

# Poverty in a prospering country

**Samuel Casha**




In 2018, anti-poverty organization Oxfam reported how in 2017, the world's 2,043 billionaires increased their combined wealth by \$762 billion—enough money to eradicate global poverty seven times over. While in past centuries, poverty was a consequence of a lack of resources, abundance is a far greater issue in today's world. The problem is resource distribution.

The gap between the rich and poor is ever-widening, and this is a reality that is true in Malta.

Our streets might not be blighted by homeless people as in most big European cities, yet hidden poverty is increasing. In 2016, the National Statistics Office reported that 16.5% of the Maltese population live at risk of poverty. Skyrocketing property prices have their part to play, grinding society's most vulnerable members down. Currently, over 900 families live in garages, as stated in a parliamentary meeting in May 2018.

The situation is not the fault of any one political party or another. Poverty is a structural problem. Capitalism generates poverty, just as it generates wealth. Yet, too often, those in the middle-class point their fingers not at the rich and powerful fuelling the machine, but at the poor themselves. Many assume that the poor could climb the social ladder if only they worked harder, but many are employed and still fail to achieve a decent standard of living since the minimum wage is inadequate.

*This is where a network of social solidarity, both formal and informal, comes into play.*

Throughout history, countless artists have depicted poverty, among them Vincent Van Gogh, whose *Potato Eaters* (1885) remains one of the most powerful paintings about poverty in history. Criticised for its lack of a 'conventional sweetness,' in a letter to his brother, Vincent insisted that 'a painting of peasant life should not be perfumed.' Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* brings the viewer face-to-face with a type of poverty that exists behind closed doors. Malta's poverty problem is exactly that: behind closed doors. If we cannot do much to help them, at the very least, the poor deserve our empathy, not our judgement. 

**This article is based on research carried out as part of the B. A. (Hons.) History of Art with Fine Arts course within the Department of Art and Art History, University of Malta, under the supervision of Prof. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci.**