



L-Università ta' Malta
Faculty for Social Wellbeing

Empowering Communities through Networking: *A participatory action research approach*

A project carried out by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing in collaboration with the Msida Local Council and the Local Councils Association

**RESEARCH REPORT
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Introduction

The Msida Local Council community project in collaboration with the Faculty was probably amongst the first community development projects we were involved in. It was a service we gave to the Msida community whereby we tried to understand and actively engage in how the community is evolving. The Msida community in itself has an intriguing dynamic and converges a number of factors that make it an engaging community to study. This project was successful because we managed to draw in the Msida Local Council in this research and together with the Faculty outlined the social landscape with some generalisable notions.

Prof. Andrew Azzopardi

Dean

Faculty for Social Wellbeing



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1. Introduction



1.1. PREAMBLE

This chapter will provide details about the rationale and conceptualisation of this research study, supported by relevant research about community development, the concept of community, the importance of participatory action research, concluding with a concise profile of the community involved in this study.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study was conceptualised based on the recognition that potential gaps may exist within - and between - local communities in the Maltese islands. These gaps consists of the skills, resources, and strengths within communities that are potentially not being utilised to their full capacity, in terms of meeting the needs of the community. This study thus aimed to achieve the following objectives, with the broader aim of enhancing the well-being of members of a pilot community of Msida:

1. To profile the community of Msida by identifying salient socio-demographic characteristics, resources, strengths, assets, limitations and needs that exist;
2. To deploy a participatory action research approach to involve collaboration with local 'community leaders' so as to draw on indigenous knowledge of the community; and
3. To foster an increased awareness, collaboration, and resource sharing within and between communities for improved sustainability.

1.3 WHY DO WE NEED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?

It has been argued that we have reached a time where community, and our ways of relating to one another, are now more important for improving quality of life than economic growth (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

Communities in the majority of modern countries are facing increasing pressures to their social structure, due to a variety of constantly evolving shifts that come about as a result of globalisation. These pressures to evolve with changing times are not inherently negative, yet they do pose a threat to the existing way of doing things, prompting communities to adapt to the new circumstances. It is this adaptation process where communities can either improve and become even stronger and more cohesive than before - or where things can go awry.

Ledwith (2011) explains how changes within a community needs to be sustainable, which is why community development should begin with the day-to-day lives of its members. Through participation that focuses on empowering local members of the community, individuals are encouraged to critically reflect upon their realities. This reflection allows for a democratic, participatory approach which leads to collective action that can address the issues faced by community members.

When people join together to enact positive change within their communities, this prompts a growth in their confidence, thereby leading to a greater sense of control and empowerment in their capabilities as a community. Moreover, when members of a community join forces to meet their needs, this has a knock-on effect that results in the feeling that they are part of something greater than themselves, which in turn increases their sense of interconnectedness (Ledwith, 2011).

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Furthermore, Elliott, Mulroney, and O'Neil (2001) discuss how communities' capacity can be enhanced through building upon the social fabric that ties communities together. They mention multiple strategies for accomplishing such a task, including but not limited to: developing human capital, promoting family-friendly practices where people are encouraged to participate in activities, creating opportunities for connection between community members, encouraging a sense of diversity and appreciation for the inherent strengths that result therein, making use of community members who are natural networkers, and building upon existing relationships with decision-makers (p.106).

1.4 THE CONTINUOUSLY EVOLVING COMMUNITY

A community can be defined as "a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings" (MacQueen et al., 2001, p.1929). For the purpose of this study, the community refers primarily to a group of individuals residing in the same geographical town of Msida in Malta.

Historically, Maltese residents have enjoyed several benefits of living in close, tight-knit communities. Recollections of Maltese people from as little as 50 years ago describe the security of not needing to lock their front doors, of families living in close proximity to each other, and of leaving a plastic bag on their front door to receive fresh loaves of bread from the local baker.

