



EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK
MALTA

2008

Poverty and inequality in Maltese society? Excluded groups in pursuit of social justice

Compiled by: Dr. Frances Camilleri-Cassar
B.A. (Hons) (Econ.), M.A., PhD (Nottingham)

When people feel they are being judged on the basis of who they are, they may perform less well. When people expect prejudice, it can undermine their motivation to achieve

(DFID, 2005)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Focus Group Facilitator, Researcher and Author

*Dr. Frances Camilleri-Cassar
B.A. (Hons) (Econ.), M.A., PhD (Nottingham)*

Administrative Back-Up

SOS Malta

Organisations which assisted in organising the focus groups

Caritas Malta

Gift of Life

Malta Gay Rights Movement

Mid-Dawl Ghad-Dlam

Paolo Freire Institute

SOS Malta

TSN Malta

YMCA Malta

This research and report was financed by EAPN (Europe) through an annual grant received from the European Commission and by SOS Malta.

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ACRONYMS

EAPN – European Anti-Poverty Network

EAPN Malta – European Anti-Poverty Network Malta

LGBTs - lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender / transsexual peoples

MSP – Ministry for Social Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN) Malta was set up in May 2004 as a network of Maltese NGOs involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. EAPN Malta has 53 member organisations and is a member of EAPN which is a network of 21 national networks and European organisations that aim towards the eradication of social injustice.

The aim of EAPN Malta is to bring together all those with the capacity and the will to eradicate poverty and social exclusion. One of the core roles and functions of EAPN Malta is to seek to influence public policy and national action plans for the eradication of poverty and social exclusion. Main strategies set up by EAPN Malta to fulfil this role and function, include research that adopts a qualitative approach for data collection through focus group interviews with those at the margin of society.

This report documents the research data drawn on such interviews, often quoted verbatim, that reflects the drive of EAPN Malta to support the development of existing national strategies for social protection and social inclusion in Malta. Specific populations taking part in the focus group sessions give an insight into the needs and contradictions faced by persons on the fringe of society. These include widows and widowers, LGTBs, lone mothers, third country nationals, persons outside the formal labour market and ex-convicts. An attempt was made to hold a focus group with persons suffering from terminal illness – however, requests to give a voice to the terminally ill were refused on grounds of privacy and inaccessibility.

The focus group meetings were undertaken during June and July 2008. The uniqueness of this research project is that the participants in the focus groups were not their NGO or agency representative, but those persons themselves who face inequality and are at risk of social exclusion.

This report has three main parts: the first part provides a brief discussion of social inclusion, solidarity, social cohesion, the open method of coordination and access to services. The second part raises the question of who are the poor in Malta and links with groups most at risk. It also presents the challenges faced by the socially vulnerable, their satisfaction, if any, with service provision, and finally their recommendations and salient needs. The report concludes with a discussion that is of particular relevance to policy makers and civil society.

2. A BRIEF OVERVIEW

2.1 Social exclusion

Social exclusion matters because it denies some people the same rights and opportunities as are afforded to others in their society. Simply because of who they are, certain groups cannot fulfil their potential, nor can they participate equally in society. Social exclusion matters to Malta because it causes poverty and gets in the way of poverty reduction. Indeed, social exclusion causes poverty in two main ways: it hurts the socially vulnerable materially by making them poor in terms of income, health or education by causing them to be denied access to resources, markets and public services. It can also hurt them emotionally, by shutting them out of the life of their community.

Socially excluded people are often denied the opportunities available to others to increase their income and escape from poverty by their own efforts. So, even though the economy may grow and general income levels may rise, excluded people are likely to be left behind, and make up an increasing proportion of those who remain in poverty. Poverty reduction policies often fail to reach them unless they are specifically designed to do so. It impedes the efficient operation of market forces and restrains economic growth. For instance, people in disadvantaged groups who may be talented and endowed with good ideas may not be able to raise the capital to start up a business.

Moreover, exclusion does not cause poverty through a simple sorting of those who are 'in' or 'out', those who can or cannot participate in society. Socially excluded groups often do participate but on unequal terms. Labour markets illustrate this most clearly by exploiting the powerlessness of excluded groups and at the same time reinforcing their disadvantaged position. The data presented in the second part of this report provides the evidence.

