It is early morning and we are on our way down the Mellieha bypass. This massive road, which in certain places is eight lanes wide, was built in the early 1980s. It cuts right through “Qasam Barrani” and when it was constructed, large areas of precious habitat were obliterated. Today, we are not going to write about this bypass, but we are on our way to meet one of the last few farmers still tilling land in an area known as “iċ- Cens”. His name is Ćikku.

Ćikku can already be seen working his land. He is a fourth generation farmer. “This land belonged to my father, who in turn inherited it from his father and grandfather”, he explains nostalgically. It has been in the family for hundreds of years. “I remember when the only thing you would see passing by was a horse driven cart or an army truck”. This area consisted of some forty fields, but now, their owners have all agreed to make way for the new hotel extension and have been handsomely compensated to leave. Ćikku is now facing the same dilemma. He is aware of the fact that if he chooses to keep possession of his field, the ongoing construction will negatively affect the quality of the soil. Besides, new brick boundary walls will now replace the traditional rubble walls. These will also be built higher, not desirable for summer crops as the field will overheat because of less of air circulation. He recalls how his forefathers used to irrigate the land with water that used to come down the hillside all year round. We follow him as he shows us what is left of the irrigation canals hewn in rock, and the remains of a traditional Sienja (donkey drawn water mill).

This area in question was designated by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) in the North West Local Plan (NWLP) as an area of HIGH NATURE VALUE FARMLAND, with a number of protected features of ecological importance. To the surprise of many, this site was unanimously leased through a parliamentary resolution to a hotelier for further expansion of his premises. Although the area was designated as an area where only ‘restrained
development’ can take place, a two storey deep car park the size of a large village square has already been excavated. On top, 270 bedrooms with balconies will be constructed.

In the vicinity of this project-site lies a Level One area of ecological importance, namely the marshland known as **Il-Ħofra**. This area dates from the Quaternary period and is approximately 0.03sq.km. **Il-Ħofra** marshland is maintained by seasonal rain, water which percolates through the substrate and most significantly from surface runoff water coming down the hills from the Mellieha slopes. The construction of the road and the excavation of the car park have literally diverted the path of the water on its way down from Ġnien Ingraw and the Mellieha hills. Thus depriving the marshland of its life blood and the much needed silt and sediment. As a result, this site will eventually be nothing more than a relict geomorphological feature. Going round the marsh, tadpoles and fish were already fighting for their last breath in the mud as the water had already dried up. This place must be the only place in Malta where sea water mullet and the fresh water painted frog have successfully adapted to live and share the same pool.

As we speak, we notice that another farmer drives down the lane, and we follow his white Japanese van to where the marshland is. His hunting dogs tied at the back of the van bark incessantly as we approach him. We ask politely if he has land in the area.” “I used to” he replies. “Not anymore. I only come here because of the dogs.” He narrates how he was offered an attractive sum of money to make way for the new hotel development and speaks apologetically about the developer and why these projects are important and beneficial for the country.

“But what about the fields? You do not seem to care about the fields” we ask amazingly. He continues to
narrate how the hotel owner offered him other tracts of land high up on the ridge and how he ended up having problems with MEPA because the fields he now cultivates were not long ago garigue areas which were illegally covered with soil and converted into fields. But he consoles himself because the same hotel developer told him not to worry about the legal costs, and that he can make use of the hotel’s legal office. “But now you have no water. Here you had free water all year round” we continue to press. “That is also not a problem,” he replies in exultation”. The other hotel near my new fields has three boreholes, and I can take as much water as I need”. This sad and tragic encounter continues. We are also told that potatoes, melons and almost everything that this farmer grows ends up in the hotel’s kitchen. Anything else is sold through black economy during the peak months of summer, when the area becomes overcrowded with people, living in green huts and boathouses by the seaside. He laments that he is not being allowed to cover more garigue with soil, to be able to plant a vineyard. We look at each other and we know that it is time to keep moving. The less we hear the better. We realize that we are oceans apart, and we know that for some people, there is no place for ‘the common good’ in their lives.

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