Fast-forward a few decades to the present day, and a great deal of change has impacted communities in the Maltese islands. Following entry into the European Union in 2003, the country has witnessed intense and fast-paced growth in its economy and the population has grown exponentially - in 2018, population growth in Malta was more than 15 times that of the EU average (Times of Malta, 2018). Such dramatic changes have therefore brought along a shift in community demographics, resulting in a need to adapt to new community structures.

Although migration of foreign individuals into Malta has undoubtedly contributed to the shift in communities' compositions, the movement within the country itself has also increased in recent years. Whereas in the past, an individual would remain in the same town or general area throughout their lifespan, today this has become particularly difficult to accomplish - most likely due to the rising property costs which mean that an individual may not be able to afford to live in their hometown.

1.5 THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

The sustainability of a community-based project is achieved because such projects give due consideration to the unique biography of individual communities (Murphy, 2014). In other words, community-based interventions take shape through understanding a knowledge base that is constructed by the community itself, as opposed to being guided by quantitative social indicators such as rates of unemployment, housing quality and other demographic data (Smith, 1987).

The current study therefore sought to adopt a participatory action research approach to knowledge construction. This was achieved by consulting with local community experts throughout the planning and analysis stages of the project, to ensure that those people who are crucial to the successful implementation of any community-based interventions were engaged in the knowledge construction process - an element deemed as holding the key to social change (McNeely, 1999).



An important aspect of community-based projects is the 'democratisation of culture' (Hardina, 2006). This refers to the process of creating a space where the knowledge base of various different individuals is considered at an equal level; in this way, democratisation allows the removal of any potential impediments that might otherwise preclude the complete participation of community members involved in the project (Windel & Cibulka, 1981).

Through the adoption of an approach that encourages the participation of the community's members in each stage of the planning process, the present study aims to provide interventions that are grounded in a sense of legitimacy and proper direction (Leung, Yen, & Minkler, 2004). Such an approach differs from alternative forms of community planning, where members of the community are not necessarily at the center of a project, but rather take on the 'silent partner' role (Callaghan, 2009, as cited in Murphy, 2014).

1.6 COMMUNITY PROFILE

The town of Msida in Malta is a harbour town located close to the capital city of Valletta. The location of Msida, being in the central region of Malta, means that it is a central hub for traffic flow coming from various surrounding localities. Moreover, the centrality of the town makes it a popular residential location for locals and foreigners alike - particularly since the neighbouring towns of Sliema and St Julians constitute the main commercial hubs for places of employment.

The increasing workforce in online gaming and financial services in neighbouring towns has contributed to a rapidly expanding number of residents in Msida and its surrounding towns of Gzira and Swatar. The growth in population across the entire island has also had an impact on vehicular traffic that passes through Msida, most notably in the roundabout area.

Statistics from the period between 2014 - 2016 show that the population stood at 8,545 residents, with Msida's population growth exceeding average numbers of more than a 2.4% yearly increase (Micallef, 2018). This meant that Msida's population growth was fourth on the list of increases for that period, following the growth seen in St. Paul's Bay, Sliema, and Swieqi. Such growth has primarily been attributed to the need for a rising influx of foreign workers to sustain Malta's economy (Micallef, 2018).

2. Methodology



2.1 PREAMBLE

This section will provide a description of how the current study was designed in order to achieve the research objectives, outlining the data collection tools, sampling strategy, ethical considerations, and analytical method that were adopted.

2.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to identify the strengths and weaknesses that exist within a pilot community of the town of Msida in Malta. The following research questions served as a guide for the development of the study and research tools:

- What are the salient issues that members of the community face?
- What gaps or needs exist in terms of resources within the community?
- What resources exist within the community that could address such issues, gaps, or needs?

