

What Have We Learned from Covid?

ANTHROPOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS





Author: **Ines Ventura**

*The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities and inequalities on a financial, social, and mental level. Creating a cohesive COVID-19 response strategy requires research. In a joint effort, EU countries worked together as part of the **SoNAR Global Network** to develop policy recommendations which could help minimise these inequalities.*

Protecting the vulnerable was one of the main objectives when nations developed a COVID-19 response strategy. Poverty and difficult access to social and health services were already known to be linked to worse health outcomes throughout life. However, the pandemic and the preventive measures applied to mitigate its spread highlighted health, social, and mental vulnerabilities – vulnerabilities which need to be understood and addressed.

To understand how COVID-19 affected vulnerable populations, the SoNAR international consortium (in which the University of Malta [UM] was involved as a partner alongside institutions in France, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia) conducted a large-scale vulnerability assessment across a number of sites. The research in Malta was led by Prof. Jean-Paul Baldacchino, Associate Professor of Anthropological Sciences at UM. The local team also included Dr Gisella Orsini, head of the Anthropological Sciences Department; Dr Victoria Sultana, visiting lecturer at the Faculty of Health Sciences; as well as Dr Maurice Said, Mr Gabriel Zammit, and Mr Adrian Camilleri as Research Support Officers.

‘In many cases, people suffering from certain mental health conditions found that their condition

worsened, whereas new psychological problems in the form of moral conflicts produced a great level of anxiety among otherwise healthy individuals,’ said Prof. Baldacchino. ‘The pandemic has also required the assessment of loss of trust and increased mistrust in official institutions, for example,’ explains Dr Said, one of the Maltese researchers involved. ‘The imposed lockdowns, mobility restrictions, closures, and social distancing exacerbated a sense of uncertainty and powerlessness.’

Two major topics were identified as particularly important in the Maltese context: social isolation and mental health. Social isolation, through lockdowns and quarantines, was one of the most important mitigation measures applied during the pandemic. It confined the general population to their homes, preventing not only socialisation but also the opportunity for people to retreat to open public spaces. This led to the impoverishment of well-being and mental health in general, especially in urban areas and in their periphery. Already marginalised groups reported greater feelings of isolation, particularly the elderly living in care homes. This lack of socialisation also impaired their mental health. Based on these results, researchers proposed several policy recommendations. ➤



Prof. Jean-Paul Baldacchino
Photo by James Moffett



Dr Gisella Orsini
Photo by James Moffett

TARGETED DIGITAL LITERACY PROGRAMMES

Mandatory social distancing and visit restrictions seriously compromised the well-being of several socially marginalised groups, particularly elderly living in care homes or mental health patients living in hostels. Individuals felt lonely, needing to communicate virtually with others during the lockdown and being unable to do that.

'Despite having shared computers available at the residence, many of them didn't know how to use it without help,' Said explains. This drawback also narrowed access to online information, limiting their knowledge about health-related initiatives and their access to several online services.

Researchers proposed the implementation of educational programmes providing both the means and the necessary knowledge to operate new technologies and to navigate the range of often-conflicting information found online. This digital literacy initiative should target elderly populations, particularly in residential care homes, as well as socially disadvantaged groups (such as those lacking access to secondary or tertiary education). The legal status or level of literacy in these socially disadvantaged groups increased the likelihood that they were excluded as vulnerable.

UPDATING THE MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY

Mental health has been a concern both in the EU and Malta's public health strategy post-COVID-19. Despite explicitly acknowledging the need to support the vulnerable, many mental health problems often remain undiagnosed, untreated, and therefore not considered. To answer this need, Maltese researchers proposed that the mental health strategy should be updated to develop a crisis mitigation plan to make mental health support available during and following the pandemic, as well as during other potential crises.

Updates should specifically address the vulnerabilities that have emerged or been heightened during this time –

including forms of OCD, generalised anxiety disorder, as well as support services for families and friends of those dealing with difficult situations who are at-risk or themselves suffer from mental health difficulties.

