campaign where footballers and regatta athletes promoted a 'Beat the Silence' banner during matches and races;
- Healthy relationships social media campaign in collaboration with the CFC and the NCPE;
- Launch of an online platform on CGBVDV's website containing a directory of professional support services for victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence;
- Information session for Ministry for the then Public Works and Planning employees;
- Information session in two Active Ageing Centres; and
- Articles published on online news portals and newspapers and appearances on television and radio programmes.

In April 2023, the Parliamentary Secretariat for Reforms and Equality and CGBVDV held a national conference to launch the findings of the research, 'Safety in Childhood: A Prevalence Study of Childhood Abuse Experiences in Malta'. This research study was conducted in collaboration with the Faculty for Social Wellbeing within the UM with the main objective of obtaining the prevalence rate of children witnessing violence and other forms of abuse during childhood. For this study, a representative sample of four hundred and thirty-three respondents aged between eighteen to twenty-four years answered retrospective questions about their childhood. Findings show that the most prevalent form of abuse was peer and sibling victimisation, followed by child maltreatment and children witnessing violence.

In 2023, CGBVDV coordinated several training programmes for professionals including four rounds of multi-agency training for professionals and frontliners, specialised training for members of the judiciary and specialised training for journalists. Furthermore, CGBVDV coordinated the following information sessions:

- CoPE sessions for educators titled, 'Self-Awareness for Educators on Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence';
- Information session for Heads of Schools;
- Information session with psychosocial professionals in Gozo; and
- Information session with creative media production and journalism students.

5.1.8 Support to persons with addictions

In 2023, the NFP for Drugs and Drug Addiction undertook various initiatives aimed at enhancing the awareness and understanding of the drug situation in Malta. In a landmark event in June 2023, the second National Drug Policy was officially launched, spanning the period from 2023 to 2033. The policy, a result of a thorough review of the current situation, aims to align with contemporary developments and enhance the understanding of the evolving drug landscape in the country. With a commitment to reducing the harms caused by drugs and promoting the overall wellbeing of society, this policy marks a significant step towards a comprehensive and compassionate approach to drug-related challenges in Malta.

One notable event was the Stakeholder Meeting on National Reporting for Drugs held on 23 November 2023. This gathering included the participation of relevant stakeholders who were invited to discuss the current situation of drugs in Malta. During the meeting, preliminary findings were presented based on the data collected in 2023, focusing on the developments in the year 2022. Additionally, presentations were delivered on the preparations for the ESPAD survey and updates on the then-ongoing General Population Survey. Furthermore, efforts were directed towards the creation of the National Report on the Drug Situation and Responses in Malta. This annual report serves as a comprehensive overview, drawing insights from data collected from stakeholders in areas such as drug policy, new research, law enforcement, courts, and treatment centres.

In the last quarter of 2023, AS added the ROOTS programme to its chain of rehabilitation programmes. This evening community group offers additional support to persons having addiction issues within the community and who are seeking a stronger community network. With a focus on mutual aid and understanding, it offers a safe place for individuals striving towards recovery. These groups are held once a week. Furthermore, at the Substance Misuse Outpatient Unit (SMOPU), Jobsplus staff are available to help SMOPU patients to find dignified employment on a weekly basis.

5.1.9 Empowering persons with disabilities

In 2023, as in previous years, efforts that promote independent living, especially among vulnerable communities, continued. To this end, government will be investing €4.2 million in the concept of Personal Assistants and Independent Community Living to enable more people with disabilities in reaching their potential. This will be the first step in finalising the Personal Assistants reform according to the guidelines of the European Network for Independent Living. Public consultation on the Personal Assistant reform is now closed and Aġenzija Sapport is currently preparing the post-consultation document. In the long term, this reform will also include legal amendments to various legislations.

In addition to the aforementioned, a research exercise was conducted by the then MIVC in order to understand the needs of people with disabilities and to gauge the products that exist on the market, which can assist disabled people with being more independent in their daily lives. A reform of the 'Empowerment Scheme' was also carried out in such a way that the bureaucracy was reduced, and the scheme responded to the current needs of persons with disabilities. This should include a set of updated standard operating procedures so that the application process for financial assistance through the scheme is more streamlined.

Furthermore, those who buy a second-hand modified car (including cars equipped with lifts or ramps for wheelchair access) that is already registered, will be given the possibility to benefit from a subsidy of no more than 10% on the price of the car. This is apart from the tax registration fee exemption. For a vehicle of this type to qualify for the subsidy, its emissions must be below one hundred and eighty grams of CO₂. A measure was also introduced providing a purchase subsidy of up to 20% for buyers of wheelchair-accessible vehicles registered in Malta. This subsidy applies to adapted vehicles with integrated 'Drive from Wheelchair' systems that enable the operation of the vehicle from a wheelchair driver position.

To assist persons with disability who need to purchase special equipment for them to live an independent life, the then MFE continued to administer the scheme, whereby eligible applicants may apply for a grant on the purchase price of the special equipment. The then MFE, together with Aġenzija Sapport, administers the 'Scheme for Exemptions/Reductions/Grants related to Motor Vehicles for Persons with Disability', aimed at enhancing the mobility of persons with disabilities. This scheme is targeted at three categories of beneficiaries: persons whose disability precludes them from driving; persons with disability who can drive; and parents (carers), first-line family members, husband or wife of the persons with disability. The beneficiaries benefit from an exemption/subsidy on the vehicle's registration tax and annual circulation tax, from a grant on VAT on Cost-Insurance-Freight and import duty (where applicable), and a grant equivalent to the duty and VAT incurred on local modifications of vehicles. Philanthropic organisations play an increasingly prominent role in supporting the international sustainable development agenda. The then MFE continued to administer the scheme 'Exemptions/Subsidies related to Motor Vehicles for Philanthropic Organisations/Charitable Institutions' which is targeted at charitable and philanthropic institutions, old people's homes and lay movements, which may benefit, if eligible, from exemption/subsidy on a vehicle's registration tax and a subsidy on the annual circulation tax.

5.1.10 Voluntary Sector Reforms

Over a period of two years, a reform process will be triggered in the voluntary sector. This is expected to lead to a change in the law that regulates voluntary associations. Moreover, it will transform OCVO into an entity which will perform all its functions based on the various purposes that the sector works in and represents, according to the outcome of the classification process of the voluntary organisations. A re-classification exercise was carried out in 2023 following a rigorous consultation process with the sector.

Government is committed to continue facilitating the availability of spaces from where voluntary organisations can operate by increasing the one-stop-shop service. This service will serve as a centralised hub where these organisations can access information, services, and support, all designed to reinforce the assistance provided to them to effectively serve and contribute to our communities. The following one-stop-shops were launched during 2023:

- Valletta – Opened;
- Rabat Malta – Opened;
- Birkirkara – Opened;
- Xewkija Gozo – Works in progress; and
- Kordin - Works in progress.

In relation to the above, training to the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector staff serving in these one-stop-shops was also provided. A public relations campaign promoting the one-stop-shops was also held.

5.1.11 Supporting Developing Countries and Providing Humanitarian Aid

During 2023, the Maltese government continued to focus on assisting developing countries in their efforts to pursue the SDGs and providing humanitarian assistance where required. The growing humanitarian crises globally, exacerbated by natural disasters and ongoing conflicts, have made addressing priority geographic regions and themes imperative. In such situations, it has become increasingly important to focus on geographic and thematic priorities.

One particular success story was the launching of a scheme whereby Maltese embassies located in developing countries were offered the opportunity to fund Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects in the countries where they are present. The last year saw such projects being launched in Türkiye and India. Malta also pursued development projects that would facilitate access to water through the launching of a project in Tunisia worth €100,000 with the Global Water Fund which would help foster irrigation and advise farmers on practices to make the best use of water resources. Additionally, the launch of the 'Connecting Classrooms' project aims to break down barriers and facilitate contacts between primary school students in Malta and Ethiopia. This project will offer opportunities to primary school students from both countries to interact and learn from each other.

Malta also contributed towards humanitarian assistance, providing support to an increased number of countries, including Afghanistan, Haiti, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, Palestine, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Türkiye, Ukraine, Venezuela, Yemen, and to alleviate suffering caused by conflict as well as natural disasters. Towards the beginning of 2023, attention centred on the earthquakes in Syria and Türkiye. Malta immediately responded by offering humanitarian funding, along with the dispatch of an urban search and rescue team to Türkiye in search of survivors.

Funds were also used to respond to humanitarian appeals made by international multilateral organisations, including various UN agencies, particularly to assist Ukraine, and Gaza, as well as afflicted countries, especially in Africa and the Neighbourhood, with the aim of responding to shortfalls in funding for urgent humanitarian crises. Furthermore, through its ODA, Malta financed a project, which was finalised in the third quarter of 2023, focusing on supporting humanitarian demining efforts in Ukraine, where almost 174,000 square kilometres is estimated to be contaminated with mines and unexploded ordnance.

In 2023, Malta supported capacity building efforts through education programmes and scholarships offered to students from developing countries. These students benefitted from academic opportunities at the UM and the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, building on Malta's efforts in previous years. To this effect, around €126,000 in scholarships and courses were offered to citizens from different ODA-eligible countries in various areas, such as diplomatic studies, conflict and peacebuilding, and the study of islands and small states, at the post-graduate level.

Assistance to Small Island Developing States (SIDS) also continued to be a priority. As part of Malta's leadership role as a champion of the interests of these states, MFET is sponsoring the carrying out of a study to explore vulnerability and resilience for the benefit of African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, including specific attention to the theme of climate change, with a focus on SIDS. MFET also continued to support the post-graduate programme run by UM's Islands and Small States Institute, with the award of two scholarships at the master's level to students from St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Jamaica. Beginning from the 2024-2025 academic year, MFET shall be sponsoring two PhD scholarships and three master's level scholarships for students from SIDS.

5.2 Ensuring Accessible Products, Services and Environments which Address the Needs of a Diverse and Changing Population

Government is committed to developing an inclusive community, starting with having spaces, services and products that are accessible to everyone. One such aspect is transport and infrastructure. In this regard, during 2023, works were finalised on transport networks, including new cycle lanes and safe cycle routes, in order to improve access to the Malta International Airport and to the Malta Freeport. Furthermore, following the success achieved through the fast ferry between Malta and Gozo, works will also continue to increase the number of quays so that alternative routes can be created and thus reduce dependence on private vehicles. The benefits of this are anticipated to extend to the entire population in terms of air quality and to reduce traffic congestion during peak hours by encouraging a modality shift to other forms of transport.

In terms of housing and accessibility, in 2023 the HA completed the installation of thirty-six lift installations and ancillary improvement works in the common areas of existing social housing blocks thus rendering them accessible to elderly and disabled residents. Twenty-nine of these lifts were completed and financed through ERDF funds at a cost of €2.7 million while seven were financed by the HA at a cost of €482,000.

Additionally, the FSWS, through its vast services, empowers and helps to develop individuals to become responsible, integrated, and productive members of society who value life as a resource for self-actualisation. In this regard, FSWS is committed to providing quality and timely support to its service users depending on their needs and situations. The nature of the support offered varies according to the service users' needs, but typically it entails providing assistance to the client, linking the client to the requested resources/services and when required even accompanying the client to seek the required assistance. In addition, FSWS is a catalyst for change and development in the social welfare sector in Malta, consistent with the real and emerging needs of children, families, and the community, to avoid social exclusion. A considerable amount of training is provided on a yearly basis to all FSWS employees which equips the workforce with the skills required to assist vulnerable people as well as to keep up-to-date with emerging trends and new realities.

To safeguard people's right to access high-quality products and services, the MAFA has initiated discussions and is collaborating with the MTA to ensure that hotels, restaurants, and catering outlets have adequate access to and supply of locally produced certified organic products. This collaboration aligns with the enhancement of the Quality Assured Seal, a voluntary quality recognition scheme managed by the MTA, aimed to recognise businesses offering high levels of quality, consistency, and professionalism.

Further to this, in 2023, the Food Systems Directorate enacted a number of actions stemming from Malta's Action Plan for Organic Food. One such action (Action 4.1) aims to facilitate access to resources in organic farming, including organic plant protection products and organically certified seeds. This aim will be partly reached through discussions between MAFA and the relevant authorities and stakeholders. Furthermore, MAFA along with stakeholders, will work to identify source materials for plant varieties adapted to local climatic conditions and agricultural technology. An additional Action stemming from the Action Plan (Action 9.3) aims to facilitate access to local organic products by the HoReCa industry.

Meanwhile, the remedies available to the consumer were enhanced. The maximum amount of five thousand euro on which claims can be made before the Consumer Claims Tribunal was again raised. This was implemented and the limit for small claims was increased to ten thousand euro through ACT XXIV of 2023 Consumer Affairs Act and the Consumer Claims Tribunal Rules (Amendment) Act.