2.3 STUDY DESIGN

In order to address the above research questions, the present study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design, in line with the chosen Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. In doing so, the researchers sought to understand participants' views and feelings about their community in a manner that is free from manipulation by the researcher(s) (MacDonald, 2012).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) involves systematically collecting and analysing data, with the ultimate goal of taking action that creates change through the generation of practical knowledge (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). Action research is generally conducted with a researcher and the members of a community or organisation who share a desire to improve their situation (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). PAR also incorporates an element of reflection with regards to the political, historical, geographic, and economic contexts that can enhance our understanding of experiences and issues in order to improve a situation (Wadsworth, 1998). Moreover, this research design maintains the epistemological position that knowledge is created through an active process (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Reality is thus considered from a postmodern perspective, in which an ultimate objective truth is impossible, but rather, "multiple or shared realities exist" (Kelly, 2005, p.66).

2.4 RESEARCH TEAM

The researchers collaborating on this study consisted of academic and research staff working within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta. The research team was thus comprised of individuals with expertise in community studies and development, sociology, psychology, social science research, and social policy. In line with PAR, members of the research team determined their level of involvement in the research process from the outset of the study, in order to ensure that decisions would be based on the full involvement of all members, whilst sharing tasks so that the research activities were practically feasible (Munford, Sanders, & Andrew, 2003).

2.5 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

PAR denotes that the researchers should collaborate with research participants to establish the

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most appropriate data collection methods (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Stringer & Genat, 2004; Gillis & Jackson, 2002). The present study therefore sought the expertise of representatives from the Msida Local Council during the early planning stages, in order to elicit their feedback of the most appropriate methods with which to collect the data.

Following this initial consultation, it was agreed that focus groups and individual interviews would be the most appropriate and practical methods for collecting data. Both such methods are among those most commonly employed to generate data in PAR (Stringer & Genat, 2004; Gillis & Jackson, 2002), in addition to participant observation. Making use of more than one data collection method also allows the researcher to overcome some of the limitations that might arise from using one single method, thereby aiding in triangulation of data and leading to more effective solutions to identified problems (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995).

Focus groups were chosen as the primary method of data collection, because this form of interview “capitalises on communication between the research participants in order to generate data” (Kitzinger, 1995, p.299). The focus group scenario also allows the researcher and/or moderator to create an environment that encourages participants to express different points of view (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

For potential research participants who were unable to attend a scheduled focus group, most often due to time constraints of their profession, the option of an individual interview was provided. Interviews are popular in PAR since they provide a space for participants to describe their situation and experiences in their own words (Stringer, 1999; Kvale, 1996; Reinhartz, 1992).

2.6 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

A discussion guide was developed in collaboration with partners from the Msida Local Council, which was to be used for both the focus groups and individual interviews. It was agreed that, rather than focussing on one or a few specific areas, the questions would be designed to capture as many different areas as possible. Questions included in the discussion guide therefore sought to gather information about the following areas:

- The main difficulties encountered by members of the community, in terms of: health related problems, education, employment, family life, environment, community residents, groups that might require particular attention, and any other issues;
- The services or resources that exist in the community that might address any of the identified issues;
- Any barriers that exist with regards to accessing these resources;
- The actions, strategies, or initiatives that would make the biggest difference to overcoming the identified issues, and;
- The solutions that might reduce or eliminate any barriers to accessing the identified resources.

2.7 SAMPLE

The sample for this study consisted of five individuals who were identified by the research team, as well as by the collaborating members from the Msida local council. These participants were identified due to being considered as community representatives for the town of Msida,



who would be knowledgeable about the particular community. Participants were therefore recruited who reside within the community and who work directly with the local community members.

Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling technique, which entails the selection of participants according to certain criteria that have been identified according to the research question(s) (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). The participants who took part in the study consisted of individuals residing in the community, as well as individuals working in local law enforcement, the local council, and community workers.

2.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study received ethical clearance from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee of the University of Malta's Faculty for Social Wellbeing. Institutional approval for the study was also obtained from the President of Malta's Local Council Association, as well as the Mayor of Msida. Participants were recruited for the study through the use of a written recruitment letter which described the purpose of the study and outlined individuals' rights and guarantees, should they decide to participate in the study. These rights and guarantees made reference to participation being entirely voluntary, and participants' right to refuse or discontinue participation at any time, as well as contact details of professional support services if needed.