Besides considering a wider repertoire of conditions that people have reported, the overwhelming social stigma associated with mental health issues should also be addressed. This stigma represents a barrier for people accessing mental health care, contributing to isolation and feelings of loneliness which have an overt affect on people's ability to manage their own health and well-being.

This approach should include revisions to the system for requesting such help. Given the small size of the island and the interconnectedness of social networks, coupled with the overwhelming stigma around mental health issues, people are often hesitant to make use of such services. 'Ensuring complete anonymity for people accessing such services is particularly important, even though it is difficult in a small place like Malta,' says Dr Orsini. Thus, this recommendation also calls for a more flexible application of the term 'vulnerable' at the policy level, where it recognises that such a term is not static in its definition and application.

NOISE POLLUTION, CONSTRUCTION, AND ACCESS IN URBAN AREAS

Imposed restrictions on socialisation and outdoor events during the pandemic increased the average time spent at home. Unemployment as a direct result of the pandemic as well as flexible working arrangements have also contributed to people spending more time at home. 'Numerous interviewees have noted that the absence of green and open spaces to retreat to as well as constant noise and dust from nearby construction have made their homes unbearable,' Said says. Whilst many Maltese are able to drive to the countryside, parks, or coastline areas, several



Adrian Camilleri
Image courtesy of the SoNAR Team



Dr Maurice Said
Image courtesy of the SoNAR Team



Gabriel Zammit
Image courtesy of the SoNAR Team

respondents also noted that they are wholly dependent on public transport. Public transport routes to green spaces are, at times, unavailable or, when they are available, are often crowded, with people hesitant to use public transportation owing to a fear of contracting COVID-19.

Noise pollution, construction, and the lack of access to open areas also aggravated already sensitive social cases. Interviews with representatives from food banks and social workers have further noted that there was an increase in the number of reported cases of mental health issues and domestic violence directly linked to the pandemic restrictions. With regards to domestic violence, large families who are dependent on social housing and whose employment may have been impacted by the pandemic restrictions suddenly found themselves confined to restrictive domestic living situations that further increased tensions, anxiety, and the likelihood of abusive situations.

Whilst the issue of construction noise and disruption in urban and peri-urban areas (zones of transition from rural to urban land uses located between the outer limits of urban and regional centres and the rural environment) has been a persistent problem, results from the SoNAR Project highlight how a problem prior to the pandemic has contributed to further vulnerabilities during and following COVID-19. People complained that both their mental and physical well-being has been adversely impacted by the lack of access to green spaces.

To further mitigate the negative impacts of construction in urban areas, Maltese researchers propose additional limits on noise generation, whilst simultaneously encouraging the establishment of new green and open spaces in urban areas. They also recommend increased transportation routes and making these services available to a wider section of the population, particularly those that are wholly dependent on public transportation. Such an initiative should also consider the coupled provision of more accessible walking and cycling routes in urban and peri-urban areas.

CONNECTION WITH THE SOCIETY

'How will these policies minimise vulnerabilities in society, and how hard is it to implement them?' is the follow up question of this project. 'The proposed policies are aimed to address systemic issues in the current institutional approach and already available policies, most prominently in making services available to a wider section of the population and, where these services are available, making them easier to use,' explains Said. 'The policy recommendations seek to address the current understanding of vulnerability which is somewhat static, clarifying that vulnerability changes according to time and context, so the definitions applied at an institutional level need to have a bit more flexibility,' notes Dr Orsini.

By default, research should inform public policy makers to ensure that applied strategies are in line with population needs. However, two major drawbacks affect policy making. The first one is the close link between public policy and the political sphere. Secondly, ministries often operate independently, resulting in little to no communication between ministries and different institutions, even in cases where policy actions might complement one another. As a result, 'We found that many stakeholders working with vulnerable populations have complained that there is oftentimes a duplication of efforts among various state agencies and systemic challenges in providing aid to specific vulnerable populations,' notes Prof. Baldacchino. **T**

The SoNAR Project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement number 825671.