The health-led inter-ministerial Advisory Council on Healthy Lifestyles, chaired by the Superintendent of Public Health also made several recommendations over the last years and engaged with different stakeholders regarding the provision of water fountains and access to free water in schools as well as AED machines in various localities, which included a mapping exercise.

5.3 Building Safer Communities and Ensuring a Timely and Effective Justice System

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
8.7	Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms
16.1	Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere
16.2	End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children
16.3	Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all
16.4	By 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organised crime
16.6	Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels
16.10	Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements
16.a	Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime
16.b	Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development

5.3.1 Reforms and Digitalisation of the Justice System

In 2023, the then MFJ advanced its restructuring by replacing the former Policy Development and Programme Implementation Directorate with two new directorates. The Strategy and Support Directorate to a Division was upgraded with two further Directorates – the Operations Directorate which oversees all Ministry’s operations, while the Justice Initiatives and Reforms Directorate focuses on justice-related initiatives, research, and reforms. The Strategy and Support Division focuses on providing support, coordination, strategies and programme implementation of the Electoral Manifesto proposals and EU-funded projects.

Furthermore, during 2023, the then MFJ continued with the implementation of reforms to the Maltese justice system, reforms which were initiated in 2020. Apart from implementing reforms which are included in the RRP, such as the transfer of prosecutions from the police to the Attorney General (AG) and the relative increase in prosecutors in the Office of the AG, work also continued on measures aimed to increase the efficiency of justice, mainly by modernising the system through digitisation, reducing delays in courts and ensuring that justice not only appears to be done but is done and carried out within a reasonable timeframe.

In this regard, during 2023, four magistrates and three judges were appointed to the Bench. Increasing the number of members of the Judiciary is also a commitment undertaken in order to reduce the caseload and delays. In this regard, the government is also committed to creating a specialised Court dedicated to hearing cases dealing with Commercial Cases and also to reform the magisterial inquiries proceeding by the introduction of the new Magisterial Inquiry Section. Furthermore, a Public Consultation to reform the Taking of Evidence and Referral System was also undertaken in 2023.

In 2023, the Office of the AG underwent a significant transition from one EC TSI project to another as part of its ongoing commitment to organisational and operational excellence. The initial TSI project, conducted in collaboration with the World Bank, titled ‘Business Reorganisation of the Office of the AG and the Office of the State Advocate (SA) of Malta,’ was launched in 2021. Successfully concluded in February 2023, the project culminated in the presentation of a five-year Strategic and Operational Plan. The plan aimed to enhance public confidence in the Office through eight focused activities/components addressing organisational development, professional development, and service delivery.

This action plan laid the foundation for a subsequent TSI project titled, ‘Implementing the Business Re-Organisation Action Plan of the Office of the AG and the Office of the SA in Malta.’ Launched in October 2023, this project is a collaborative effort with the Transversal Challenges and Multilateral Projects Task Force within the COE. Building on the achievements of the previous project, the objectives for the next two years include the:

- Adoption of internal strategies, such as a new public relations strategy, and the incorporation of tools like case weighting methodologies and the establishment of efficiency benchmarks to facilitate institutional and administrative reorganisation;
- Implementation of a communication strategy to enhance public trust and transparency;
- Strengthening the capacity of the Office to provide training opportunities for legal and administrative personnel at various stages of their engagement; and
- Support the Office in constructing the necessary data structures for strategic and operational purposes, performance assessments, and overall efficiency improvement.

To ensure effective oversight, commitment and support for the implementation of the action plan in the coming years, the Office established the new position of Head of Strategy and Initiatives. A training manager was also recruited, and the Office is in the process of procuring the service of psychologists to optimise staff wellbeing. This move underscores the Office of the AG’s dedication to fulfilling its mandate with the highest levels of efficiency, emphasising its ongoing commitment to enhancing public trust and accountability.

As part of the investments committed under the RRP, in 2023, the entities falling under the remit of the then MFJ continued with the procurement of Information Systems to assist in the development of Case Management Systems.

Furthermore, during 2023, the Malta Mediation Centre further pursued initiatives to enhance the process of mediation through discussions between LCs, government departments, entities, and third parties. In addition, a tender was issued for a new IT system designated to support all aspects of mediation. Moreover, discussions with the UM and Family Business Office were held to develop training for mediators specialising in family businesses disputes and explored cooperation opportunities with the Chamber of Advocates to further enhance mediation services.

At the beginning of 2023, the then MFJ set up a Family Court Reform Working Group tasked with studying the processes of the Family Court in both its civil and criminal jurisdiction and proposing recommendations to make the process more efficient and accessible. The working group consistently met, and formalised a number of recommendations which shall be issued for public consultation. These recommendations cover new processes for civil jurisdiction, mediation, children’s advocates, parental alienation, and legislative amendments for reduced timeframes. These proposed reforms aim to improve the Family Court’s responsiveness for users.

Furthermore, during 2023, the Family Court Building was refurbished, featuring a New Court Hall, which optimised building space and the number of sittings, thereby resulting in reduced case backlog. Additionally, a call for quotations led to the awarding of a tender setting up of a new Criminal Court within the Main Court Building with works starting in September 2023. Progress is on track, with completion anticipated by the second quarter of 2024.

In its efforts to propel the transition to a more people-centred approach, in 2023, the then MFJ submitted an application through the EC TSI entitled 'Enhancing access to justice through the application of a people-centred approach'. The then MFJ took the lead in this project which constituted a multi-country application and a flagship project as well. The objectives of the project include:

- A systematic investigation of the current processes in terms of people-centricity and accessibility;
- A legal needs analysis of citizens and businesses and their pathways to justice;
- The mapping of the skills and competences of justice stakeholders;
- The development of a roadmap and action plan that will lead to a strategic and actionable framework for strengthening access to justice and enhancing people-centricity; and
- The development of indicators and KPIs that can be reviewed on a national basis.

The participating countries in this project include the Netherlands, Ireland and Italy (apart from Malta) and expert assistance is being asked from the OECD.

During 2023, the then MFJ continued rolling out the Digital Justice Strategy (2022-2027) launched in 2021, to improve the quality of the national justice system through digitalisation. In line with the strategy, over ten million euro from RRP was invested in the justice sector's digital transformation. This funding aims to introduce secure digital solutions and tools, fostering collaboration, integration, and accessibility, thereby streamlining justice administration. The primary stakeholders are the Law Courts, MPF, SA, AG, Legal Aid and Asset Recovery Bureau (ARB).

In 2023, the MPF successfully implemented the renewed Schengen Information System (SIS), the largest EU information system for border control and security. The renewed SIS includes new types of alerts on persons including alerts based on return decisions and alerts on vulnerable persons such as children at risk of abduction, children and vulnerable adults at risk of being taken abroad unlawfully. It also includes additional SIS alert data and functionalities. The renewed SIS entailed significant technical changes and investments in national applications. National legislation regulating the new alerts has been promulgated. Changes to the Criminal Code covering police powers related to the new SIS alerts are in the pipeline.

Following the delivery of the renewed SIS, the police force's focus in the area of border control and migration is shifting towards the implementation of the other EU large-scale IT systems. The priority is to deliver the Entry-Exit System (EES), which if the recently revised timelines agreed by the Justice and Home Affairs Council in October 2023 are respected, will enter into operation during October-November 2024. The Police Force is in the process of acquiring the required software in preparation for EES. Together with EES, the EU will also deliver the first of the interoperability components i.e. the Shared Biometric Matching System.

Upon the successful entry of EES, the focus will then shift to the implementation of the European Travel Information Authorisation System (ETIAS) which if the aforementioned revised timelines are respected will enter into operation in mid-2025. The entry into operation of the ETIAS should strengthen security in Europe. Moreover, work is also ongoing at both Central (EU) and national levels on the Visa Information System.

The DoJ, in partnership with the IMU of the then MFJ and key stakeholders, is dedicated to driving a sustainable shift to a digital economy. This commitment is underscored by the initiative to digitally transform Conduct Certificates and Conviction Sheets (Fedini Penali), establishing them as the default standard. The long-term objective involves staggered and gradual digitalisation, whereby eventually even court judgements are envisaged to be inputted digitally at source.

Commencing in previous years, there has been a continuous commitment to the gradual digitisation of a national criminal records information system (CRIS). This system is designed to be interoperable not only with other national justice systems but also with other competent authorities, both within Malta and internationally. The envisioned outcome is to establish a real-time, efficient, and effective system enabling online self-service provision for citizens and authorised entities to access necessary information they are legally entitled to,

under the necessary safeguards. This facilitates the enhancement of justice systems and processes, enhancing accessibility for authorised individuals and/or entities to search for current convictions and/or prior convictions. Furthermore, the Business Process Reengineering (BPR) initiative documenting existing processes of the Criminal Records Office (CRO) and the subsequent development of a desired future business engineering process, will help in addressing existing gaps and will lay the foundation for improvement which will be essential also for the successful implementation of a national digitised CRIS.

During the transitional phase of the CRO from the Police to the DoJ, the then MFJ recognised immediately the paramount importance of establishing a digitised system to enhance service delivery to society. Consequently, ongoing BPR efforts are continuing to be conducted at various levels to scrutinise the current CRO operations and identify areas for improvement. Furthermore, certain standard operating procedures have also been developed primarily aimed towards informing the strategic design of an information system that will streamline both the front and back-office operations. The objective is to enhance efficiency and utility, ultimately with the aim of improving the quality of services provided both to the public in general and to facilitate the requirements of the respective competent authorities using this service.

Various other sub-projects and initiatives are being undertaken in this remit as part of the digitalisation process of the CRO with one of the ultimate aims being the decrease and/or the phasing out of document volumes, thereby minimising the requirement for physical storage space enabling a more efficient and paperless environment over time.

In 2023, there were enhancements for a fuller digitalisation of the application for one to register in Malta to practise the legal profession under the respective home-country title within the EU, whereby the application process was reviewed and assessed on various levels coupled with an assessment for seeing into any legal implications that might ensue with the IT changes needed.

During the year 2023, the DoJ has continued to make use of its online secure payment system through the Government Payment Gateway to the online application form for Registration to Practise the Legal Profession in Malta under the Home-Country Professional Title.

A DoJ official in 2023 represented Malta at the e-CODEX Commission. The e-CODEX offers a European digital infrastructure for secure cross-border communication and information exchange in criminal and civil law. E-CODEX boosts judicial cooperation across the EU, by improving the interoperability between legal authorities, building upon national systems and infrastructures supporting the e-Justice activities. This network increases security and reliability while saving time in cross-border judicial processes.

Furthermore, the DoJ is closely involved in the implementation of EU Directive on the exchange of information on third-country nationals (ECRIS-TCN Directive), which was duly transposed into national legislation. Further to the European CRIS platform, already in operation for a few years and which principally addresses requests and notifications for EU nationals, the ECRIS-TCN Directive foresees the implementation and handling thereon of notifications and requests with the exchange of criminal record information concerning third-country nationals within the EU.

Furthermore, the DoJ together with the Ministry's IMU is also actively engaged in the comprehensive implementation of the EU Regulation on establishing a centralised system for the identification of MSs holding conviction information on third-country nationals and stateless persons (ECRIS-TCN) to supplement the European CRIS. The objective of this Regulation is multifaceted, whereby it aims to safeguard the public, uphold public safety, ensure fair and consistent sentencing processes, and further enhance security, border control, and migration management, which are envisaged sustainable goals.

One of the obligations outlined in the ECRIS-TCN Regulation involves the collection of biometric data from TCNs convicted of a crime to specify which MSs possess criminal records for a given TCN. Currently, the primary focus of biometric data collection is mostly on fingerprints, with the anticipated introduction of facial images

as an additional biometric identifier in the future. Several meetings have been held, and are ongoing, among various stakeholders to explore and determine the optimal approaches for obtaining the required fingerprint data. A forensic expert was engaged in the previous year to assist the DoJ and the Ministry's IMU in meeting the deadlines established by EU-LISA for the implementation of this requirement.

With the aim of enhancing the legal aid professional services, Legal Aid Malta (LAM) further created different legal aid panels for Civil Court representation and Criminal Court representation. All panels have different legal aid lawyers thus avoiding conflicts of interest for court representation and advice.

During 2023, LAM continued to participate in various media fora to disseminate information and discuss topics about its services. Moreover, in collaboration with the then MFJ, it participated in a nationwide information campaign.

To safeguard the rights of the elderly, The LAM Agency signed an MoU with Active Ageing within the then MFAA to assist the elderly, who are eligible for legal aid services, defend their rights. The MoU also stipulates that immobile elderly can meet their legal representative through video conferences, thus making the service more accessible.

Meetings with the Chamber of Advocates took place with the intention to collaborate further with them on various themes, and events and to elevate the legal aid service more professionally.

LAM continued with the digitisation project called Legal Aid Management System. The Implementation of this project is presently at an advanced stage of testing. The project will enable the provision of legal aid services to be closer to the public through online applications and various entities across the Maltese islands.