2.7 DATA ANALYSIS

Audio recordings from the interviews and focus group were transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis, which entails the researcher identifying patterns and common themes that emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were read several times in order to 'get to know the data', following which, salient sections were highlighted and organised into overarching themes. Connections between themes were also identified, and it became evident from the data that a saturation point had been reached whereby no new patterns were occurring.

In line with the principles of Participatory Action Research, the results of this analysis will be shared with the co-researchers of this study - consisting of the research team and key project partners from Msida - in order to solicit further feedback regarding the findings.

3. Results



3.1 INTRODUCTION

This section will provide a description of the main themes that emerged from analysing the data. These themes will be organised according to the research questions that shaped the discussion guide, starting out with details of issues that participants believe to be of relevance to members of the community. Next, the identified resources that exist within the community will be listed, followed by some potential barriers to accessing services or resources. Finally, this section will conclude with an outline of proposed solutions based on the above information.

3.2 ISSUES FACED BY THE COMMUNITY

Analysis of the qualitative data revealed several themes with regard to issues experienced within the community of Msida. These themes, which are described below, all reflect the participants' views of prevalent obstacles to a well-functioning community. Several of these themes were thought to be the result of the rapid demographic changes that have taken place over recent years - both in Msida, as well as in Malta as a whole. It should also be noted that, for the majority of the issues that were identified, these are not necessarily specific to the town of Msida. Therefore, the following findings may be generalisable to other local communities.

Financial issues

A number of sub-themes were identified to emanate from issues that are related to finances. It was suggested that a number of residents in the community were struggling to cope with managing their finances, which had a negative impact on their lives overall;

Children - and even the parents - are not learning the skills such as discipline or dealing with the consequences of their actions. A lot are stubborn and want to do things their way, and then they end up with problems such as financial problems. For example, there are a lot of people I know who don't know how to budget their money. There is a project that I am volunteering in, where we offer a service to learn to budget in a simple way by looking at their salary, bills for electricity, target the basic needs such as rent, water, food, and what's left after that. But a lot of people who use this service don't get as much use out of it because they find it hard to plan long-term in this way ...I also think that a lot of the people who come here end up homeless, even the older people, because they are being kicked out of their homes due to rising rents when the contract finishes.

(Local community worker)

I know what this is about, because this is a position that I am in - the rent has doubled.

(Local community resident)

Families struggling to cope

The rising cost of living in Malta was also considered by participants to have a negative impact on the lives of families residing in the community. Family life was hypothesised to suffer due to the fact that both parents need to work in order to pay the increasingly high costs of daily necessities, such as rent, food, etc;

I think that probably a problem is that there are a lot of families where both the father and mother are working, which is a problem for the children because they don't get a chance to spend time with their family. The grandparents pick them up from school, give them food, then the mother comes to pick them up and then they go home to bed. I think that this is

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a problem, when both parents have to work full time. And those people who have a higher wage and have the option to take flexi-time at work have more chance to spend time with their children ... Some families have a very positive environment, but then some cases are the opposite. And this could be due to the financial difficulties that we mentioned before, where people don't have the possibility to create a positive atmosphere for their families.

(Local community resident)

Economic inequality

Participants also emphasised the social impact resulting from relative income inequality between residents of vastly different financial (and educational) circumstances. This was also thought of as particularly salient due to the recent increase in online gaming companies setting up shop in Msida, meaning that the gap between more and less wealthy individuals had increased;

Msida has at least three main housing estates. The trends are that there is a low education level, also as being the... I hate saying immigrants, because some of them might be educated, but might not be able to show education due to lack of language. Because some of them might even be professors, but they might not speak the English or the Maltese language, so they become redundant or can't do any work due to this... but, on the other hand, we have gaming companies also, and being now that Sliema and Gzira are super expensive, the next one is Msida. Then you have, like, a big gap.

(Local law enforcement officer)

There are many people from the housing estates who are vulnerable individuals. They experience many difficulties such as mental health, financial issues, disability, etc.

(Local community worker)

There are definitely some areas, and I could be mistaken ... where there are people with very different levels of education.