Social inclusion is being challenged by demographic changes and the need to improve accessibility and quality of social services. At the same time, the influence of EU policies has become increasingly important, and there is growing concern about uncertainties and gaps in knowledge and understanding of the complex legal issues at stake. How has Malta responded to the challenges posed by implementing EU policies? How poor are the poor in Malta? To what extent is inequality a concern to Malta's policy makers?

2.2 Solidarity

Solidarity is a hallmark of the European Union, and is an intrinsic goal of European models of society and welfare. People should not be prevented from benefiting from and contributing to economic and social progress. Building a more inclusive society in Malta is vital to achieve the European Union's goals of sustained economic growth, more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion.

In 2000, EU leaders established the Social Inclusion Process to make a decisive impact on eradicating poverty by 2010. Since then, the European Union has provided a framework for national strategy development as well as for policy coordination between the Member States on issues relating to poverty and social exclusion. Participation by actors such as NGOs, social partners and local and regional authorities has become an important part of this process. Indeed, consolidating plans to combat poverty and social

exclusion into national policies has increased political awareness of social justice and social integration. As a result, social cohesion has been placed higher on Malta's political agenda.

2.3 Social cohesion

Recent developments in Malta are encouraging. Reforms have been carried out or are under way to make systems more fiscally and socially sustainable and more responsive to people's evolving needs. There is a growing convergence towards active inclusion, recognizing that people's right to play an active role in society has to be supported. On pension reform, there is a will to progress both on adequacy and sustainability.

Malta acknowledges more clearly that economic and labour market reform contribute to strengthening social cohesion, and that social policies must support economic and employment growth. Active inclusion policies increase labour supply and strengthen society's cohesiveness.

2.4 Open method of coordination (OMC)

The Open Method of Coordination mainly uses a relative concept of poverty adopted by the European Council in 1975 which defined the poor as "individuals and families whose resources are so small as to exclude them from the minimal acceptable way of life in the Member State in which they live." This relative concept acknowledges that it is not enough to ensure access for all to a minimum subsistence level. The aim is also to ensure that all citizens can benefit from the general level of prosperity of their country and participate as full members of society. The main indicator used to reflect this concept is the at-risk-of-poverty rate, defined as the percentage of individuals whose equivalised disposable income is below 60 % of the national median income.

In its 2007 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, the European Commission optimistically suggests that the OMC is starting to create more impact on the ground, making attachment to social values more visible to citizens. Moreover, OMC is seen to be helping towards deepening mutual learning and widening involvement of stakeholders at national and European levels. The Joint Report adds that the OMC has increased awareness of the multi-dimensional nature of exclusion and poverty, and has forged a shared approach to social protection reforms based on the principles of accessibility, adequacy, quality, modernisation and sustainability.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, the European Anti-Poverty Network's perspective is perhaps less positive. In April 2008, the Network called for a renewed, express political commitment to strengthen the social dimension of Europe and points out that the OMC must be the key tool for policy convergence in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The EAPN suggests that Member networks are not seeing any big ideas but are simply rehashing the jobs and growth agenda that are rigidified into an ideology that is failing to lift the weakest out of poverty. "People who are experiencing poverty are under no illusions about the unfairness of the rewards being dealt out to the rich, arising from the failure in the regulation of the financial systems whilst they have to endure penny pinching and punitive measures. This apparently unbalanced approach is damaging social and political cohesion and it must change."

The EAPN points out that a major weakness of the OMC has been the absence of political commitment to use it to drive forward a social Europe that is not an appendage of economic policy but strong, confident,

distinctively European, preventing poverty and social exclusion, protecting the weak, regulating the powerful and making social progress. “This year’s Spring Council Conclusions are backward looking. A more explicit commitment to a social Europe would focus on a renewal of the 2006 objectives of the OMC and the development of a new, dynamic and effective EU Strategy that would set meaningful targets and effective instruments that are focused on cutting poverty directly, rather than relying for ten more years on the backwash from economic and employment policies. This vain approach has allowed millions of children in Europe to have their childhood blighted by empty promises, and adults living in poverty to face each new day with anxiety and fear” (OMC, 2006).