In 2023, the ARB issued a call for tenders for the procurement of a Case Management Information System (CMIS). The new information system shall process all the information collected from government entities and private entities in a holistic way through the digitised system. This system will assist the employees within the ARB to retrieve all the required information which was previously provided through emails and stored in files. It is being targeted that the work related to the collection of the information is reduced by 30% to 50%. Upon implementation of the CMIS, the risk of human error will diminish substantially, while officials can focus their time on working on the cases rather than the collection of the data. The system will provide details of the assets and the progress of every case while providing accurate statistical reports. This project is financed by the EU under the Digital Justice Fund.

Over the past year, efforts have focused on procurement processes required to set up the technological infrastructure within the judicial system. At the same time, the Court Services Agency (CSA) worked on a tender for the new Court Management System that will provide enhanced opportunities for quick and easy access to the judicial process for both legal and non-legal users. In addition, the Court Services Agency has invested in new technology within the courtrooms, making it easier for all courts to hold virtual sittings when necessary. In parallel, an ad hoc working group has started a review of current legislation in order to amend it so that it would not impede the digitisation process.

During 2023, the Court Services Agency worked on a project to change and upgrade the Wi-Fi system within the Court building. This project enabled the Court Services Agency to provide uninterrupted Wi-Fi service throughout the entire Court building considering that Wi-Fi was available only in particular areas limiting coverage.

All Court Halls in Malta and Gozo were equipped with document cameras/digital overhead projectors to facilitate court operations. This enables members of the Judiciary during any particular sitting to display Court Documents on the screens of the Court Hall. Through this equipment, the members of the Judiciary can also conduct online sittings more efficiently. Additionally, a tender for the replacement of the audio system of the Court Halls was published and awarded. The aim of this project is to provide more efficient equipment and provide the public with an excellent sound system. New laptops were provided to the members of the Judiciary and a number of Court Services Agency staff; video-conferencing equipment was installed in boardrooms and other monitors and IT peripherals were replaced.

The Civil Courts and Tribunals Directorate facilitated the online submissions of applications in the Civil Court (Voluntary Jurisdiction). Previously, legal practitioners presenting applications in this particular court, in relation to interdictions, execution of particular acts, publications of secret wills and authorisations for the division of the community of acquests needed to physically attend the registry of the said court, present a hard copy of the application and pay the relative registry fees in person. Under this measure, all lawyers, legal procurators and notaries, can submit the same applications from the comfort of their office and pay the requested fees online without the need to be physically present in court. During 2023, the development of this measure involved an internal consultation to establish the specifications of the online form. Once these discussions were concluded, the project was handed over to the designated service provider for development. Concurrently, amendments to Subsidiary Legislation 12.21 were drafted and sent for the approval of the Legislation Unit and subsequent consideration by the Cabinet. User acceptance testing started in August and the project was successfully launched online in November 2023.

The Criminal Courts and Tribunals Directorate also worked on the upgrade of the Criminal Court database specifically concerning items presented as exhibits during court proceedings. It streamlined access to exhibit-related information through the incorporation of multiple fields detailing exhibit data, which were then connected to the corresponding court case entries in the database. Hence, with the introduction of this system, all the information pertaining to a criminal court case can be stored in one place. The project was launched in the testing environment in October 2023, undergoing multiple tests and amendments, and the measure was subsequently implemented early in December 2023.

Throughout 2023, the Office of the SA has focused on the continuous updating of its current website in order to create a more professional and accessible site for all users.

The National Language Technology Platform (NLTP) project was also launched in 2023. The project aims at combining the most advanced language technology tools and solutions in a new state-of-the-art, AI drive. The scope of the project is to develop a customisable and easy-to-set-up NLTP, which will be equipped with essential AI-based functionality: custom machine translation, eTranslation, terminology management, translation memory management, and speech technology. NLTP will have a ready-to-use user interface and integration options. NLTP's goal is to remove language barriers, promote language equality, increase accessibility, and foster cross-border integration in the use of public digital services in EU and EEA countries.

The NLTP will integrate a comprehensive range of tools, including those developed in the framework of the previous CEF-funded actions and other projects, as follows: translation workspace (2016-EU-IA-0121 and 2018-EU-IA-0079); translation memory (2017-EU-IA-0149) and terminology management (2016-EU-IA-0122); computer-aided translation (CAT) workspace (FP7-ICT GA 287688); an online translation assistant, webpage translation widget, speech to text, and text to speech (ERDF Project No. 2.2.1.1/16/1/004); and functionality via an API, enabling high-quality and secure translations. The developed solution will provide public administrations, and the general public with secure access to high-quality tools for translation of texts, including sensitive information, as well as translations of confidential documents and regulations across all the languages of the Single Digital Market in an efficient and cost-effective way. Through combining and matching the existing solutions, the developed NLTP will be customisable to the specific needs of each public administration.

Additionally, the NLTP will be linked to eTranslation services enabling translations across twenty-four official EU languages, and will be open for integration with other technology providers. As a result, the NLTP will enable users to translate entire documents by uploading or dragging/dropping a document and to obtain a complete, formatted and easily editable translation within a few seconds. To facilitate the use of a professional translation environment with integrated terminology databases, it will be possible to integrate the translation into the CAT tool.

This will contribute to increasing the efficiency of translation, reusing translation memories and taking advantage of high-quality machine translation technologies. The Action will also contribute to integrating speech technologies to facilitate the access of the tool to users with disabilities, for example, to visually impaired users.

In 2023, 'traduzzjoni.mt' was developed through the project NLTP, in which nine entities from the industrial, academic and public fields from five European countries participated: Malta, Latvia, Estonia, Iceland and Croatia. 'traduzzjoni.mt' is a tool intended to cater for the linguistic needs of the Maltese public administration. To this end, the system has been trained on public administration data, such as the Laws of Malta and other data such as the 'Maltese Corpus' which is held and cured by the UM.

The system also integrates eTranslation, the translation platform developed by the EC, which makes specialised memories available to the user such as Public Health, formal European language and the Court of Justice of the EU. Therefore, the new 'traduzzjoni.mt' platform encompasses a mix of linguistic sources both domestic and European, for increasingly refined translation results.

In addition to the 'Windows' system, i.e. inserting text on the left, which is automatically translated into the language of its choice on the right, the new platform also offers the possibility to attach a full document in various formats, which is translated shortly into the language of its choice, while maintaining the attached document format and splitting the document into paragraphs etc.

As it integrates eTranslation, the system is available from and to all official languages of the EU, as well as languages such as Arabic, Chinese and Japanese.

'traduzzjoni.mt' was made available to the public free of charge with the aim of making this technology more inclusive and accessible. The intention is also to further encourage the use of Maltese in digital environments. Other characteristics of the 'traduzzjoni.mt' platform:

- The system functions on the basis of AI technology;
- Can be integrated into existing digital services (e.g. government websites) through an API, in order to render the same services multilingual;
- The system itself will serve as a repository for the linguistic data produced by the Maltese public administration, which is a very important resource to further train and strengthen the system; and
- Security and confidentiality: using international machine translation tools, the security level is low and translated content can be kept on foreign servers. In the case of 'traduzzjoni.mt', the content used for translations will not be retained while the platform is located on MITA servers.

Given that the remit of the Legislation Unit has evolved and the functions vis-à-vis the review of legislation have increased, it transpired that following the necessary testing and deployment of the European Legislation Identifier EU funded Project, the Unit requires the track changes functionality to be enhanced and as similar as possible to Microsoft 'Word' as well as available in the actual course of drafting, not only in a comparative context. In practice, the current functionality is only available once a new version is created when clicking on 'save' or upon automatic saving by the system, thus limiting the review process in its entirety leading to unnecessary delays. This track changes enhancement will facilitate the smooth running and efficacy of the review stage of legislation and is intended to simplify and expedite communication between the Legislation Unit and the drafters of legislation across ministries and public entities.

The inclusion of 'schema.org' as an add-on to the current <https://legislation.mt/> website concluded in the second quarter of 2023 assisted in the creation of an enhanced description which appears in search results. This has provided the users with better information relating to their conducted search. The purpose of utilising schema.org for the <https://legislation.mt/> website was to give priority ranking to the website when searched, thus providing more legal certainty to end-users. This ensured that users access the correct source of information when searching for Maltese legislation given that they will be promptly directed to the website. This enhanced website visibility has assisted the then MFJ in ensuring the better extraction of accurate legal information and legal terms and in diminishing the use of incorrect legal sources and misquoting of information.

Furthermore, the development of the Client Self-Care Portal was intended to provide a personalised service to end-users to more efficiently serve the legal and judicial professions and the public at large. The scope of this service was to provide real-time notifications to the subscribers through their preferred method of communication.

Nowadays, subscribers are given the option of receiving daily, weekly or monthly notifications of new publications (Acts, Legal Notices and Bye-Laws) and also of receiving keyword notifications on selected types.

During 2023, the Data Protection and Information Coordination Directorate (DPIC) finalised a tender procedure relating to the provision of a new digital system for Freedom of Information (FOI) requests submitted by eligible persons. Whilst the process, in previous years, already integrated an online system to facilitate the submission of requests for documents held by the government, the system will be modernised to enhance users' experience and promote more efficient communication between the public and the government.

The modernised system will provide a new interface and a simplified online form that will be managed from a backend and to which access will be provided to internal users as authorised. The backend will involve new steps that facilitate communication with applicants by seeking clarifications to requests and allowing a diverse selection of document formats that can be disclosed in terms of the FOI Act Malta (Chapter 496).

In addition, during 2023, the DPIC started drafting a new tender for the provision of a digital system that allows for the submission of whistleblower reports. The system will be built around an online form that potential whistleblowers may use in order to submit reports on improper practices within the workplace. Internal users who have been authorised to act in the role of receiving such reports will be able to acknowledge and reply to such reports as outlined in the Protection of the Whistleblower Act (Chapter 527).

The Office of the Notary to Government houses all notarial deeds and wills, gathered in coded volumes, in two separate but linked archives: the Main Notarial Archive which houses all original copies of the notarial deeds and wills, and the Secondary Notarial Archives which houses the registered copies of the original deeds and wills housed in the Main Notarial Archive. Rehabilitation works on the Secondary Notarial Archive (now rebranded as the Notarial Registry Archive) co-funded by the ERDF have been concluded. Now the rehabilitated archive has two components:

1. The structural component includes the restoration, conservation and adaptation of two adjacent interlinked palazzos housing the archive itself, a paper conservation laboratory, a digitisation laboratory, a reading room, a visitors' centre and a museum, as well as residencies for artists and researchers.
2. The non-structural component includes the disinfection of all volumes within the secondary archive, conservation and restoration treatments on a selection of these volumes, the installation of properly adequate horizontal shelving systems, the purchase of appropriate digitisation equipment, a museum using the latest display technology related to historic artefacts, as well as furnishings and furniture. In addition, it includes project management as well as professional services to steer forward and channel the conservation efforts within the secondary archive and the historical aspects of the archive and its collection. This archive has now been handed over to the National Archives and is being managed by the Notarial Archive Foundation.

This project within the Notarial Registry Archive has paved the way to embark on a similar project concerning the Main Notarial Archive. Likewise, this project will also have two components: structural and non-structural. The Office has already procured mapping/ surveying services covering the facades of the building, in order to assess the external state of the building fabric. This will eventually be followed by the restoration and conservation of the said facades. Subsequently, the project will concentrate its efforts on the interior of the building, and the refurbishment and maintenance of the structural fabric of the archive's fourteen rooms spread over two floors. The non-structural component will include the procurement, purchase and installation of adequate shelving and the procurement, purchase and installation of disinfection equipment.

5.3.2 Financial Intelligence and Protection from Money Laundering

The FIAU aims to ensure that Malta is protected from money laundering and the funding of terrorism, protects the economy, society, individuals and good governance.

The government has significantly invested in the FIAU, which saw its staff grow from forty-three in 2018 to over one hundred and fifty by the end of 2023. To cater for such growth, FIAU moved to larger premises with an investment exceeding €87 million. The increase in personnel and resources has enabled the FIAU to allow for a more specialised and targeted approach to combatting money laundering and funding of terrorism.

In 2023, heightened awareness among obliged entities led to a four-fold increase in reports to the FIAU's Intelligence Analysis Section, totalling over 8,000. This resulted in increased dissemination by the FIAU to its counterparts. This surge resulted in the FIAU making over 5,500 disseminations to foreign FIUs, around three hundred and fifty to the MPF, and approximately six hundred to the Commissioner for Revenue. The usability rate of reports filed by key sectors like the banking and gaming sector is within the 80 – 90% range; this not only manifests the FIAU's commitment to preventing and disrupting money laundering activities in the country but also its effort to combat money laundering and funding of terrorism on a global scale.