(Local council member)

Overcrowded accommodation

The financial burden of rapid increases in rent by landlords was mentioned in the context of more and more individuals who have no choice but to resort to shared accommodation, even in the case of families. This was deemed to lead to issues within the community, both for the families themselves, as well as for neighbouring residents and law enforcement;

Being that there are a lot of foreigners living in shared apartments, because nowadays they live in shared apartments, there's chaos in every apartment that we go in. When you have four bedrooms and four different families living there, it's chaos. It also has an effect on the neighbours, and it has an effect on the police due to the change in law. Because if they have an argument between them, it's not an argument between two persons, it's domestic violence because they live under the same roof. Now it changed, the law, about six months ago. If two people have an argument, even a verbal argument, it's not something contravenational which is just a fine, it becomes an offense under the domestic violence law. But the problem is, if you have eight people living together, at some point in time somebody is going to argue. (Local law enforcement officer)



The physical environment

The environment in Msida was also mentioned by several participants, who spoke about the high volume of vehicular traffic and construction as having negative impacts on those who reside and/or work in the area;

You have to keep in mind that Msida covers also the hospital, university, so you have the skate park, the roundabout over there, the roundabout over here, it's all traffic congestion... you know, I think that and the construction galore that is going on ... for sure, the air is not the same ... there are many arterial roads in Msida and obviously in the peak hours, it's totally congested. (Local law enforcement officer)

There are a lot of cars, which is a big problem for people who live in the central areas, because of the fumes from the cars. (Local community resident)

There is also the issue of traffic since Msida is a traffic hub, even in residential areas ... The problem that we have in Msida is that we do have places where families can go for recreational activities, but there are too many cars surrounding them. We know that we need more open spaces, but where can we find these open spaces? The best places that there are are near the school, there's a small garden near Triq Cenzu Farrugia, but everywhere where you find a big 'pjazza', there is a large amount of traffic. (Local council member)

Lack of a sense of community

The fact that Msida has been witness to significant demographic changes in recent years, due to an increasing amount of foreign workers taking up residence there, was seen by the majority of participants as contributing to less of a sense of community amongst residents.

But, I see msida as too fast-paced - it's like an intersection, people passing through. There's no, like, sense of community... Going from the east of Malta, from Qawra down to Msida, it's getting... it's not losing its identity, but every place is becoming touristic or residential for foreigners... (Local law enforcement officer)

Such changes were believed to be pushing Maltese residents out of Msida, since the town was becoming comprised of less Maltese residents, a fact that was exemplified by a local council member noting: "we have about 5,000 Maltese registered to vote from here, and there are almost 4,000 EU nationals. And there are of course, other non-EU [residents]";

The people I know from Msida are no longer here. So, there isn't any sense of belonging. (Local council member)

Low participation rates in community activities

Another factor linked to the lack of a sense of community amongst Msida residents was that of low participation rates in community activities and initiatives by residents;

I work with people from many localities and I see many people who kind of alienate themselves from the community and convince themselves that it isn't important to be part of the community. It's like they have a mindset that they don't want to go to any sort of community event or activity. (Local community worker)

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Whilst various initiatives have been organised, by the Msida local council and other local entities, participants expressed a sense of frustration with the turn out that such initiatives usually saw;

*The local council does organise activities - for older people, for young people, for everyone - but very few people actually show up ... It cannot be due to the type of activities, because we organise all types of activities. Very few people, less than twenty, usually show up, and it's always the same people.
(Local council member)*

Integration of foreigners in the community

Another prevalent theme which emerged was the need to address foreigners' integration within the community. Some participants believed that the increasing proportion of foreign students in schools posed education-related issues that require addressing;

*It is definitely a challenge for the teachers because of language barriers, however it is good for integration. However there are many children who don't pick up as well because they don't understand. We need to identify what challenges the teachers are facing with these big changes ... The issue is also all the different cultures, and it's difficult to cater for the level that each student is comfortable with. For example, with some students they need more gestures to understand. Today, young people have a lot of know-how and you also have to cater for that. So if there are two students who need to be taught at a slower pace and in a different way, how does the teacher in school cope with that? I think that we have to go back to the drawing board to see how to cater for all these things.
(Local community worker)*