2.5 Access to services

Overall, Member States recognize the need for access to quality services to allow participation of disadvantaged groups in society, and to prevent and address exclusion. Increased spending on its own is not enough to ensure improvement. For example, the 2007 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Exclusion suggests that Malta stresses the priority of strengthening the role of NGOs, promoting voluntary work and encouraging self help.

Access to adequate housing and fighting homelessness are particularly vital factors for social and labour market integration. Indeed, homelessness is an extreme example of social exclusion, usually indicative of shortcomings in a range of policy areas such as health, welfare, housing, employment and justice. Malta is increasingly adopting a structural approach to tackling housing exclusion by improving access to housing for vulnerable groups, rehousing for people living in socially deprived areas, housing refurbishment and the prevention of evictions.

For example, Malta’s 2006 – 2008 Report on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion states that affordable housing plays an important role in promoting better prospects for social inclusion, and that the Housing Authority has in place various schemes that help those most in need. The Report adds that Government is considering the amalgamation of the Housing Authority, the Social Housing Department and the Housing Construction and Maintenance Department for better value for money from this sector.

3. WHO ARE THE POOR? GROUPS MOST AT RISK IN MALTA

3.1 Introduction

The Malta EAPN report looks at the risk of poverty affecting different sections of the population, and identifies subgroups that qualify as experiencing socially excluded, but are not necessarily officially acknowledged as such yet. For policy makers, it will be useful to look both at group-specific at-risk-of-poverty rates, and at the total number of people at risk of poverty in various groups. The first gives an idea of weaknesses in poverty prevention policies; the second may be useful to determine where action needs to be taken to achieve the biggest reductions in at-risk-of-poverty rates.

EAPN Malta identified a number of disadvantaged groups experiencing poverty, and listened to their concerns so as to be instrumental in giving them a voice, and to help improve their lives by raising awareness among policy makers and relevant stakeholders. Poverty and exclusion remain significant challenges in Malta with 15 per cent of the population at risk of poverty. The EU's latest Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion emphasised that social protection reforms and active inclusion policies have contributed to higher growth and more jobs in Europe over the past year. However, more still needs to be done to ensure that the benefits of an improved economic framework reach those at the margins of society and improve social cohesion.

The risk of poverty in Malta varies markedly between different sections of the population. Social benefits other than pensions reduce the percentage of people at risk of poverty in all the countries, but to very disparate degrees. The reduction is smallest (less than 25%) in Malta alongside some other Mediterranean Member States e.g. Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus and Portugal. At the same time, those with the highest risk also vary across sub-groups. Nevertheless, seven groups stand out as having a high risk in Malta. These are:

- a) Widows and widowers, both employed and unemployed, living alone with or without dependent children;
- b) Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons who in most cases are hidden within Maltese society;
- c) Ex-convicts many of whom may not be working, in most cases because of the stigma;
- d) Lone mothers of working age who in most cases are not in paid employment;
- e) Homeless persons many of whom are of working age but not in paid employment;
- f) Third-country nationals with a residence permit, and who may be employed in the informal economy;
- g) The terminally ill who may have very specific concerns and needs (no data in this report is available as access to such persons was refused).

The focus group meetings focused on three broad key concerns:

- (i) What are the challenges faced by socially vulnerable groups in Malta?
- (ii) To what extent are disadvantaged individuals satisfied with service provision?
- (iii) What are the salient needs and recommendations for integration into mainstream society?

3.2 Challenges

3.2.1 Challenges faced by Widows and Widowers

- Due to their minimum financial means, pensioners find tax very challenging.
- Participants claim it is unjust to have to choose between keeping a full time job and a widow's pension after the children reach the age of 16 years.
- A widow's pension should not be taken away from her after 5 years of remarriage.
- An individual contribution for pension rights and other benefits would eliminate injustice and risk of poverty among the elderly .
- Invalidity pension should not be replaced by a survivor's pension.
- When a widow is on full time employment, the survivor's pension is lost when she reaches pension age. This is considered unfair as the survivor's pension is the late husband's contribution and therefore her own money too.
- Pensions need to be revised with every Collective Agreement e.g. Mr X who worked for the Freeport was promised an increase in his pension after every Collective Agreement. He wrote to the UHM but nothing happened and is asking for redress for compensation.
- There are many widows who would willingly remarry but are afraid to lose their survivor / widows pension and become financially dependent on their new partner. They argue that if their marriage breaks down, they would not be able to revert to a widow's pension because they would then be considered as separated persons.
- The official website of the Ministry for Social Policy needs regular updating so as to avoid misunderstanding and loss of benefits due to lack of information and knowledge that they exist.