5.3.3 Necessary support and assistance to victims

The Victim Support Agency (VSA) has conducted the following:

- Screening of National Legislation related to victims of crime (VoC) for better access to justice and support services;
- Periodically review progress within the structures providing for victim support and prepare recommendations to mitigate gaps within the same structures;
- Monitor and document local and international initiatives and best practices;
- Facilitate discussions and the sharing of expertise and information between members; and
- Coordinating joint efforts to raise awareness and advocate in support of victims' rights.

Furthermore, the VSA has established the Victim Support Network. The National VoC Support Network is a consultative body aiming at facilitating the exchange of information and practices amongst entities working in the field of victim support. Having a National VoC Support Network enables all stakeholders to exchange practices, explore the current issues affecting VoC and increase awareness while advocating for victims' rights to encourage victims to report and seek support. It is also envisaged to give a platform to victims themselves to exchange experiences and to be empowered.

The VSA has also conducted consultations on the matters related to:

- Victims' access to state compensation and other forms of compensation; and
- Review of legal instruments to enhance the rights of child victims of crime.

Through an agreement between the VSA and the Directorate for AACC, the VSA is providing support to elderly abuse victims. This includes court guidance and a unified referral system, aligning with the Ministry's goals and protecting the elderly's rights and dignity by ensuring access to legal aid and support. Sessions were conducted to educate older individuals on how financial abuse and fraud targeting older persons can occur.

5.3.4 Enhancing community safety

The Department of Probation and Parole, pursuing its modernisation goals, adopted the cutting-edge tool OUTCOME STAR/JUSTICE STAR, in partnership with Triangle Consultancy Group, and Jobsplus. This initiative equips Probation Officers with a more precise, contemporary instrument to perform their duties. Selected Officers underwent comprehensive training sessions on the tool's functionalities, which shall significantly improve the quality of the Department's work, particularly in the scope of offender care plans. With this tool, the Department of Probation and Parole anticipates a positive impact on reducing recidivism rates and fostering positive rehabilitation outcomes.

Meanwhile, to ensure safe towns and villages, the CPD continued with various initiatives during the course of 2023, including the following:

- Revamp of all fire stations to ensure that each can become a suitable workplace in line with today's working standards, as well as the latest Occupational Health and Safety guidelines. This will further protect fire fighters from exposure to carcinogens and ensure that a healthy working environment is retained;
- The construction of three new fire stations, one of which has already started, and one finalised as well as the enlargement of an additional three fire stations to ensure that each station has the capacity to cater for today's requirements;
- The recruitment of additional personnel to work as fire fighters;
- The replacement and increase of fire engines to ensure that the CPD is able to respond to emergencies using the latest vehicles and technologies. This includes specialised vehicles to respond to wildfires due to the effects of climate change and fire engines that are able to tackle lithium-powered EVs;
- Review and upgrade of the current Personal Protection Equipment to ensure that fire fighters are protected to the highest standard, and to ensure that they are able to provide the highest levels of rescue when deployed to emergencies; and
- Running of an educational campaign on fire safety and civil protection matters through leaflets, media presence, social media and publications.

5.4 Achieving High-Quality Education Responsive to Labour Market Needs

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
4.1	By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
4.2	By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education
4.3	By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
4.4	By 2030, substantially increase the number of youths and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
4.5	By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations
4.6	By 2030, ensure that all youths and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy
4.7	By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture’s contribution to sustainable development
4.a	Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all
12.8	By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature
13.3	Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning

At the compulsory education level, the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–2024, which is now in its final cyclical policy phase, underpins Malta’s strategic outlook towards an equitable and accessible educational setup for all. In view of this, in mid-April 2023, the process that would eventually culminate in the launch of a National Education Strategy 2024-2030 took off. It is MEYR’s belief that educators and all personnel working in schools are to be given a strong voice in this strategy. Therefore, an intensive pre-consultation phase was initiated as a result of a job satisfaction survey among educators. Dialogue with educators and social partners was central to the feedback-gathering process.

As a person-centred strategy, the National Education Strategy 2024-2030 will be placing a lot of emphasis on wellbeing and mental health, particularly in the context of unprecedented technological advances and the impact of AI in today’s society. Therefore, the Strategy will highlight the issues of both students as well as educators’ physical, mental, and socio-emotional health, coupled with digital wellbeing throughout. This Strategy will also complement the government’s efforts to expand support systems geared at enhancing the quality of the education system and the teaching profession.



The second pillar of the National Education Strategy 2024-2030 relates to growth and empowerment alongside learning outcomes. It necessitates the close monitoring of the impact the education system is having on each student, ensuring that students transition to the post-compulsory stage after having attained basic skills. This is also seen in curricula, which are being expanded to encompass digital and data literacy in order to better prepare students to respond to the emerging technological trends. Further to this, while recognising the value of formal schooling, the Strategy will also highlight the importance of alternative forms of learning.

The third pillar of the Strategy then emphasises equity and inclusion, highlighting the right of access to quality education for all. In view of this, the scope of inclusion will be expanded to incorporate the concept of progress, accentuating the need to extend the margins of inclusion so that high-ability learners become part of policy discourse.

In March 2023, Malta initiated public consultations for two significant frameworks: the National Quality Assurance Framework for Education and the National Quality Standard in Education, aimed at upholding high standards in pre-compulsory and compulsory education. Furthermore, in 2022, Malta revised two key steering documents in the field of inclusive education, which continued to guide the nation's approach in 2023. These documents, namely 'A National Inclusive Education Framework' and 'A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion', aim at encouraging schools and stakeholders to develop high-quality inclusion by implementing, reviewing, and committing to more inclusive policies and practices. The revised documents also aim to provide education that embraces social equity and achieves a more inclusive society. Moreover, the revised policies emphasise a culture of collaboration, the removal of barriers to learning, and proactive approaches to managing behaviour and bullying in schools.

Implementing diversity days in schools, for example, has been key to promoting social inclusion and dismantling stereotypes, with three hundred and fourteen events held in the 2022/2023 academic year. The educational materials and activities, integral to showcasing inclusive practices, were adopted across various levels of the Maltese education system, including primary, middle, and secondary schools. The overarching goal was to reinforce an environment where inclusivity is not only understood but also actively practised within schools.

In 2022, MEYR also developed an Inclusion Toolkit designed to support educators in addressing the needs of learners with individual educational needs (IEN). Throughout 2023, this Toolkit was introduced across schools in Malta, providing strategies, techniques, and materials to foster inclusivity. It aims to establish an optimal learning environment that accommodates the diverse needs of all students. Heads of department were tasked with the responsibility of introducing the Toolkit to learning support educators (LSEs) as part of their professional training, offering guidance on its application in educational practices. The focus was on enabling these educators to apply the resources and strategies from the Toolkit in their direct interactions with learners with IEN, thereby facilitating a more inclusive and supportive educational experience for these students. This initiative aligns with Malta's strategic objectives in education, particularly in promoting inclusivity and ensuring equal access to education for all learners. In addition to this, CoPE sessions focused on equipping educators with the skills and knowledge to support inclusive education, fostering a collaborative approach to addressing diverse student needs. During scholastic year 2022/2023, a total of one hundred and forty-two CoPE sessions were delivered by professionals from the National School Support Services (NSSS), complemented by training sessions to enhance the knowledge and understanding of practitioners and specialised educators.

In 2023, a series of forty inclusive education parent training sessions were also conducted both face-to-face and online focusing on a wide range of topics, with an emphasis given to early years support. These sessions covered areas such as early intervention, early literacy and numeracy skills, supporting children in the early years, the development of fine motor skills, and using gestures and routines to promote communication skills. Additionally, sessions catered to parents and guardians of older children, covering emotional coaching training for parents, anti-substance/anti-bullying sessions, and understanding child development across the growth stage, offering valuable insights and guidance for parents in navigating the challenges of raising older children.

Furthermore, in March 2023, the NSSS organised a conference titled, "Nurture Groups, Learning Support Zones (LSZ), and Learning Support Centres: The What, The Why, and The How", a significant step in Malta's commitment to inclusive education and social inclusion strategies. The conference was a platform for various practitioners in the field of social and emotional learning to present their research, contributing to the broader discussion on how to effectively support students with diverse educational needs. The conference emphasised the importance of understanding and implementing nurture groups, LSZs, and learning support centres within the educational landscape.

Other training events included the participation of NSSS in the STESSIE Erasmus+ project, which was organised to disseminate knowledge and practices pertaining to social inclusion in education. The project aimed to enhance the effectiveness of tools for self-evaluation and the stimulation of social inclusion within educational settings. A significant part of the event was dedicated to discussing various services and projects that exemplify Malta's approach to inclusive education, notably projects which included the multisensory learning rooms (MSLR) and Reach Units, as well as specialised educational provisions such as nurture groups and LSZs.

By increasing its efforts in effectively addressing the needs of all learners and ensuring that schools are inclusive and equitable environments, Malta is enforcing its commitment to promote and encourage inclusion in its education system and create a more equitable, inclusive, and supportive society where every child has the opportunity to succeed and thrive.

During 2023, through the work of the DoH, efforts were made so that occupational therapy services are delivered at schools and no longer in hospitals. In this regard, the services will include the provision of training, progress monitoring, ongoing screening and support, as well as consultation regarding classroom design and modifications for all students. In this case, the occupational therapist will work with educators and help build their resilience in delivering the curriculum. Targeted support will also be provided as a way forward in supporting children with 'hidden' needs within the classroom environment. At the compulsory education level, the NSSS provides services focusing on the physical, social, emotional, psychological, cultural, and behavioural development of children within an inclusive-oriented culture, aimed at eliminating challenges and barriers, to help children reach their full potential. These services include school psychological services, anti-bullying services, and anti-substance abuse services among others.

In addition to the above, Scheme 9 is intended to ameliorate the life of primary, middle and secondary school students aged between three and sixteen years living in the most disadvantaged familial and cultural backgrounds. In essence, this scheme addresses these students' basic educational necessities to ensure the provision of a quality educational experience, hence diminishing barriers for students living in families experiencing economic, social, and cultural difficulties. Through this scheme, which began in 2016, during the scholastic year 2023-2024, eligible students were provided with a uniform voucher, a pack of stationery and an extra-curricular activity from the following: Skolasajf; Klabb 3-16; Sportmalta Summer Programme; and Sportmalta Winter Programme.

Moreover, during the second quarter of 2023, the NSSS coordinated a working group set up by the Department for Educational Services in relation to school absenteeism. The working group, chaired by the NSSS Director, included a representative from each of the following:

- Head of College Network;
- Head of Primary School;
- Head of Middle School;
- Head of Secondary School; and
- Social Work Service within NSSS.

The board was required to:

- Look into practices in connection with improving attendance rates;
- Refine current guidelines for colleges and schools; and
- If necessary, hold consultations with school leadership teams about the topic.

The recommendations included the following:

- Review of the Attendance Procedures;
- Review of related Standards of Procedures;
- List of strategies for School Senior Leadership Teams to implement to improve school attendance; and
- Creation of a system whereby parents can upload medical certificates online.

Furthermore, an MoU between NSSS and the Community Police was drafted aiming at improving collaboration to reach out to more vulnerable children. Additionally, several social work interventions were conducted, namely, a:

- Number of habitually absent students followed during scholastic year 2022/2023 – 1,481
- Number of other students followed who faced parental, social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties – 162
- Number of home visits – 1,286
- Number of school visits – 1,296
- Internal referrals to support services – 112
- External referrals to support services - 206

The FES continued offering Skolasajf (summer school). A programme of activities is implemented in the Skolasajf centres and is always centred around a main theme. The theme chosen for 2023 was ‘Peace by Piece’. This slogan urges people to do their part, no matter how small, as all the individual ‘pieces of peace’ build the peace that is so needed by everyone. During 2023, FES provided training for all its Skolasajf staff. Training was carried out in collaboration with the Institute for Education. The primary aim of such training was to ensure that Skolasajf staff would have the necessary skills and knowledge on how to deal with children (including those having specific needs) and how to implement the Skolasajf Programme.

The National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2023-2030 was launched on 18 November 2023, adopting a multifaceted approach centred on expanding adult learning opportunities. It seeks to facilitate access to adult education, aligning with Malta’s commitment under the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. This commitment includes contributing to achieving the target that 57.6% of all adults aged twenty-five and sixty-four participate in learning by 2030. The strategy also focuses on creating synergies among various stakeholders and sparking a national dialogue about adult learning. The Strategy aims to reach these goals through three pillars:

- Pillar I focuses on improving those educational opportunities aimed at low-skilled and low-qualified adults who face a higher risk of unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion.
- Pillar II aims to diversify the methods and opportunities for learning through the enhancement and promotion of community, work-based and other forms of informal and non-formal learning options.
- Pillar III seeks to ensure quality in the lifelong learning course provision. The Strategy proposes to ensure this through the facilitation of a paradigm shift in the perceived role of the Directorate responsible for Lifelong Learning within MEYR, highlighting its wider national role to coordinate and create synergy amongst its stakeholders.

