

News

Sociologist slams dangerous 'third-world' pavements which discourage social interaction



MARC GALDES

Sociologist Michael Briguglio believes that the dangerous condition of the "third-world" pavements in Malta is preventing social interaction.

"It is important that we strive to invest in society from the basic things, such as pavements, where people can meet and talk safely," he said.

The Malta Independent last week reported the results of a survey, conducted by the Faculty of Wellbeing that revealed that 54.6% of people have a sense of loneliness, which is an 11.1% increase from the last survey the Faculty conducted in 2019.

In comments to this newspaper, Briguglio stressed that besides the policies proposed by the Faculty, we also need to think of policy proposals which build a lot on the importance of community.

The current infrastructure is claustrophobic, unsafe and uninviting. He emphasised the importance of having an infrastructure which is safe and accessible, to promote social interaction and prevent loneliness.

"We also have to think about infrastructure and community development – what in sociology we refer to as social capital. You invest in society," he said.

"I think the issue of the pavement is definitely one of our most important yet neglected issues in the country. Some elderly people don't go out because they are afraid that they will fall because pavements are either taken up by signs or else they are simply not up to standard. They are third-world pavements," he said.

More recently, many pavements have started to be blocked by e-scooters, which are also contributing to fears of people leaving their homes.

There are then situations when although there might be space, some people do not feel safe in that area. "For example, Paulina Dembska was murdered in Independence Gardens. Her memorial is still there with police on patrol; this signifies a lot."

"That's what investment in communities is all about, having spaces which are accessible and safe," he said.

The results of the survey, he said "at first glance... are quite shocking, however, one has to dig a bit deeper". He elaborated by

saying that loneliness could either be situational or a feeling of solitude.

"Loneliness can be something which we call situational in sociology. For example, you are lonely because you don't know anyone of your neighbours, or nobody talks to you, or you're an elderly man and you have nowhere to go. That's situational and that can be very problematic and that needs to be worked on in terms of policies," Briguglio said.

"Then there's also loneliness which is not technically defined as loneliness but which is solitude. Sometimes people enjoy being lonely, sometimes people enjoy solitude," he said. He added that sometimes people do to do with one's agency. One might seek to be lonely because they enjoy their own company.

He understood that this figure was still worrying, but he wanted to point out that in a quantitative study, questions could be interpreted in different ways. If it is interpreted as solitude then this should not be something worrisome; situational loneliness is what can be problematic.

The project leader of the survey study, Andrew Azzopardi, said that blaming these statistics on Covid-19 would be a "minimalistic and shallow argument". Instead, Azzopardi believes that the pandemic just exposed the reality of our lives which we did not want to show. He said that the statistics would not have been very different from 2019 to now without Covid-19.

In response to this, Briguglio said: "I think Covid-19 played a huge role. I don't agree that we should minimise the importance of Covid-19."

During the times of Covid-19, he revealed that he was very vocal about his concern for people suffering from loneliness.

Briguglio pointed out that different groups of people reacted differently during Covid-19 times, therefore, all groups must be addressed and studied separately.

His main concern was that there was a lot of loneliness which was invisible because it was not shared on social media. "A lot of loneliness was invisible. There are a lot of people who are not present, neither on social media nor on mainstream media," he said.

"There were many elderly people who couldn't go out and



there were many who were afraid to go out. There were many elderly who lost certain networks, for example, for some people going to the supermarket is a social occasion," he said.

Covid-19 had the largest impact on people who relied on a lot of outside activities, he said.

Briguglio also mentioned migrant communities that do not have a voice and lack social networks.

"You have others which do not even have communities at all. That is something which has to be researched," he added.

While some people were not affected too badly during the pandemic, others are in the recovery process and are still suffering from "psychological trauma". "So even though the restrictions aren't there anymore we still have to see the impacts of trauma which Covid has had on some people."

He was also asked why is it that in such a densely populated country, where everyone knows everyone, do people feel so lonely and isolated.

"Some sociologists have been concerned with this issue for over a century," he replied.

He said that Malta should be compared to cities because cities are highly congested places where there is a lot of loneliness.

"Some sociologists seem to relate this to alienation," he said. In a place where people are coming and going, although you are surrounded by a lot of people, you might still feel alienated amid the chaos because it might be hard to build relationships.

"So congestion can paradoxically result in what we refer to as loneliness in a crowd," Briguglio said.

Additionally, he spoke about the fake "façade" people display



on social media. "You might be heavily depressed or very lonely, but you are constantly showing a façade of yourself which isn't true."

The report also revealed that 20.8% of people feel a sense of emptiness. When asked about this he responded by saying: "We are giving a lot of importance to the identity of the consumer but at the expense of the identity of the citizen."

"It's as if we're in an endless race," he noted. "I think we need to slow down, we need to invest more in quality of life."

He pointed out that in terms of the consumer, it is all about instant gratification: having more money, progressing fast, and so on. However, he is suggesting that society slows down a bit and thinks in terms of the citizen. The citizen would have rights just like the consumer, but also responsibilities towards others.

"We seem to have invested a lot in policies over the years which have centred a lot around the I,

my rights. Which are important. But perhaps we haven't invested enough in policies which have got to do with our responsibilities and I think that can help combat the idea of emptiness. When we speak of responsibilities we're speaking of the quality of life and of the environment which are very important factors," he said.

He used the example of news as a metaphor for the fast life we are living. It's better to have reliable news that might take a bit longer rather than clickbait news which is full of lies and deception. The same goes for life, let's slow down and find free time to improve the quality of our lives.

He believes that this shift in mentality might be the solution to combat this feeling of emptiness.

Nonetheless, he understood that "some people don't have the privilege to enjoy free time".

Unfortunately, some people don't have the opportunity to slow down and enjoy life. There are people who are working multiple jobs and long hours to pay their loans, pay their expenses and/or finance their children.

The budget could be the opportunity for the government to support those people and families who are struggling with the current crisis, he said.

He emphasised the importance of introducing the concept of social impact assessment. "Social impact assessment means that when we devise policies we have to look at their social impact."

"Social-impact assessments try to measure the impacts on community life on loneliness and on all these variables which we have mentioned. I think we need to mainstream social impact assessments and that can be an area where sociologists and other social sciences can play a very important role," he said.