3.2.2 Challenges faced by LGBTs

- Legislation for same sex couples because they feel cut off from basic family units society in general.
- Lack of representation and visibility in all sectors of society e.g. curriculum and school syllabi.
- Transgender reassignment surgery is not available through the national health service or even subsidized except for the provision of hormones through the pink card.
- Bullying in schools on the basis of sexual orientation exists but is not challenged.
- National Commission for the Promotion of Equality does not include sexual orientation.
- Rampant discrimination in the provision of goods and services.
- Little awareness among society as there is lack of funds, campaigns and education.
- Lack of insurance, mobility, health.
- Same-sex parenthood is not recognized, both socially and legally, in Malta.
- Social security allowances are not extended to same sex families.
- In terms of inheritance, the same sex partner is not recognised as immediate family
- Transpersons are not able to change to the other sex school.
- Support services in schools and national service are lacking.
- Other government Commissions for disadvantaged groups (eg. Disabled) are heavily funded but not for LGBTs.
- Lack of access in schools to raise awareness among students. Such awareness-raising is not on the school agenda.
- Lack of acceptance by peers and society has serious consequences on -young people's mental health e.g. youth suicide.
- Sexual health campaigns do not include LGBTs needs.
- Lack of education and skills among health professionals.
- Closed centres for irregular migrants are notorious for pain and suffering as their culture does not allow them to express themselves freely.

- Multiple discrimination among LGBTs includes:
 - Disability*
 - Age*
 - Race*
 - Religion*
 - Prisoners – conjugal visits but not same sex visits*
- Discrimination of transgendered persons in the labour market e.g. they are sent to Ballut Blocks when they change to femininity.
- Prostitution may be the solution to get an income and undergo surgery for transgender but this leads to other risks such as pimps, drugs and prison sentences.
- Hospital wards are not sensitive to the needs of transpersons, as a woman may be placed in a male ward.

3.2.3 Challenges faced by Ex-convicts

- Prison personnel are indifferent to prisoners' needs and top personnel are unapproachable. They claim that their personal qualities are not appreciated and their upbringing is not accounted for.
- Persons from the Commission for the Prevention of Torture visited the prison but they are afraid that their findings will not be published because prison personnel are afraid of the media.
- Prison is run by police in their regimented style: it is not humane.
- It is difficult to acquire social housing as they are not entitled to the points system when on bail.
- Persons released from prison are often left to fend for themselves in the streets and possibly become junkies. One participant claims he spent 3 months sleeping in a car with his wife and three children. Very often they are alone in the world due to rejection by all including children and family.
- Employment opportunities are few and far between due to the stigma. The employer is expected to pick them up in the morning and when the ETC scheme ends, they are generally sacked.
- Very often the only way out is to break the law again and be sent to prison for food and lodging – otherwise there is a risk of remaining penniless.
- Sometimes ex-convicts receive no social assistance as they are people with no address.
- The ID card for persons on bail is humiliating and cannot be presented to an employer or a date.
- Except for workshops that are of direct relevance to prison needs, such as building construction and the bakery, other workshops that would make prisoners feel useful are open sporadically or not at all
- Time hangs heavy for many of Malta's prisoners who have nothing to do all day. For example, a very small percentage further their education at school
- Prison has only 1 social worker for all 400 inmates..
- One ex-convict claims that his mother's house given to her by the department of social housing was taken away from him when she passed away.
- Politicians ignore prisoners until the elections when then they are anxious for their vote.
- Prisoners with no family support remain without essentials e.g. bath soap as prison only provides washing powder for personal hygiene.
- Prison allowance is very little: 4.66 Euro per week after the first 6 months. Suriel il-Briedem suggests 500 euro per month is essential.