During 2023, the government directed its efforts at building and renovating school buildings and accommodation for students. Thus, renovations of the Gozo College Nadur Primary School were undertaken, with the aim of improving the learning environment for approximately two hundred pupils and educators. Works encompassed refurbishments to construct new open and recreational spaces and new spaces for teaching extracurricular subjects, including the performing arts. These new spaces include a dance studio, a music room, a literacy room, a theatre studio, and art classes. Through this project, various measures were introduced to increase the energy efficiency of the whole building.

In 2023, the then MGOZ also continued with the implementation of the Gozo College Victoria Primary and Middle School Project, which consists of the construction of a new primary school in Victoria, along with the refurbishment of the existing middle school, which happens to be in the same campus area. By the end of 2023, the construction works concerning the primary school were completed.

In 2023, the then MGOZ also continued with its work on the Villa Lauri Project, which will provide accommodation to Gozitan students attending an educational institution in Malta, as well as to Gozitan relatives of patients recovering in a hospital in Malta. Ongoing works focused on monitoring, evaluation and finishes work, the installation of a lift, and furnishing and fittings.

The Grant Payable to Malta Resident Students Following Full-Time Courses in Gozo, the Grant Payable to Gozitan Resident Students Following Full-Time Courses in Malta, and the additional benefit covering rental costs for Gozitan students studying in Malta, all of which had commenced in previous years, but were sustained due to the importance that the country is giving towards establishing an education environment that leaves no-one behind.

5.5 Equal Opportunities and Fair Access to Fair, Safe and Secure Working Environments

Relevant UN SDG Targets	
4.4	By 2030, substantially increase the number of youths and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
8.2	Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value-added and labour-intensive sectors
8.3	Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalisation and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services
8.5	By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value
8.8	Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment
8.9	By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products
9.2	Promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and, by 2030, significantly raise the industry’s share of employment and gross domestic product, in line with national circumstances, and double its share in the least developed countries
9.3	Increase the access of small-scale industrial and other enterprises, in particular in developing countries, to financial services, including affordable credit, and their integration into value chains and markets
9.4	By 2030, upgrade infrastructure and retrofit industries to make them sustainable, with increased resource-use efficiency and greater adoption of clean and environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes, with all countries taking action in accordance with their respective capabilities

9.5	Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries, including, by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per one million people and public and private research and development spending
12.6	Encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle
16.b	Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development

5.5.1 Safeguarding Working Conditions and an Inclusive Labour Market

Several initiatives have been undertaken to support Malta's commitment to fostering the development of the labour market, in particular by creating opportunities for personal development, ensuring the availability of jobs that meet the needs of individuals in terms of pay and security, safe working conditions, and promoting work-life and family-friendly measures such as flexible working arrangements.

In consideration of the above, several changes were introduced in 2023 reflecting a commitment to improving the standard of living for workers and lower-income families in Malta. These include:

1. **Minimum Wage Increase:** The minimum wage in Malta will see a significant increase from the current €192.73 to €213.54 per week, effective from the 1 January, 2024. This adjustment includes the standardised annual cost of living adjustment (COLA), resulting from an agreement between social partners that outlines minimum wage increases for the next four years.
2. **COLA:** Wages will increase by a minimum of €12.81 per week to reflect the inflation rate over the past year. This marks the highest increase ever, surpassing the previous record of €9.90 per week in the previous year (2023). The COLA will be provided in two tranches - one before Christmas and the second in May. As of 2022, persons living on social benefits started receiving the full COLA for the first time. During the year 2023, these persons once again received the full COLA; such assistance was increased by €9.90 per week. Furthermore, the tapering of benefits continued to improve whereby a beneficiary shall continue to receive 10% more of the benefit in the three years mentioned. Thus, such beneficiaries continued to receive 75% of the benefit for the first year that they were in employment, 55% of the benefit in their second year in employment, and 35% in the third year.
3. **Additional Benefits for Lower-Income Families:** Approximately ninety-five thousand families with lower incomes will benefit from an extended additional cost of living mechanism. The increase in benefits will range from €100 to €1,500 per year, depending on the family's income and the number of dependent children. The government will invest €26 million in financial support for poorer families.
4. **Extension of Beneficiaries:** The number of beneficiaries for the additional cost of living mechanism will nearly double compared to the previous year. The Budget Speech of 2024 suggests an extension to cover a larger portion of the lower middle class, in addition to those on benefits and with very low incomes.
5. Up until 2022, persons who were not in employment and were receiving either the unemployment contributory benefit or the sickness contributory benefit could not benefit from non-contributory medical assistance. This changed in the year 2023, with such persons becoming entitled to non-contributory medical assistance, even if they receive any of these contributory benefits and if they are not working.

6. Up until 2022, single persons who lived alone on social assistance and moved in with an elderly relative to take care of them would have had their income reduced once they qualified for the Carer's Allowance. This was because they were no longer the head of the family, they would no longer be entitled to social assistance, and the allowance rate they received would be lower. As of the 1 January 2023, a change was introduced whereby these people started to receive the same amount of benefits as before, and thus this anomaly was resolved.

Additionally, a percentage incentive is being awarded to the applicable pension rate to persons who, although having the requirements to retire at the age of sixty-one years, opt to continue working up to their statutory retirement age. If a person retires at the age of:

- 62 years, an incentive of 5% is awarded over the applicable pension rate.
- 63 years, an incentive of 10.5% is awarded over the applicable pension rate.
- 64 years, an incentive of 16.5% is awarded over the applicable pension rate.
- 65 years, an incentive of 23% is awarded over the applicable pension rate.

Six hundred and forty-five pensioners benefitted from this initiative during 2023.

Furthermore, Malta has set up the Low Wage Commission, which advised the Government of Malta to increase the minimum wage for 2024-2027 resulting in the effect of a legal notice. Moreover, the Low Wage Commission was the vehicle through which an agreement between the Government of Malta and the relevant social partners was concluded and signed on 25 October 2023.

In 2023, the government continued to promote employee wellbeing, considering physical, emotional and mental health at the workplace, with particular emphasis on health and safety, work-life balance measures, and addressing gender imbalance.

In terms of addressing the emotional and mental aspects of wellbeing, the Public Service, as the lead employer, is committed to promoting the welfare of employees. A workplace offering work-life balance contributes towards talent retention whilst attracting potential employees. In line with the Public Service's commitment towards work-life balance, in the first quarter 2023, improved measures and new modern work practices were introduced for public officers. These include reduced hours, flexitime, flexi-week, remote working and extended remote working.

Reduced hours were already available for public officers, however, through the revised policy, employees do not require eligibility criteria in order to qualify for such measure. In fact, public officers may request to work on a reduced working schedule varying from twenty to thirty-five hours per week. Prioritisation criteria may still apply to ensure a sustainable operational framework and the continuation of seamless service delivery.

Another enhanced work practice is flexitime, which allows public officers to choose to start working up to two hours before or after the established office hours, thereby providing increased flexibility for employees. A new concept of working was introduced through the flexi-week. Through this measure, public officers may request to spread their working week of forty hours over a period of four or six days.

Public officers may request to work up to 20% of their weekly working hours remotely. Moreover, through extended remote working, public officers may work all or part of their working hours remotely outside their normal office hours, based on eligibility criteria.

The implementation of modern work practices was carried out by adopting a holistic approach involving dialogue and discussions with heads of department and trade unions. Following the feedback received, the policies were then drawn, and the respective Public Service Management Code Manuals were updated. The modern work practices were launched through a circular issued by the Principal Permanent Secretary on 30 March 2023. The circular included a set of guiding principles on the implementation of modern work practices.

To ensure Gozitan employees' wellbeing and as part of a work-life balance mechanism assistance to employers, the then MGOZ offered the following schemes:

- Gozo Employment Refund Scheme and Gozo Back Office Scheme: this scheme offers eligible employers a 30% refund of pay up to €6,000 for every new job created within the private sector based on a three-year contract. The aim is to support full-time recruitment in Gozo in a sustainable manner, create increased and higher quality full-time jobs in Gozo as well as address the issue of a higher dependency on the public sector for full-time employment in Gozo.
- The Gozo Back Office Employment Refund Scheme provides partial reimbursement of salaries for full-time work in back-office operations in Gozo on a minimum three-year contract with the aim of attracting highly skilled and educated workers whilst reducing the existing disparities in average basic salaries between Malta and Gozo. Beneficiaries receive partial reimbursement of the Annual Net Salary of each employee carrying out back-office operations in Gozo with the annual maximum financial aid capped at €65,000 per single undertaking.

In 2023, a total of €653,823.10 was disbursed from funds allocated under both schemes.

Another scheme is the Gozo Teleworking Scheme. This scheme consists of a financial grant to employers up to a maximum of €10,000 spread over a three-year period in proportion to the number of days an employee is granted telework. The scheme also offers a 75% financial grant with a maximum of up to eight hundred fifty euro related to the technological and capital investment to equip the employee with the necessary tools to perform tasks. In 2023, a total of €149,390.46 was disbursed from funds allocated under this scheme.

The government also strides to be a pioneer in family-friendly measures. In this regard, the FES currently operates thirteen government-subsidised childcare centres across Malta. Childcare centres provide care to babies and toddlers aged between three months and three years. All FES-run childcare centres are registered with the Department for Quality Standards in Education and follow the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (2006).

The FES childcare centres have varying operating hours with six centres operating from 06:00 to 18:00, whilst the rest operate from 07:30 to 16:00. However, FES is conducting a market study to analyse demand for extended childcare services during the evenings, weekends, and shifts to better accommodate working parents/guardians.

Staff members are supported with ongoing professional development to enhance their skills. Excellent staff-child ratios are maintained thus ensuring that each child is receiving the very best care, attention and comfort. During 2023, FES continued to train its childcare staff in the Emergent Curriculum, also known as the 'Child-Led Approach'.

FES offers the Klabb 3-16 Programme, an after-school programme that runs throughout the scholastic year. Each month, FES offers a programme of activities that centres around particular themes.

For two consecutive years, FES has offered the service of Klabb 3-16 during the school holidays for children attending in Resource Centres according to the demand for the service. The FES intends to continue offering this service during the school holidays. During Skolasajf 2023, the FES worked in collaboration with the Voice for Inclusion, a service which was provided at the Sannat Unit in Gozo, benefitting fifty students.

Services provided by FES such as childcare, an after-school-hours programme through Klabb 3-16 and Skolasajf enable parents to work while their children are in a safe environment. This measure assists mostly females who would like to return to the world of work thus ensuring work-life balance. FES also promotes employee mental wellbeing through supervision for full-time staff and collaborates with the Employee Support Programme for additional personal and professional support as needed.

Finally, the FES is encouraging the employment of foreign workers especially refugees and asylum workers through the provision of part-time employment. The provision of childcare and after-school services encourage the employment of these employees who do not have extended family here in Malta to support them with the care of their children whilst they are at work.

In 2023, Jobsplus maintained the Free Childcare Scheme to enhance work-life balance and support the Maltese labour market, particularly boosting female participation. This scheme provides free childcare to children aged from three months to three years of age whose parents are either employed or in education leading to a recognised qualification. Additionally, in 2022, it was expanded to cover parents/legal guardians working atypical hours and shifts.

In terms of occupational health and safety, this is currently regulated through Chapter 424, which during 2024 will undergo a legislative review following a public consultation process embarked upon in 2023. In addition, during 2023, the Occupational Health and Safety Authority (OHSA), as the regulator of this field, also continued the process of amending the main Construction Occupational Health and Safety Regulations (L.N. 88 of 2018) to further refine the duties therein.

Further to this, during 2023, OHSA started a strong recruitment drive to bolster its operations, including, but not limited to additional enforcement personnel and commenced the development of an electronic software solution to aid the efficiency and security of data of the enforcement division. Meanwhile, OHSA also continued its core functions of conducting enforcement action, and partial inspections of places of work to ensure that, as required by law, those who have a duty in occupational health and safety, particularly employers and self-employed persons, effectively obey the relevant legal obligations. Ancillary enforcement action continued to be taken where applicable in the form of issuing cessation of work orders, and improvement notices and by taking enforcement action through judicial proceedings in Court, together with the issuing of administrative fines for lesser offences. Efforts were also made to raise awareness on this subject through social media posts, media interventions (radio, TV) and through the organisation of or participation in seminars and conferences.

