



GTI E-Convention Opening Session Technology, Policy and Finance to Boost islands' sustainable growth

Joseph Borg

Tuesday 19 October 2021

Introductory Round Table

First of all I would like to thank Greening the Islands for inviting me today. As President of INSULEUR we represent the interests of small island economies which have been hit hard by the effects of the pandemic, mostly because they are over reliant on certain economic niches such as tourism. This has shown that we need to look at new economic models for islands, and new niches.

In this sense technology has given us a great advantage. It has shown in real terms that for certain economic niches, the place from where you are working is not significant. What is important is that you have the right infrastructure in place, principally related to digital connectivity.

This is why the 3 topics that are being discussed in today's conference are of extreme importance. One can indicate them as the three pillars on which the sustainable growth of islands should be built.

Technology is being identified as a solution especially for islands. It is not the panacea for all evils however it will definitely help islands to move to more sustainable practices. Overall it can make islands less dependent on certain economic niches which negatively impact the environment.

However, these solutions need to be deployed through a good policy framework which can create the right incentives, while facilitating the deployment of new technologies on islands through the right regulatory environment. Given their size and circumscribed environment islands provide the ideal test bed for new technologies in the area of sustainability. I am happy to see that many technologies will be discussed through the following 3 days. These open up a number of possibilities. However, there must be a strategy of where we want to go.

As regards policies it is also important that countries recognise the extra difficulties faced by islands. The plans submitted for the recovery and resiliency facility provided the ideal testing ground for countries to take into account the particular needs of islands in their territories. Not all the countries however took this into account. Islands must not be seen as an after-thought but as a real contributor towards economic development. To this end while many countries in the European Union are discussing how the funds for 2021 – 2027 will be spent, it is important that a top item in their agenda is that the islands in their territories become greener and more sustainable.

Indeed EU funds and the mentioning of the Recovery and Resilience Facility point out to an important item which we are discussing today ie finance. It is useless having important objectives if these are not properly financed.

Obviously, in my discussion today I focused on the EU reality. However, what I pointed out today applies to any island reality.

The initial investment will be high, however the returns will be greater. Taking into account for example the investment concerning energy. Many a times islands are dependent on outside sources for their energy supply. This makes energy supply on islands not only more expensive, but also makes islands more vulnerable. They can succumb more to external shocks both in terms of prices and supply.

An investment in green forms of energy would mean that the energy required by islands would be produced on the same islands. This would make the supply of energy on islands more secure and less dependent on external factors.

It is also important to look at synergies with other sectors such as the aspect of reserarch which can get substantial funding. Besides being the President of INSULEUR, I am also the President of the Gozo Business Chamber, the second largest island in the Maltese archipelago. We are suggesting to the Government to consider also the aspect of research, of having a specialised faculty of the University of Malta which would focus on green technologies in Gozo. The link with academia would also mean that islands can also become an important research location, creating further economic activity. And why not linking this research activity with industry as well? In such a way the island populations would not only be benefiting from the new forms of technology, but new green jobs would be created providing real value for islanders.