- The participants claim that the drug problem is rampant among 85% of inmates and drug rehabilitation is usually offered by Caritas, Santa Marija and SATU (Mtahleb).
- In prison permission is not granted to call the children.
- Food in prison is poor.
- It is difficult for a person to remain calm in prison: it is nerve-wrecking and leads to aggressive behaviour.
- Rampant paranoia among inmates.
- Women prisoners are placed in 2 separate divisions one of which is drug free. There are no workshops that serve as time-fillers for women
- Women may be requested to provide sex to 'elite' prisoners.

3.2.4 Challenges faced by Homeless

- The most obvious need for people who are homeless is accommodation.
- All participants insisted that there is need for a change in administration.
- Money is a big issue especially when one needs to cope with a child with disability. However, one participant claimed that the parish priest helps her out financially.
- The participants said that the YMCA home is in need of refurbishment as the furniture is broken, water drips from the taps and there are no fans in summer. A computer was removed from the premises to the detriment of a 15-year-old girl who cannot use it anymore for her studies. The participants complained that the food needs improvement.

3.2.5 Challenges faced by Lone Mothers

- Lone mothers cannot cope financially on their own. Relief and children's allowance are not enough and it is often the grandmothers or parish priests who support and help them.
- Lone mothers need a subsidy for a house loan.
- Expenses are too high to cope with – there is therefore a need for an increase in government benefits. Participants claimed that the children's allowance per quarter is very little to cope with children's needs. They also argued that it does not make sense to give the same amount of allowance to a couple who are both economically active and financially better off than lone mothers on relief.
- Lone mothers with a disability suffer multiple-discrimination.
- A 14-year old participant with a child was not accepted back at her old school. She claimed this is against the law as the compulsory school leaving age is 16 years.
- 'Unknown fathers' is a common phenomenon and lone mothers are left with very little financial and moral support

3.2.6 Challenges faced by Third Country Nationals

- The participants suggest that their most important need is a good job which is regularized, has a work permit and a good salary. They claim that many employers exploit them by offering low salaries and a roving employment contract (perpetual renewal) to avoid benefit entitlement. They have to work long hours, during holidays and are not given a pay slip so that they cannot talk about their employment details.
- They argue that the employer seems to be above the law and issues a work permit only if desirable.
- The participants argue they face discrimination in the labour market as Maltese workers seem to be paid more than them. Moreover, they are made to feel a foreigner and need to obey the employer.
- Language barrier makes it difficult to know what is available to them in the labour market.
- Academic qualifications are important for third country nationals to get a job but participants claim that these are not accredited.
- Police will not allow families to come to Malta which they claim is a right for family life.
- More jobs are created in Malta than elsewhere in Europe but foreigners are discriminated against.
- Malpractice is not reported because people in Malta are not used to listening to constructive criticism.
- The Philippino community claim they work without a permit, get a minimum wage and employers provide them with a visa to be able to stay in Malta.
- Most Philipinos have no work permit, are paid less than minimum and 15% of their pay is taken away from them so as to trap them with the employer.
- Philipinos are controlled by employer who cannot keep their passport but keeps the work permit instead.
- Philipinos are deprived of their bonuses and the employer rewards them with air ticket which were taken from their bonus entitlement.
- No pay slips – no show of taxes or NI.
- When medical care is needed, the hospital administration checks whether a person is NI registered . If NI is paid, the medical service received is provided free of charge - otherwise the individual is charged for the service.

3.3 Satisfaction with Service Provision

3.3.1 Satisfaction of Widows and Widowers with ongoing services

- Free medical service.
- Counseling and support groups e.g. Caritas, NGOs, *Minus One*, and *You are not Alone* but the latter is restricted to an age limit.
- TeleCare.
- Meals on Wheels, however, food needs improvement. Also, street servers should get free meals as compensation.
- Voluntary work is beneficial for self esteem and feeling good.
- Self initiated hobbies are helpful for their well being
- The services provided to widows and widowers by the Church and Parishes are more humane.

3.3.2 Satisfaction of LGBTs with Ongoing Services

- There is no service provision that may be considered satisfactory. It simply does not exist. LGBTs have to be self-sufficient as any kind of assistance is missing. There is no political will or commitment from government to offer any related service. For example LGBTs get no mention in Malta's National Action Plans.