In 2023, OHSA carried out the following:

- Total number of inspections carried out by OHSA: 2585
- Number of improvement notices issued: 510
- Number of orders to stop works issued: 270
- Number of Administrative fines issued: 77
- Number of judicial proceedings initiated: 128

In 2023, OHSA published the following:

- Construction Scaffolding
- Guidelines regarding Chemical Risk Assessment
- Guidelines regarding the Classification, Labelling and Packaging Regulation

OHSA undertook 3 legislative updates, currently underway:

- New Construction Occupational Health and Safety Regulations (updating of L.N. 88 of 2018 through a new Legal Notice)
- New Occupational Health and Safety Act
- Updating of the carcinogens and mutagens regulations

In a stride towards safeguarding the interests of all stakeholders and upholding the integrity of the employment market, in 2023 the government embarked on very important amendments in the laws governing temporary work agencies and employment agencies in general (L.N. 270 of 2023, Chapter 452). The scope of these regulations is to ensure that such employment agencies are subject to stringent oversight, ensuring their operations are conducted in an orderly and accountable manner. This is accomplished by mandating comprehensive governance, upholding rigorous standards for conduct within the industry, and instituting checks and balances

that foster transparent and ethical management of employment agencies' activities. Under these amended regulations, no individual or entity will be permitted to operate an employment agency or business unless they meet specific criteria.

As in previous years, the DOC published its annual Contracts Circular which establishes the 'Minimum Hourly Rates Payable to Contractor' and the 'Minimum Basic Rates Payable to Contractors' Employees in relation to a set of Service Contracts, which tend to attract pay discrimination both from a gender perspective and from a generic holistic perspective, including economic and social rights.

In October 2023, ITS launched the consultation procedure on a proposed skills pass system for TCN. Under the skills pass system, TCNs applying for a visa to work within Malta's tourism sector from January 2024 onwards will need to pass an initial skill pass assessment before their visa and work permit applications can be processed. The course leading to a skills pass will include an English language proficiency test and basic courses in customer care, hospitality and what Malta offers tourists. Applicants will need to pass a final assessment to get the certification, enabling them to work in hotels, bars, restaurants, kitchen staff, housekeeping and front office posts. This initiative is expected to improve the quality of workers in the sector. The consultation process was launched in October 2023 and closed on 16 November 2023.

In 2023 Jobsplus sustained its management of the INTERCEPT Project. This pilot project, funded by the EEA and Norway Grants Fund, focuses on securing green jobs for inactive youths aged between twenty-five and twenty-nine, through tailored activation, training and career counselling package tailored to the green economy. Following comprehensive research carried out in 2022 on NEET trends, needs and challenges in Malta, and stakeholders' perspectives on Green Jobs competencies, this project was drafted. This research also identified how Jobsplus staff will be trained to motivate youths to shape their green career pathways more effectively. Employers, as crucial stakeholders, contributed to the training's design and delivery, ensuring alignment with industry requirements and a focus on essential skills.

To foster a sustainable labour market with equal opportunities, Jobsplus administers the 2% quota for the integration of disabled individuals. Enforced since the 2015 Budget Speech, this quota mandates that employers with over twenty employees must have at least 2% of their workforce comprised of persons with disabilities.

In 2023, the VASTE Scheme continued to support disabled jobseekers and other vulnerable groups, offering labour market integration through a targeted approach. This includes training, job exposure, and services from a Vocational Multi-Disciplinary Assessment Centre, leading to a personalised training plan. The Lino Spiteri Foundation provides a six-month pre-employment programme, complemented by mentoring, job coaching, and employer support. All placements are followed up by one-to-one mentoring services and job coaching as well as employer support. This comprehensive strategy aims to remove employment barriers, enhance skills, and facilitate personalised job matching, increasing the chances of sustained employment.

5.5.2 Upskilling the Workforce

Upskilling and re-skilling are key to sustaining economic growth. The Maltese government is committed to continue incentivising employee training through a number of initiatives. Through the Maltese Public Employment Services (Jobsplus), in September 2023, Malta relaunched the Investing in Skills (IIS) Scheme. The IIS Scheme, co-financed by the European Social Fund+ (ESF+), seeks to promote the upskilling of persons who are already active within the Maltese labour market. The aim of this scheme is to encourage local employers in all different sectors to upskill their workforce by actively participating in training programmes and courses through financial incentives. The scheme covers costs related to training, wages, and travel expenses. The IIS Scheme was re-launched in 2023 with the first call for applications being published on 18 September 2023. The scheme will close on 31 December 2026.

Jobsplus also offers an array of training courses (funded through national funds) both online and in-person in accounting, business skills, care work, green skills, clerical work, health, safety and security, ICT, hospitality and

customer services, language and numeracy, technical work, and trades amongst others in order to foster a better lifelong learning culture. All courses are offered free of charge to individuals residing in Malta and who meet the eligibility criteria. The courses focus on employability and are on an ongoing basis.

In 2023, Jobsplus also relaunched the Access to Employment (A2E) Scheme, co-financed by the European Social Fund+ (ESF+), the government and the employers and falling under Malta's Operational Programme 'Fostering The Socioeconomic Wellbeing Of Society Through the Creation of Opportunities For All and Investment in HR and Skills' for the 2021-2027 programming period. This scheme will provide employment aid to employers in Malta and Gozo to encourage the recruitment of job seekers in Malta and Gozo, particularly those encountering hurdles in their employment journey.

Due to the onset of the green and digital transition, Jobsplus sought to prepare the labour force for a changing labour market. The SMARTLY Project, launched in 2021, came to an end in 2023. SMARTLY's objectives included research on those NEETs and sectoral needs, the design of training content in green jobs and digital jobs, design and testing of an enhanced profiling tool which features specific elements relevant to digital and green skills as well as general awareness and promotion of these sectors. The project worked towards increasing Malta's supply of required green and digital skills while at the same time increasing youth employability in key sectors. The first phase of the project included a survey and needs analysis, through which main trends were extracted, and findings presented to the partners. This triggered the subsequent phases of the project, which included the development of two training programmes, one focusing on green skills and the other on digital skills. The training programmes have been accredited by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority at MQF Level 3 with 5 ECTS.

Malta has re-established the National Skills Council (NSC). The vision of the NSC is to foster a culture of lifelong learning for all, enabling people to reach their full potential in a dynamic world of work. The NSC is also the national coordinator of the European Year of Skills. Through the use of evidence-based practices, complemented by extensive stakeholder engagement, the Council also aims to gain a better understanding of the current and future skills imbalances within the labour market, whilst instigating policy changes to address them. Industry dialogues, skills foresight and forecasts, lifelong and corporate training, as well as VET, are priority areas of action on which the Council is focusing. The NSC was launched in March 2023. Its operations are sustained through national funds. Furthermore, in collaboration with the then MEEE and the e-Skills Foundation, the NSC is mapping training opportunities in the area of green and digital skills with a view to addressing workforce preparedness for the green and digital transition.

Following the attribution of a broad definition to training opportunities in the area of green and digital skills, an analysis of existing training offerings is being carried out in terms of accredited qualifications at EQF Levels 4, 5, and 6. Training gaps to either enhance existing courses or to address emerging needs will be outlined with a view to addressing current and future demands. This desktop evaluation will then be openly discussed with the industry by adopting a sectoral approach. Final recommendations will be presented and discussed with academia and VET institutions. The project is expected to be finalised by the third quarter of 2024. Additionally, on 7 September 2023, the National Skills Council organised its first conference entitled, 'SkillScape Malta – Towards Tomorrow's Skills'. This conference served as a platform, bringing together key stakeholders from different sectors, with the goal of addressing pressing challenges and opportunities related to skills development in Malta. The conference provided a space to showcase local success stories, collaborations, and good practices related to the topic. Six key recommendations were presented to conclude and summarise the outcome of this event to further align educational outcomes with industry needs.

Skills Development was a scheme administered by ME throughout 2023 which aimed to support businesses in providing training focused on developing a knowledge-based workforce, namely by developing and updating the skills and knowledge of their workforce and training new employees to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to perform effectively, thus addressing skills shortages, facilitating re-skilling, and addressing skill mismatches. The beneficiary may receive support in the form of a tax credit, a cash grant or a mix of both. Aid approved may cover up to 70% of the cost of training, including wages of trainees for the time dedicated to receiving training. This scheme is being revised and extended to reflect the new state aid rules.

Concluding Remarks

The Sustainable Development Annual Report 2023 highlights the significance of embracing a unified approach towards sustainable development, emphasising the need to leverage synergies and address trade-offs in order to achieve the targets set out by the UN Agenda 2030 and achieve the goals and strategic objectives of Malta's Sustainable Development Strategy for 2050. The Report showcases the various projects and initiatives managed by Maltese government bodies aligned with the fulfilment of the SDGs. It also sheds light on the pivotal part that ministries and government entities play in ensuring the attainment of Malta's targets, emphasising their role and commitment in devising and implementing policies that contribute to a cleaner and healthier environment, and socio-economic progress that is beneficial to all.

During the past year, the whole of government actively participated in the process of developing a set of national set of sustainable development indicators to monitor progress towards the implementation of Malta's Sustainable Development Strategy for 2050. The objectives of this Strategy, evident throughout the government's activities outlined in the Annual Report, envision a future marked by a robust local economy, an appealing environment, and sound social policies.

Prioritising an approach that champions a sustainable green and blue economy holds immense potential for enhancing sustainable practices through innovation-driven approach. This is crucial for realising Malta's sustainability ambitions and propagating the values of sustainable development and the SDGs across all sectors. As highlighted in the Annual Report, the government is encouraging cross-disciplinary collaboration among sectors, decision-makers, public bodies, professionals, and stakeholders to further promote shared learning, know-how and the exchange of information. This collaborative effort can translate knowledge into practical strategies and help navigate synergies and trade-offs in the three pillars of sustainable development.

Success in achieving the SDGs necessitates a variety of actions and factors, spanning from legal frameworks and regulatory measures to initiatives and schemes designed to drive and promote positive societal, economic, and environmental changes.



Annex 1: 2023 Milestones

SDG	Main Initiative/Measure commencing in 2023	Description	Reference page in document
ALL SDGs	ESDW 2023	The chosen theme for ESDW 2023, which took place between 18 September and 8 October, was 'Sustainability starts with us'.	18
ALL SDGs	The Sustainable Development Fund	Five voluntary organisations were given funding for projects that addressed a multitude of sustainable development principles through a variety of ways.	21
3	The Fun Fit 5 (FF5) Project	The then MEEE and the Fondazzjoni Inġobb il-Futbol signed an MoU regarding the FF5 project. The aim of this initiative was to combat the ever-increasing issue of obesity in Maltese society, particularly within the younger generations.	21
12-15	Revision of the National Strategy for the Environment 2050	The National Strategy for the Environment 2050 was revised in 2023 according to comments received during public consultation.	23
13, 15	Initiation of the Fire Prevention Strategy	This Strategy was implemented for the three main woodland areas of Buskett, Aħrax tal-Mellieħa and Miżieb with the aim of mitigating the impacts of fires through sustainable practices in line with climate adaptation principles.	26
3, 13	Drafting of a Heat Health Action Plan	This Action Plan is being drafted to ensure preparedness for, and to limit health and health systems impacts of, future climate-related heat events.	27
13	Launch of the 'Toward Net-Zero Carbon in the Tourism Accommodation' Project	The project consists of carrying out a study on the current energy and water consumption in the tourist accommodation sector.	27
7, 11, 13	Freeport Shore-to-Ship Project	This project relates to the provision of Onshore Power Supply for ships berthing at the Malta Freeport and will see the installation of three points at the main terminals of Malta Freeport.	28
7, 11, 13	Development of a Ride-Sharing Platform	The Ride-Sharing Platform will be integrated with the new fleet of general-use EVs. It will comprise a mobile application (for drivers and	30

		vehicle sensors (card reader, panic button, and battery level among others).	30
11, 13	Issuing of the Air Quality Plan for Public Consultation	The draft AQP was issued for public consultation in September 2023.	30
15	Education Campaign on Soundscapes/Environmental Noise in Spencer Garden	This education campaign aims to raise awareness on soundscapes and environmental noise.	31
7, 9	Offshore Renewable Energy	The then MEEE launched the first policy document, detailing the National Policy for the Deployment of Offshore Renewable Energy for public consultation.	33
7	Projects for Utility Scale BESS	The first Project will be located in Delimara Power Station. The second Project will be located within the 'A' Station in Marsa.	33
7, 6	GUEST Project	Project aimed at making guesthouses more sustainable in terms of energy and water use.	34
7	REEVALUE Project	This is an EU-LIFE funded project which aims to generate value-chain collaborations amongst businesses in target NACE codes, through which energy efficiency and renewable energy sources opportunities will be identified and implemented.	34
12	Inauguration of the MMRF	This facility is designed to accept waste streams such as wood, mattresses, polystyrene, tyres, and textiles.	40
12	Law on Mandatory Waste Separation	This new obligation came into force in April 2023.	40
12	Waste Compositional Surveys	The ERA carried out two waste compositional surveys.	40
12	Pilot Repair Lab	The creation of a pilot repair lab at MCAST.	41
8	Implementation of the FoodTuristic Project	This project addresses the lack of green technology curricula in European culinary and hospitality schools.	43

