Resilience in a Double-Insular Territory: Lessons from Gozo, Malta



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Introduction

Gozo, the second-largest island of the Maltese archipelago, offers significant lessons in how small territories cultivate resilience and sustainability within structural constraints. Situated just 25 minutes by ferry from Malta's main island, Gozo is home to around 41,000 residents. To the casual observer, it may appear as a tranquil, rural extension of Malta, yet beneath this calm façade lies a distinctive socio-economic system shaped by *double insularity*, a condition of isolation within isolation.

This article analyses how Gozo's double-insular condition has influenced its development path, governance models, and sense of identity. It argues that while

insularity generates economic and social challenges, it can also nurture adaptive governance, substantial social capital, and innovative policy frameworks. Gozo thus offers a valuable case study for small and peripheral regions across Europe pursuing resilience amid global and regional transitions.

Understanding Double Insularity

Double insularity refers to territories that are geographically separated not only from continental regions but also from their own administrative cores. In Gozo's case, the short sea passage from Malta, though physically minor, creates enduring barriers to accessibility, economic activity, and prominence in policy discussions.

Economically, this dual separation raises transaction costs, limits economies of scale, and reduces investment incentives. Socially, it restricts opportunities for education, healthcare, and cultural engagement. Politically, it calls for governance systems tailored to the Island's realities.

EU institutions and research bodies such as ESPON have long recognised these challenges. ESPON's studies on island regions (e.g. *The Geography of Islands in Europe*, 2019) highlight how double insularity amplifies peripherality, making connectivity and multi-level governance critical drivers of resilience. Yet, Gozo shows that double insularity can also be a source of strength, encouraging local innovation, place-based policymaking, and community-led adaptation.

Persistent Challenges

Gozo's development continues to be shaped by interrelated structural issues common to small-island contexts.

- Economic Concentration: The island's economy remains less diversified than Malta's, with a reliance on tourism, public administration, and education. Emerging sectors such as digital services and high-value added manufacturing are still limited, constraining economic upgrading.
- Demographic Imbalance: Persistent out-migration, particularly of younger, highly educated Gozitans, weakens the local skills base and innovation capacity. This pattern echoes broader European trends in peripheral island economies, where limited labour markets encourage human capital flight.

- Connectivity and Costs: Maritime dependency continues to impose logistical and financial burdens. Although recent investments have reduced travel times and improved digital infrastructure, connectivity remains a defining vulnerability.
- Environmental Pressures: Rapid development, tourism expansion, and land scarcity pose significant threats to Gozo's ecological assets. The challenge of balancing economic growth with environmental stewardship mirrors broader EU debates on sustainable spatial planning and green transition.

The Roots of Resilience

Despite these enduring pressures, Gozo's identity is defined by its capacity to adapt. The island's resilience arises from a synergy of community cohesion, workforce adaptability, tailored governance, and environmental foresight.

- Community Cohesion: The compact social fabric of Gozo fosters dense networks of trust, cooperation, and mutual support. Local parishes, and voluntary organisations sustain civic engagement and social solidarity, key dimensions of what OECD regional studies identify as "social capital for resilience."
- Adaptive Workforce: Limited economic opportunities have historically encouraged multi-skilled, entrepreneurial workers. This versatility enhances the island's ability to absorb shocks and seize new opportunities, particularly in tourism and microenterprise.
- Tailored Governance: Institutional innovation has been central to Gozo's development. The establishment of the Ministry for Gozo in 1987 recognised the need for differentiated governance. The Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA), founded in 2020, represents a more mature phase of tailored regional policy. Its *Regional Development Strategy for Gozo 2023–2033* embodies the principles of EU Cohesion Policy, particularly *place-based development* and *partnership governance* by promoting local ownership, data-driven planning, and multi-level coordination.
- Environmental Leadership: The *ECO Gozo* programme (2009) and the ongoing *Gozo Climate Neutrality Plan* illustrate the island's proactive ecological vision. These initiatives align with the EU Smart Islands Initiative, which views small islands as laboratories for experimenting

with the circular economy, renewable energy, and digital transition.

Building Resilience: Recent Developments

In recent years, targeted investments and strategic alignment with national and EU frameworks have accelerated Gozo's transformation.

- Enhanced Connectivity: The introduction of a fourth *Gozo Channel* ferry (2019), a second fibre-optic link (2020), and a fast ferry service to Valletta (2021) have substantially improved mobility and digital integration. These measures align with the European Commission's priority on digital and physical connectivity for cohesion regions.
- Educational and Social Infrastructure: The establishment of Queen Mary University of London's Gozo Campus has strengthened local capacity in education and health sciences, while also enhancing the university's international visibility. Investments in health, schools, and sports facilities reflect the alignment of regional development with social well-being.
- Strategic Governance: The GRDA's regional strategy operationalises the EU's 2021–2027 Cohesion Policy objectives, particularly "Smarter Europe" and "Greener Europe." It integrates sustainability, innovation, and inclusion, promoting a coherent long-term vision that transcends sectoral silos.

Emerging Outcomes

Gozo's recent trajectory is encouraging. Over the past decade, economic activity has more than doubled, unemployment has reached historic lows, and employment has expanded beyond traditional sectors. Tourism remains robust, but diversification into professional and technical services is increasingly evident.

Improved transport and digital infrastructure have facilitated new forms of entrepreneurship, remote work, and knowledge exchange, positioning Gozo as an emerging "micro-region of innovation" within the Mediterranean context.

ESPON's 2023 analysis on *Territorial Resilience in Europe* identifies governance quality, community participation, and innovation capacity as the main determinants of resilience, all areas where Gozo shows measurable progress.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

For Gozo to sustain and deepen its resilience, several strategic directions are essential:

1. **Invest in Smart Connectivity:** Continue enhancing multimodal and digital connections, prioritising reliability and environmental performance. Innovative transport solutions (e.g. hybrid ferries or smart mobility platforms) could further reduce isolation.
2. **Foster Knowledge Retention and Entrepreneurship:** Policies should support remote work ecosystems, startups, creative clusters, and youth entrepreneurship. Internship programmes and industry partnerships can encourage return migration and local innovation.
3. **Diversify the Economic Base:** Gozo should promote green economy, cultural industries, and digital services, areas supported by the EU's Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) framework.
4. **Strengthen Environmental Governance:** The island must maintain strict spatial planning controls, prioritise sustainable transport modes, and accelerate the adoption of renewable energy, in line with the EU Green Deal and the Smart Islands agenda.
5. **Enhance Local Governance Autonomy:** A stronger institutional voice within national and EU decision-making processes is crucial to ensure alignment between local aspirations and policy frameworks.

These recommendations echo the OECD's *Building Resilient Regions* (2022) guidance, which emphasises empowering territories to design and implement their own adaptive, place-sensitive development pathways.

Conclusion: Resilience as Forward Momentum

Gozo's experience shows that resilience is not merely the capacity to recover but the ability to transform. Through community strength, strategic governance, and environmental foresight, Gozo demonstrates how small, double-insular regions can convert peripherality into potential.

Its development trajectory reflects the value of *place-based policy*, a cornerstone of EU regional cohesion, and reaffirms that even the smallest territories can become models of innovation and sustainability. In a century defined by uncertainty, Gozo stands as a microcosm of how islands, and regions more broadly, can shape their destinies through resilience, foresight, and collective

intelligence.