3.3.3 Satisfaction of Ex-convicts with Ongoing Services

- *Mid-Dlam ghad-Dawl* is very helpful: volunteers are kind, understanding and helpful.
- Help and support is often found outside prison, not inside it.

3.3.4 Satisfaction of Lone Mothers with Ongoing Services

- None of the government services are good enough for their living as social benefits are poor.
- Participants noted that with 3 children, lone mothers cannot be employed as there are very few childcare services. Social benefit is removed or reduced if employed.
- They point out that the pink card is only available for unemployed individuals.
- Participants claim they cannot survive on benefits even when employed and earning an income.

3.3.5 Satisfaction of Third Country Nationals with Ongoing Services

- Health service is very good and there is no discrimination. The participants point out that this is indeed an example of good practice.
- Another good practice relates to school fees that are waived when a request is presented to the authorities.

3.4 Recommendations

3.4.1 Recommendations put forward by Widows and Widowers

- It would be ideal to have a survivor's pension and own individual pension.
- Public transport is of particular relevance to widows and widowers. However, the service is still not adequate.
- A *karta romol* (similar to the *karta anzjan*) is suggested e.g. for public transport, TV licence and medicine.
- As for senior citizens, a subsidized fare is requested for widows under 60 years e.g. for cinema, gozo boat, etc.
- The website of the MSP needs to be updated regularly as new benefits may be lost due to invisibility.
- Customer care staff at MSP need to be knowledgeable as they are sometimes in the dark about new policies.
- An increase in pension to widows with dependent children should be treated with urgency as the current rate is insignificant.
- More help with home maintenance is needed and receipts for service may be given to Social Security Department.
- Loneliness and solitude are common experiences. For this reason, it is recommended that a place / club / day centre is established with the aim of being open all day, especially in the evenings and at weekends, for widows / widowers to be able to meet and socialise. Condominiums or a little village complex, with housing government schemes for widows, are also ideas.
- A general request for the same support as for senior citizens.
- Bus schedules that run late in the evenings.

3.4.2 Recommendations put forward by LGBTs

- Formal recognition of the rights of same sex couples;
- The inclusion of an article in the Criminal Code regarding homophobic and transphobic violence, and a clear strategy addressing homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools;
- Legal protection against discrimination in the delivery of goods and services expressly referring to the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression;
- The formal extension of the remit of the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality to cater for the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression;
- The inclusion of gender reassignment surgery and hormone therapy for transgender persons as part of the public health services;
- Services that do not rely on volunteers; commitment of a national body that offers services and recognizes their needs and is fully aware of the situation;
- Funds are a big issue;
- Civil court decision that allows post op transgender to marry;
- Recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity for a claim for refugee status.

3.4.3 Recommendations put forward by Ex-convicts

- Reformative justice is recommended.
- The most pressing need is accommodation after finishing their term in prison.
- Prison personnel would benefit from specific training in communication skills.
- Prisoners seek better treatment by staff in general.

3.4.4 Recommendations put forward by Homeless

- The participants suggest they need an increase in government benefits e.g. sickness benefit is too low and they have little financial means to pay for accommodation and lodging at the YMCA.
- Privacy is needed.
- The YMCA drop-in centre provides food and it is recommended that food is also provided for residents in the shelter who currently need to buy and cook their own.

3.4.5 Recommendations put forward by Lone Mothers

- The Government needs to look into each individual case and not provide benefits across the board, irrespective of circumstances.
- Lone mothers are expected to pay their way through, even when living in a home or shelter.
- Increased state-funded childcare services would help, because nurseries are not affordable.
- Childcare provision should be free or means-tested.

3.4.6 Recommendations put forward by Third Country Nationals

- A legal framework is essential. Participants claimed that Malta has always 'looked inwards' and that a conscious policy to get third country nationals involved and contributing to society, has not been implemented, although highly imperative and recommended.
- Counselling services are important to keep families together. Also important are visits by spouses in their country of origin as otherwise third country nationals living in Malta tend to get into relationships with Maltese women, have children, and break up families.
- Police training, specifically on how to deal with third country nationals, is called for. Malta is still without a legal structure or policy. As a result everything becomes arbitrary: 'I know you so I treat you well; I don't know you so I don't treat you well.'
- Government needs a structure that is not run by volunteers but by professionals that link and integrate third country nationals into Maltese society.
- Government needs a system that accredits foreign academic qualifications.
- Structure for knowledge and support that provides information to third country nationals who might be faced with a language barrier. Services are good but are discretionary and cannot be tested because there is no structure.
- Dialogue that is non confrontational is recommended as authorities seem to go on the defensive when put on the spot. It is important to build bridges rather than be negative.