12	Re-Usable Veggie Bags Dissemination Initiative	The objective of this initiative was to spread awareness about and mitigate the harmful effects of SUPs generated through the use of single-use plastic bags in supermarkets.	44
6	Public Consultation on the Green Paper on Regulation of Private Groundwater Abstraction	The Green Paper proposes the establishment of a national licensing framework for private groundwater abstraction including a pricing policy intended to incentivise the efficient and effective use of abstracted groundwater.	46
15	Formulation of Malta's National Strategy and Action Plan for Pollinators to 2035	The intent and objectives of this policy were published for public consultation between 13 February and 17 March 2023.	50
8, 15	National Database on Biodiversity	An inventory of information on local species, in particular, native, endemic and threatened species.	50
4, 15	NGO Training Seminar	ERA held the first NGO training seminar, inviting NGOs who are involved in terrestrial site management.	51
14,15	Master Plan for the Preservation of Wied il-Lunzjata underway	Preliminary geological investigations were commissioned to assess the geological and geomorphic conditions of the cliff located above the chapel.	52
14	Launch of the Sea Urchin Restocking Project	This project is envisioned as a three-year project to release sustainable numbers of sea urchins into identified areas in Maltese waters, enhancing the species' stocks.	54
8, 14	Creation of the first Marine Park	MTA collaborated with Nature Trust Malta to create the first marine park in Ċirkewwa.	56
2, 8, 15	Publication of NAA	This provides for the new legislation framework for all regulations related to agriculture whilst repealing and replacing all previous agriculture-related legislation.	58

2, 4, 6, 10, 13, 15, 16	Implementation of Malta's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027	The CAP 2023-2027 is an EU instrument which, while continuing to offer a decent income to European farmers, promotes greener and sustainable practices while ensuring food security.	60
2, 15	Launch of measure on the Implementation of SMP on a Parcel	The objective of this measure is for farmers to prepare and implement an SMP on their parcels targeting three primary soil-related threats on a parcel level; erosion, compaction, and low soil organic matter.	60
2, 15	Establishment of the Agency 'Riżorsi Agrikoli Malta'	The primary objective of this Agency is to bolster the sustainability of farming, enhance food production, and protect the rural environment, with the registration of ownership of agricultural land being one of its main responsibilities.	60
6	Expansion of the Malta South Reclaimed Water Production and Distribution Network	WSC secured €20 million of EU EAFRD Funds for the expansion of the Malta South reclaimed water (New Water) production capacity and extension of the distribution network to cover the southwest of Malta.	61
2, 8, 15, 16	Rural Leases Reform	A new legislation was published, this being L.N. 212 of 2023, which is expected to introduce new legal provisions to empower the Rural Leases Control Board to fix the rent in a manner related to a fair rental price.	61
1, 4, 10	Launching of Malta's Action Plan for Organic Food	This action plan promotes organic farming and provides financial support for organic farming conversion and maintenance.	61
2	Launching of Process to Obtain Organic Certification for the Slaughter Line	The Public Abattoir launched the process to obtain organic certification for the slaughter line as well as for its cutting and deboning plants.	62
2, 4	Launch of the Second Edition of the Let's Talk Farming Programme	The second edition of the Let's Talk Farming Programme was launched in 2023, titled 'Empowering Future Generations for a Sustainable Food System'. This programme promotes farming and food production in	64

		primary schools, empowering future generations, and fostering a sustainable food system and culture.	
2, 4, 13, 15	Launch of Booklets on Management of Specific Crops Using Integrated Pest Management	Five booklets with guidelines on the management of specific crops using Integrated Pest Management.	64
2, 8	Fertiliser Scheme to Land Farmers	Direct aid to partially support the increase in the cost of all chemical and synthetic fertilisers of land farmers in the context of the sudden unforeseen increased costs in production, in line with the provisions of the Temporary Crisis Framework for State Aid measures to support the economy following the aggression against Ukraine by Russia.	65
8,9,11	Launch of the Boat Restoration Scheme for the 5 th Executive Year	The scheme entailed the provision of financial assistance to MFA (full-time fishermen) and MFB (part-time fishermen) category boat owners that have one of the traditional Maltese wooden vessels, these being <i>Firilla</i> , <i>Frejgatina</i> , <i>Kajjik</i> , and <i>Luzzu</i> .	69
13, 14, 15	Commencement of EU Horizon Project NETTAG+	This project provides a portfolio of three suitable innovative smart and sustainable solutions to prevent, avoid and mitigate the negative impacts of ALDFG on marine life and habitats.	70
8	Listing of Malta's First Green Bond	MSE had the listing of Malta's first Green Bond, launched by WSC at a value of €25 million, through its subsidiary ClearFlowPlus plc.	71
8	TSI Multi-Country Project on Sustainable Finance	MFSA together with the national competent authorities of Croatia, Poland, and Romania, is participating in this project, which will provide technical support on supervisory capacity enhancement in sustainable finance.	72
8, 14	Establishment of Malta Tourism Observatory	Tasked with disseminating information about the implementation of the Tourism Strategy and engaging with stakeholders on subjects of interest to the sector.	77

11	Commencing of reform of Eco-Certificate for Tourism Accommodation	This certification aims to improve the sustainable performance of tourism accommodation on the Maltese Islands.	78
4, 11	Construction of a New ITS Campus	This will contribute to increasing the quality of education provided whilst investing in the future generation of people working in the tourism industry.	78
8, 11 15	Guidebook for Geological Walks Around the Maltese Islands	CFD prepared a guidebook for geological walks around the Maltese Islands.	78
3, 8, 11	Scheme for Financial Assistance to Build Carnival Floats	Designers/organisations were financially assisted to rent a facility in which to build carnival floats.	80
4	<i>Chiasmus</i> Project	A project created to encourage young people who love English literature and writing in English to develop their writing skills and talents.	80
4, 11	<i>Kjażmu</i> Project	A project created to encourage young people who love Maltese literature and writing in Maltese to develop their writing skills and talents.	80
4	Young Composers	A joint initiative between Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ and Pjazza Teatru Rjal, provided young people with the opportunity to be mentored by some of Malta's leading composers and professionals in the field of the music industry.	80
4,11	Konkors ta' Kitba – Letteratura għaż-Żgħażaġħ	A writing contest that selects, rewards and publishes Maltese novels written for young adolescent readers between 13 and 18 years. This programme is organised in collaboration with the National Book Council Malta.	80
4	ideARTI	A project-based programme offered in collaboration with the Malta School of Arts intended to support young creatives in developing a final artwork that reflects their artistic language.	80
4	The Malta Youth Film Festival	A joint collaboration of Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ and the Malta Film Foundation that offers a platform for young film-makers to encourage them to enter their films for awards.	80

4	Songcraft	A joint collaboration between Aġenzija Żgħażaġh and Spazju Kreattiv that was developed to encourage young singer-songwriters to develop their creative skills and preparedness for the music industry through mentorship and guidance by established and successful artists in the field.	81
4	Shifting Contexts	A collaboration with Spazju Kreattiv. This visual art project aimed at exploring the critical role of art in responding to a rapidly changing world and contributing to contemporary discourse.	81
11	Grant for restoration of structures and other immovable monuments	The then MGOZ will be awarding grants to Gozitan LCs and Administrative Committees to undertake projects leading to the restoration of structures and other immovable monuments of historic and/or artistic value and/or projects for the rejuvenation through enhancement, resurfacing, embellishment, lighting and greening of existing alleyways that are located within their delineated boundaries.	82
11	Scheme for Grade 1 and 2 Scheduled Buildings	A new scheme for Grade 1 and 2 Scheduled Buildings which will affect some 70 scheduled residential properties, whilst the number of applications received was 162.	82
14, 15	Development of Guidelines for the Reduction of Light Pollution	ERA is in the process of developing guidelines for the reduction of light pollution and in cooperation with PA and other stakeholders.	87
11	Review of the Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development (SPED)	Will provide the basis for future planning and development for the use of the land and sea for the years 2020-2040.	87
11	Refurbishment and Repair Work in Approximately 60 Vacant Residential Dwellings	Works were carried out either directly by HA contractors or by means of a financial grant given to the new tenants. Through this renovation work, these properties,	88

		mostly situated in urban cores and housing estates, were rendered habitable and fit for allocation to social housing applicants.	
11	Housing Regeneration Projects	Regeneration projects by HA in various housing estates comprising the renovation of facades, roofs and other improvement works in the common areas and improving the urban environment within these estates.	88
7, 13, 11	Procurement of Energy-Efficient Street-Sweeping Vehicles	In total, 23 pedestrian sweepers, 10 compact sweepers, 4 city sweepers, 15 electric robot floor scrubbers, and 5 electric robot floor sweepers were procured.	88
11, 13, 15	Introduction of over 40,000 m ² of New Green Spaces and Planting of 4000 Trees Across Malta	Project Green introduced over 40,000 square metres of new green spaces and planted more than 4000 trees across Malta.	89
11, 15	Community Greening Grant	This grant is set to transform sites which are derelict into vibrant green spaces in the next few years.	89
11	Regeneration Project of Spencer Garden in Marsa	Spencer Garden is being regenerated to be more sustainable and serve as a greener lung to the area.	89
3, 10	Launch of the National Strategic Policy for Active Ageing 2023-2030	Adopts a holistic approach that emphasises both prevention and support.	92
3, 8	Voucher System to Reimburse Out-of-Pocket Payments for Children Requiring Occupational Therapy Services	A voucher system to reimburse out-of-pocket payments made by the public for children requiring occupational therapy services.	99
3, 10	Establishment of Bilateral Joint Controllership Agreements between the CSA and POYC	This allowed prison doctors access to prescribing rights to Schedule V medications.	99
3, 10	Establishment of On-Site Prison Infectious Diseases Clinics	Inmates with active Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and HIV are being regularly reviewed in the prison clinic.	99
3, 10	Engagement of an On-Site Pharmacist at the CSA	Inmates have the availability and option of purchasing private medications that are not available on the government formulary, as	99

		as recommended by the medical officer at the prison clinic.	
3, 10	Establishment of Residential Agreements between the CSA and Church Homes for the Elderly	For elderly inmates with comorbid illnesses and dire medical needs. After the recommendation from the medical doctors and approval of the prison director, inmates whose nursing needs cannot be catered for in the prison setting can be promptly referred to an elderly home.	99
3, 10	Establishment of Bilateral Agreements between the CSA and the National Immunisation Service	Allows the medical staff of the prison clinic to access the vaccine data history of new inmates - to ascertain and administer any vaccinations that may be overdue.	99
3	Investment in Ultrasound Machine at SVP	The investment in an ultrasound machine to strengthen digital imaging at SVP.	100
3, 11	Inauguration of Garden at SVP	This project aimed to create a therapeutic environment tailored to the unique needs of individuals affected by dementia. The garden will provide a service space, promoting sensory engagement and fostering a sense of wellbeing among residents.	100
3	New Facilities Opened at the Outreach Clinic at Dar Padova in Għajnsielem Gozo	New facilities include a vascular clinic, podiatry, occupational therapy, psychotherapy, and other interventions.	100
8	Increase in the Carers' Grant	This benefit increased from €500 to over €4,500 per year and is paid every three months. There were 450 persons who benefitted from this measure during 2023.	100
3,4	Organisation of Information Sessions and Workshops on Mental Health within the Elderly Population	Organisation of information sessions and workshops for general practitioners to enable them to recognise mental health issues in later life.	100
3	Launch of GP Service for the Elderly in the Community	Through this service, the AACC will start offering a GP service for the elderly who have complex health problems and live in the community.	100

3	Launch of New Service for Leasing of Motorised Beds	These beds will be leased to people in the community aged sixty years or over, who require this service due to physical difficulties.	100
3	Heatwave Emergency Preparedness Preparations	Preparations by the MFH and health entities (e.g. hospitals) vis-à-vis heatwave emergency preparedness that are underway jointly with the Chief Medical Officer and Superintendent of Public Health.	102
3	Setting up of Wellbeing 360	The project is an online monthly webinar series for service users and the general public, aimed towards engaging, educating and raising awareness on mental wellbeing.	102
3, 4	National Mental Health Campaign Flu Fsieb	This campaign sought to educate and enable the population in Malta with respect to key habits that are beneficial for both physical and mental health covering thematic areas of diet, sleep, mindfulness, meaningful social connection, mental and physical self-checks and work-life balance.	102
3, 11	Development of a national HEPA Strategy	Intended to make the Maltese population more resilient by promoting active lifestyles.	103
3	Piloting of a Child Weight Management Programme	The aim of the pilot was to establish a healthy lifestyle programme for healthy weight management in children.	104
9	National Digital Decade Strategic Roadmap	Highlights key measures towards achieving EU's commitments in relation to the Digital Decade Policy Programme.	110
9	Project on Voice recognition on Freephone 153	AI-driven voice recognition technology for Freephone 153.	111
9	Upgrading of servizz.gov on-premises Microsoft Dynamics Customer Relationship Management	This project will optimise agents' interactions with citizen requests by providing a more intuitive interface and analysing AI historical/real-time data to identify patterns, trends, and insights that can help agents make better decisions and offer a personalised service.	111

