**From Consulting to PhD: Uncovering the Secrets of Island Resilience**

For over a decade, I worked in the world of consulting, where every new project brought unique challenges and the opportunity to delve into fresh scenarios. While the work was demanding, I cherished the constant analytical exercise—it was intellectually stimulating with the constant challenge of solving problems, though it always felt something was missing. That something turned out to be a return to academia. I wanted to immerse myself in the structured, methodical approach of scholarly research—a pursuit where critical thinking and rigorous methodology are not just about solving problems for clients, but about a deep, principled understanding of complex issues. This opportunity presented itself in Malta, with a PhD at the Islands and Small States Institute, where I could not only expand my knowledge but also transform my worldview.

Embarking on this PhD meant tackling a fundamental question that has often been addressed but with still many dimensions to uncover: Why do small island states, traditionally seen as fragile, manage to withstand massive global shocks? The prevailing narrative might label these islands as vulnerable, but the reality, as explored by my research, tells a story of resilience and adaptation. This was demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic when many of these islands, despite their economic dependency on tourism, did not collapse under the strain. Instead, they adapted and showed a resilience that defied traditional expectations.

The study spanned ten small islands, Malta, Cyprus, Bahamas, Barbados, St Lucia, Mauritius, Seychelles, Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu, each with its unique cultural and economic backdrop. Through a blend of analysis of government-led policies, surveys and insights from interviews with key stakeholders including government officials, industry associations, and economic operators, the research contributed to the understanding of the dual nature of resilience in small islands. Initially, it appeared that resilience could emerge from a synergistic blend of top-down policies and bottom-up initiatives. However, further insights revealed a more complex scenario.

While top-down policies provided a broad framework of support, they often fell short in addressing specific local challenges effectively. Conversely, bottom-up initiatives, fuelled by local knowledge and insights, delivered targeted assistance at the community level. Although these efforts significantly contributed to resilience, they typically operated independently with little coordination.

However, instances where top-down and bottom-up efforts in Malta and other small island states effectively collaborated highlighted their combined strength. This collaboration led to significant outcomes, showcasing the benefits of enhanced interaction between government initiatives and grassroots efforts. In places like Malta, where societal divisions sometimes slow or impede progress, fostering such collaborative efforts could be transformative. Strengthening these partnerships could further enhance resilience, enabling more effective responses in both everyday situations and in crises, thereby bolstering the long-term sustainability of the country.

Reflecting on this, it is clear that my PhD journey was much more than an academic milestone. The profound insights gained from studying these collaborative efforts have not only marked a significant period of personal and professional development but have also equipped me with a nuanced understanding of complex challenges. This experience has broadened my perspective, enhancing both my career in consulting and my academic pursuits.

I am deeply grateful to the University of Malta and the Tertiary Education Scholarship Scheme (TESS) by the Ministry of Education for their indispensable support throughout this journey. As I look to the future, I remain committed to the pursuit of knowledge and to applying what I have learned in ways that benefit both my consulting practice and the academic community.

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