

Dances with Poverty: Crime

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Back In Time

Uneasy childhood memories of the old lady begging in front of the now defunct Valletta Gate, dressed in a long black dress, wearing dark glasses and a black cap whilst holding a pointed black cop always brought up memories of a medieval witch. An imprinted memory that elicited a retinal flashback whenever one crossed the bridge to the gate, something I thought finally banished now that the Gate has been eradicated.

Until CARITAS and McKay that is...

Pandora's Box

The CARITAS Poverty report published on the 16th March 2012 entitled "A Minimum Budget for a Decent Living" and the subsequent McKay interviews have opened the final latch of Pandora's proverbial lid that has been simmering for some years. As early as 1984, sequential studies by DISCERN, CARITAS, NSO, EUROSTAT, CrimeMalta, the Institute of Criminology and other social partners have pointed at the emergent poverty gap. EUROSTAT's structural indicators should have rung the bells for both policy and decision makers. Albeit, such a topic seems to have been as shirked as the old lady in black for various social, political and economic reasons. A state that accepts the existence of poverty is perceived as a failed state. Such ostrich tactics! Alas, the monster has finally raised its ugly head but what perplexes researchers is the mere fact that a large number of people refuse to accept the fact that poverty is back with a bang, citing relative poverty, misplaced priorities, laziness and sheer overspending. Tell that to the old grandma who has to cater for the upbringing of four children who have been abandoned by the parents and she has to live off her pension. Tell that to the kid who goes to school wearing a t-shirt in winter as he cannot afford to buy anything better. Tell that to teachers who continuously buy lunches for students who go to school empty-handed.... Fantasy stories? Go in the field and meet these people; the number is growing as the middle class loses ground and the lower-income see their spending money trickle ever slowly. Pity that those who serve different gods never bother to visit some areas of the islands.

The Spatial Factor

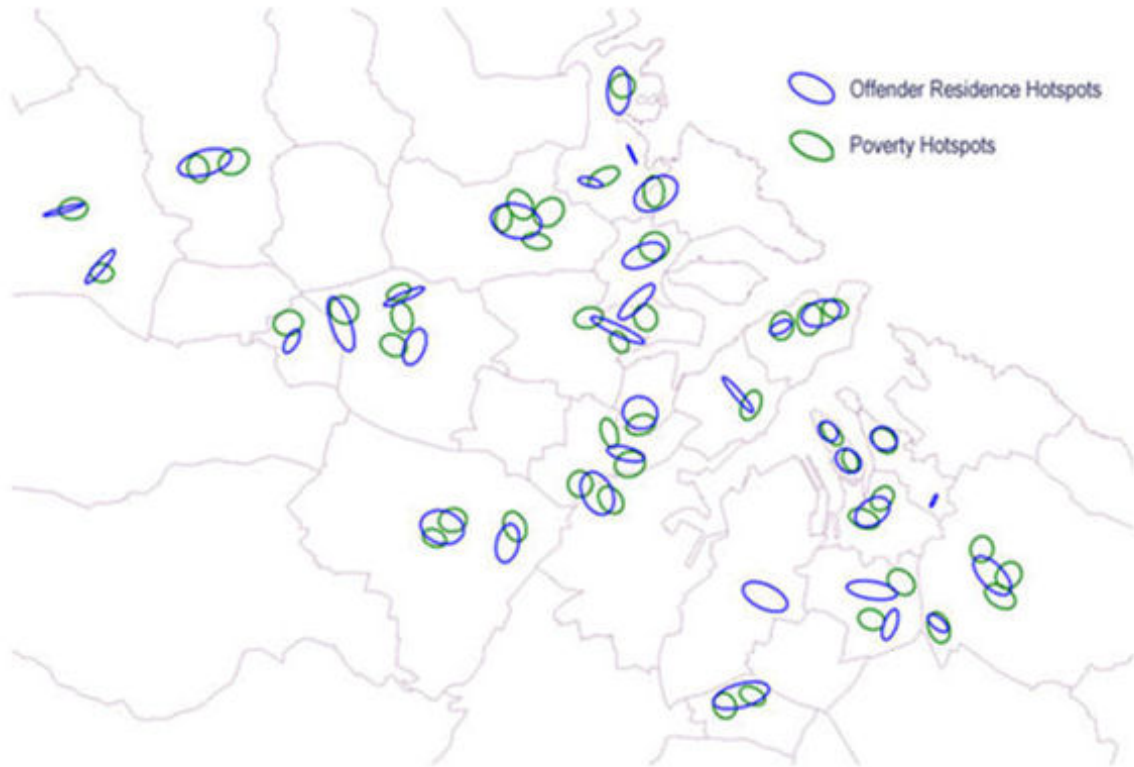
What actually seems to have broken the camel's back was a short interview with Leonid McKay who became indicated some real areas that harbor poverty: areas that have been hidden in plain sight, some ancient, but many less than a few years since construction. That is what got the message home: naming a few drove bloggers through classic denial mechanisms that the new poor are figments of the imagination. It also drove sections of the political group into silent mode. A pity as the phenomenon has been staring all in the face.

Poverty does not dance alone; it always finds a partner and scientific studies carried out over twenty years by this article's authors indicate that in Malta the partner added a twist to the broth; a twist termed criminality.

The Crime Factor

A study of over 2000 individuals over space and time shows that poverty and crime correlate perfectly: where poverty rests, crime strives. And this is not just some labeled towns that have tipped such as the perennially quoted Grand Harbour Towns. Once and for all, forget Bormla and Valletta and acquire a drastically different social reality! At enumeration area level, practically every council has its poor area, inclusive of those deemed too well-off. On the other hand, are spread throughout the islands and their social cohesive links gravitate them to areas with specific proximity concentrations that overlap on the areas of poverty. The 2007 Formosa study showed that there is a positive relationship between offender residence density and poverty risk indicating a tendency for offenders to live in poor areas as driven by socio-spatial realities. With some areas registering as much as 20 times the national rate, both in terms of offender concentration and poverty hotspots, such is should serve as a short-sharp-shock for action.

These circumstances have been driven by factors of low-rent, dilapidation, housing policies, and a 40-year social engineering exercise that started off with the initiation of the housing estates and was sustained with the expansion of the urban fabric. The spread of offenders from the core areas did not lessen offence and neither poverty, it actually brought the two together. It removed whole families from their roots and rendered social cohesion non-effective. It elevated strain in such areas which have tipped and few people will move in to balance the guardianship. With strain comes conflict and luckily for Malta this conflict has not reared its head, partly through the works of various NGOs and social activists. However, strain can only go so far and the state must act fast to reduce the thresholds. The rising cost of living has definitely not helped and the safety net actually catches those who are bold to go for the goods; the real poor rarely approach for the misperceived concept of shyness. People are falling through the net and the only way out of strain is to take up opportunities that bring in those unattainable goods.



New Crusade? *Solidarity Scarcity*

Poverty is a harsh beast but governance has to reach down and touch the realities on the ground. The resurgence of social solidarity needs more than NGOs to sustain itself: it demands a comprehensive domain-spanning approach that targets mitigation and the only way to do this is to get one's hand dirty.