9	Implementation of an Electronic Queuing Ticketing solution across all servizz.gov hubs	Minimising customer waiting times aligns with the objective of delivering prompt and accessible services to citizens, contributing to a more digitally inclusive society.	112
9, 16	Development of the Voting Document Tracking System	In 2023, the Voting Document Tracking System (Electoral Office) was developed in order to facilitate the delivery of voting documents throughout all three phases of the delivery process, by implementing a digital system for the delivery of these documents.	112
3, 9	Launch of the National Health Systems Strategy 2023-2030	The strategy highlights the importance of incorporating digital health into innovation, technology and research for better health as one of its strategic objectives.	113
2, 9	Development of Farmers App – ilbidwi.gov.mt, Hawkers App - ixerrej.gov.mt, Online Payment Enhancement - ixerrej.gov.mt, and Iddashboard.gov.mt	Four apps through which growers and buyers can see their pertaining information.	113
2, 9	Inauguration of an AI-based system at the Public Abattoir	The Public Abattoir inaugurated an AI-based system for the scanning and grading of pig carcasses.	113
3, 9	Updates to the myHealthPortal	These include the function of viewing medical images and electrocardiograms for both citizens and their linked doctors.	113
8, 9, 11	Introduction of a web-based system and mobile application for events in Gozo	This web-based system and mobile application (Events in Gozo) showcases all events taking place in Gozo split according to the preferences of the users.	116
9	Digitisation process of the Registry and Archives of Malta	Documents ranging from 1934 to 1950 were scanned, digitised, and stored in folders on SharePoint to ensure proper management of files, increasing accessibility.	116
9	Deployment of a revamped ePPS and eForms	ePPS system is much more user-friendly and addresses the needs of Contracting Authorities/Entities.	117
4, 9	Undertaking of Codesprint Youth Hackathon	National coding competition whereby coding enthusiasts put their skills to the test by working their way through a series of tasks to earn a spot in the finals.	120

4, 9	Launch of Cyber Skilling Programme	The first course launched for this programme addressed Security Operations Centre Analyst.	120
4, 5, 8, 9	Development of Women4IT Project	Women4IT is aimed at raising awareness of digital skills and the gender gap and promoting concrete, innovative partnerships and solutions to increase the numbers of EU vulnerable girls and young women in the digital agenda.	120
9	Release of the Space Upstream Programme	Aims to kick start Space Upstream activities in Malta which is a sector that is currently not being addressed through a specific funding strand.	123
9	Installation of Malta's first National Optical Astronomy Observatory at il-Qortin ta' Sopu, Nadur	EcoGozo Directorate within the then MGOZ in collaboration with the Institute of Space Sciences and Astronomy (ISSA) of the UM, installed Malta's first National Optical Astronomy Observatory at il-Qortin Ta' Sopu, Nadur.	123
9, 14, 15, 17	Launch of a one-stage call for the SINO-Malta Fund	MCST and MOST launch annual calls for funding to support bilateral R&I projects between Maltese and Chinese researchers.	124
8, 14, 17	Launch of the First Annual Call of the SBEP	A Horizon Europe partnership that enables an unprecedented effort to pool R&I investments and align national programmes at a pan-European scale, taking into consideration the sea-basin and Atlantic Ocean dimensions.	124
7, 9, 11	Launch of the BlueMissionMed Project	This project is a comprehensive initiative with the goal of revitalising and preserving the Mediterranean Sea by 2030.	125
9, 14, 17	TRAILS Project	Aimed to foster innovation in electromobility education in Bulgaria and Malta.	126
9, 14	BCThubs: Blue Culture Technology Excellence Hubs in EU Widening Member States	This project will establish permanent hubs in Malta, Greece, and Bulgaria as well as in other future participating countries to provide cutting-edge scientific and innovative solutions and products in areas of sustainable Blue Economy and Culture.	126

3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12, 15	Community Services Outreach Actions	Several community services organised outreach actions and projects throughout 2023, namely in Qawra, Zabbar, Valletta/Floriana, Msida/Birkirkara Southern, Western, Cottonera, and Tarxien.	136
5	Launch of the NCPE Equal Pay Tool	The tool seeks to facilitate the application of equal pay for same work and work of equal value between women and men in organisations that employ at least 50 employees and which are certified with the Equality Mark.	138
3, 5, 10	Launch of the LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy and Action Plan for 2023 - 2027	Strategy tackling issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sexual characteristics among other issues.	140
5, 10	Publication of a Media Reference Guide and Queer Dictionary	Support various content writers, journalists and the general audience in making correct and responsible use of the terminology when reporting LGBTIQ+ issues.	140
5, 10	EuroPride 2023	EuroPride 2023 was held in Valletta, Malta.	140
4, 10	Anti-racism and integration training	Training for anti-racism and integration has been provided to over 500 participants of which a significant number came from Community Police officers within the Malta Police Force.	141
10, 16, 17	Launch of the "Online Pre-Departure Integration Measures in Malta," Project	This 18-month project aims to continue the reform of integration governance in Malta.	141
3, 11, 16	Implementation of the Project Integration Group	Implemented in the Marsalforn Community Centre with the aim of increasing community ties and networking and reducing loneliness.	142
1,3,4	2023 Child Guarantee National Progress Report	The report was presented at a stakeholder conference with panellists from social protection, education, adequate housing, and healthcare.	143
10, 16	Launch of empoweringchildren.gov.mt	This platform aims to establish a secure, inclusive, and meaningful space, enabling children to express their thoughts and ideas, actively engaging in national policymaking.	143

5, 8, 16	Setting up of the Technical Working Group on CJLA	Aims to address the necessary legislative amendments in fulfilment of the recommendations to Malta by the GRETA concerning Malta's obligation to combat human trafficking as a State Member to the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against THB.	144
16	'Prevent, Protect, Report' Campaign	The aim of the campaign is to raise awareness on what constitutes the crime of human trafficking, and to ensure that the public is knowledgeable of the indicators of trafficking.	145
16	'Reach Every Victim of Human Trafficking, Leave No One Behind' Conference	A conference held on 25 July 2023 as part of the UN Blue Heart Campaign leading to the UN World Day Against Trafficking in Persons on 30 July.	145
1, 4, 5, 8, 16	Launch of Malta's third national Strategy on Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence (2023-2028) 'UNITE. ENGAGE. ELEVATE'	This strategy includes various measures and actions based on the GREVIO recommendations and the four pillars of the Istanbul Convention.	147
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 16	CGBVDV Training programmes for professionals	Training programmes for professionals including four rounds of multi-agency training for professionals and frontliners, specialised training for members of the judiciary and specialised training for journalists.	147
4,5,10,16	16 Days of Activism 2023 and the Beat the Silence Campaign	CGBVDV designed and conducted a national awareness-raising campaign titled, 'Beat the Silence', for the international 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence 2023.	147
1, 4, 5, 8, 16	Launch 'Safety in Childhood: A Prevalence Study of Childhood Abuse Experiences in Malta' research findings	Findings show that the most prevalent form of abuse was peer and sibling victimisation, followed by child maltreatment and children witnessing violence.	147
1,3	Launch of the second National Drug Policy 2023-2033	Provides a comprehensive approach to drug-related challenges in Malta.	148

3	Agenzija Sedqa: ROOTS Programme	In the last quarter of 2023, Agenzija Sedqa added the ROOTS programme to its chain of rehabilitation programmes. This evening community group offers additional support to persons having addiction issues within the community and who are seeking a stronger community network.	148
9, 10, 17	Reform of the 'Empowerment Scheme'	Aimed at reducing bureaucracy and ensure that the scheme respond to the current needs of persons with disabilities.	148
10	Subsidy of 20% for buyers of wheelchair-accessible vehicles	Providing a purchase subsidy of up to 20% for buyers of wheelchair-accessible vehicles registered in Malta.	149
10, 16	Launch of One-Stop-Shop Services	These services aim to extend the availability of spaces from where voluntary organisations can operate.	149
4, 17	Capacity building through Education Programmes and Scholarships	Education programmes and scholarships offered to students from developing countries.	150
11, 13	New Cycle Lanes and Routes	Transport networks, including new cycle lanes and safe cycle routes, in order to improve access to the Malta International Airport and to the Malta Freeport.	151
10, 11	Housing and Accessibility	The installation of 36 lift installations and ancillary improvement works in the common areas of existing social housing blocks was completed rendering them accessible to elderly and disabled residents.	151
8, 16	Amendment to the maximum amount of claims made before the Consumer Claims Tribunal	The remedies available to the consumer.	151
16	Launch of the Implementing the Business Re-Organisation Action Plan of the Office of the Attorney General and the Office of the State Advocate in Malta TSI Project	The objectives of the project include adoption of a new public relations strategy, implementation of a communication strategy to enhance public trust and transparency and providing training opportunities for legal and administrative personnel.	153

10, 11, 16	Family Court Reform	A refurbishment project at the Family Court Building was launched which included the setting up of a New Court Hall.	153
9, 16	Implementation of the SIS	The Malta Police Force successfully implemented the renewed SIS which is the largest EU information system for border control and security.	154
9, 16	Launch of Online Submissions of Applications in the Civil Court	All lawyers, legal procurators and notaries, could submit online applications, namely in relation to interdictions, execution of particular acts, publications of secret wills and authorisations for the division of the community of acquests and pay the requested fees online.	156
9, 16	Upgrading of the Criminal Court Database	The measure implemented an upgrade to the Criminal Court database specifically concerning items presented as exhibits during court proceedings.	156
9, 17	Development of "traduzzjoni.mt"	Online platform providing translations of legal texts and official documents.	158
16, 17	Investment in the Outcome Star/ Justice Star Tool	This tool aimed to provide probation officers with a more precise and contemporary instrument for the performance of their duties.	161
3, 8	Publication of Occupational Health and Safety Guidelines	OHSA published the following: • Construction Scaffolding • Guidelines regarding Chemical Risk Assessment • Guidelines regarding the Classification, Labelling and Packaging Regulation	161
3, 4, 9, 10, 16	Launch of the National Education Strategy 2024-2030 for Public Consultation	This Strategy includes: well-being and mental health, particularly in the context of unprecedented technological advances and the impact of AI in today's society; growth and empowerment alongside learning outcomes; equity and inclusion, highlighting the right of access to quality education for all.	162

4, 16	Launch of the National Quality Assurance Framework for Education in Malta and the National Quality Standard in Education for Public Consultation	These frameworks are designed to ensure high pre-compulsory and compulsory education standards within Malta.	164
4, 10, 16	Diversity Days	A total of 314 diversity days events where social inclusion is promoted while stereotypes are eliminated, were held during the scholastic year 2022/2023.	164
4, 10, 16	Introduction of the Inclusion Toolkit across Maltese Schools	Comprehensive resource that includes a variety of strategies, techniques, and materials, aimed at enhancing inclusivity and support.	164
4, 10, 16	Inclusive Education Parent Training Sessions	The parent training sessions encompassed a wide range of topics, with an emphasis given to early years support.	164
3	School-Based Occupational Therapy and other services	Occupational therapy services are delivered at schools and no longer in hospitals.	165
4, 10	The National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2023-2030	Adopts a multifaceted approach centred on expanding adult learning opportunities.	166
8, 9	Introduction of New Modern Work Practices in the Public Service	The modern work practices aimed towards an enhanced work-life balance and increased employee wellbeing. They include reduced hours, flexi-time, flexi-week, remote working and extended remote working.	169
8	Amendments in the laws governing temporary work agencies and employment agencies in general	The scope of these regulations is to ensure that such employment agencies are subject to stringent oversight, ensuring their operations are conducted in an orderly and accountable manner.	171
4,8	Launch of the Consultation Procedure for the ITS Skills Pass System	Under the skills pass system, TCNs applying for a visa to work within Malta's tourism sector from January 2024 onwards will need to pass an initial skill pass assessment before their visa and work permit applications can be processed.	172

4, 8	Relaunch of the IIS Scheme	The IIS Scheme seeks to promote the upskilling of persons who are already active within the Maltese labour market.	172
8, 10	Relaunch of the Access to Employment Scheme	This scheme will provide employment aid to employers in Malta and Gozo to encourage the recruitment of job seekers in Malta and Gozo, particularly those encountering hurdles in their employment journey.	173
4, 8	Re-establishing the NSC	The NSC was launched in March 2023.	173
4, 8	Skills Development Scheme	Support businesses in providing training focused on developing a knowledge-based workforce, namely by developing and updating the skills and knowledge of their workforce and training new employees to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to perform effectively.	173

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