4. CONCLUSION

Malta's overall poverty rate is 15 per cent, however, children (21%) and people over 65 (20%) are the most vulnerable groups. The wide-ranging social protection system absorbs 18.5 per cent of the GDP and the active role of NGOs and strong family and community ties in Malta are instrumental in keeping the poverty rate relatively low. Nevertheless, the demographic dynamics, recent poor economic growth and large fiscal deficits are putting a strain on the sustainability of the social protection system. The need for reform has been recognized and the process initiated.

To this end, a comprehensive reform is taking place in Malta that is marked by a shift from government provision to a growing emphasis on the responsibilities of the individual. For example, Malta's employment strategy addresses the need to increase access to employment through the introduction of more flexible forms of work, and the provision of services aimed at reconciling family life and earning. However, policies to fight poverty and to promote social inclusion need to take into account which groups represent the largest share of the population at risk **and which groups** are most exposed to the risk of poverty so that the right mix of horizontal and targeted policies can be developed.

4.1. Discussion

Much can be done to tackle exclusion through the budget process. There are impressive examples of collaboration between governments and civil society to analyse who benefits from public policy and expenditure, and to improve the benefits for those who have missed out, such as social budget. Social protection that includes welfare payments such as pensions and benefits can also play an important role in reducing vulnerability and poverty. It can go a long way towards overcoming cycles of poverty and exclusion that repeat themselves generation after generation. Economic empowerment of excluded groups is also vital if they are to work their way out of poverty.

Government can help to break down barriers to the labour market and service provision. Main international human rights agreements all promote measures to tackle discrimination. But individual countries' governments are the only bodies that protect those rights, by producing their own domestic legislation to guarantee them. Engaging with socially excluded people, and empowering them to take an active role in decisions that affect their lives can bring about positive change at national level. Indeed, excluded groups themselves have to be involved in changing their own situation. This is critical, given that the political situation and government action or neglect in Malta are often responsible for exclusionary policies. In order to make lasting progress, it is often necessary to support excluded people so they can successfully challenge the power structures that cause their exclusion.

While many measures to promote social inclusion incur costs, in some cases these are minimal, and they can often be reduced by taking account of the needs of excluded groups from the start of the planning process. For instance, thinking about the inclusion of LGTBs at the outset would enable schools to implement inclusive education programmes, bringing long-term benefits to the community. The advantages of more inclusive policies also need to be taken into account, to enable a fair cost/benefit analysis. These advantages are too often ignored, and too few of them are pursued.

4.2 Influencing policy making

Civil society plays an important role in challenging government and ensuring accountability towards its citizens, and that it meets its legal obligations. These include government's obligations to protect and realise the human rights of the whole population in a non-discriminatory way. Moreover, civil society in Malta can influence policy making, deliver services where the state will not, and tackle prejudice and change behaviour. Moreover, key civil society groups, such as trade unions, the church and the media can help excluded groups to exercise their rights and obtain redress where this is not happening.

However, there are risks. Civil society organizations may reflect patterns of exclusion in the wider society. Where they provide services, they may treat socially excluded groups as passive recipients of welfare, rather than people with equal rights who are capable of taking their own decisions and contributing to society, if given the opportunity. On the other hand, government may also rely on civil society to provide services that they themselves should be providing. Nonetheless, civil society may provide a vital lifeline for excluded groups.

Finally, a strategy to tackle exclusion has to challenge deep-seated attitudes and prejudices. Facing such attitudes can affect people's self-confidence. When people feel they are being judged on the basis of who they are, they may perform less well. The expectation of prejudice can undermine the motivation to achieve. Civil society can play an important role in helping to change attitudes. The media, in particular, while they have the potential to reinforce prejudices, can also play an important role in changing attitudes and behaviour.

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