Residents of the community who are not Maltese were also considered to be at risk of becoming segregated due to not being given enough opportunities to integrate, particularly for those who were unable to communicate effectively in either Maltese or English;

*There is also a big issue with the people who are not able to speak even a bit of English
(Local community resident)*

*Yes, for those people, they end up being segregated.
(Local council member)*

*I think that it is also an issue that a lot of residents don't understand the language, so for example they do not understand the signs and information that is provided. I think that this also is due to one's sense of belonging. People may believe that they don't belong, so they don't care.
(Local community worker)*

The language barriers faced by foreign residents was also discussed with regards to their employment opportunities, which are significantly hindered for those who have difficulties speaking Maltese or English;

If they don't speak Maltese or English, they will not be able to find work. They can maybe be a cleaner or work in construction. Now we have a lot of people who are restricted because of the language. This issue prevents them from integrating. (Local community worker)

Although there have been a number of initiatives that provide training courses for foreigners, participants pointed out that many of these courses were not being well-received because they failed to address the specific concerns of those who attended;

There are many people who do not manage to find work, and there is a need to design training that addresses the specific needs that they have. Many go to the training courses that exist and find that they did not answer their questions.
(Local community worker)

The difficulties experienced by foreigners lacking sufficient language skills was also believed to contribute to a greater number of individuals choosing not to work and seeking social welfare benefits;

We found that a lot of people say that they don't want to work if they are getting only 10 euros, when they could be getting benefits instead. So the pay is also a factor. They are also limited in the type of work that they can do, such as manual work.
(Local community worker)

Another compounding factor with regards to foreign workers from the community was identified as the lack of childcare services for those working long hours;

And then there is another situation, where for example, if you have come here from another country and you know other people who are getting a lot of money here, but then you bring your children over and say that you do not want to work such long hours because there isn't anywhere to take care of your children.
(Local community worker)

3.3 Community resources

As part of the data collection, participants were also asked to identify the resources and strengths that already exist within the community. A multitude of examples of services that are working particularly well were provided, such as the recent introduction of a Home Therapy Family Services Unit;

They give help to families and visit them in the home. They work with groups for specialised parental skills, relationships, it's quite good. Because, when they visit at a house, they can see how the family interacts and their dynamics.
(Local community worker)

Participants also praised the success of several initiatives and services organised by Aġenzija Appoġġ, the National Agency for children, families, and the community;

Appoġġ have a day program that caters for vulnerable youths, but this is for a particular group of young people ... they help them with jobs and have courses about things such as, social security, et cetera. They work well with specific groups and they are specifically targeted for those groups.
(Local community worker)

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When participants discussed the reasons for services or initiatives that were particularly successful, a few common themes emerged as potential factors. The fact that certain services or activities were specifically tailored to suit the particular needs of the people that they were intended for was seen as a crucial factor for success;

For example, a project at the Millenium chapel created awareness and tailored programmes for the local community's needs - because if we target what people really need, then they will be more on board.
(Local community worker)

The importance of different entities collaborating and including all members of the community was also noted as an important element;

Everyone has their idea about what activities could be done, but it needs to be done correctly to include everyone. Different organisations, band clubs and other clubs, political clubs and so on can share their ideas and work together on particular events.
(Local community resident)

It's not easy. And one organisation can't take the full responsibility for organising the entire event.
(Local council member)

3.4 Barriers to community participation

In addition to the issues that emerged from the data, participants also identified potential solutions to overcoming some of these issues. The effectiveness with which any solutions - be they services, activities, or otherwise - are carried out was also discussed as being an integral part of remedying the situation. This was explained in light of the limited success of previously organised initiatives, which saw a lack of participation by members of the community;

Because to give something to the people who are already, nowadays everybody is busy to the brim. I mean, to give them something to do, all people want is to relax and chill. So to teach them something else..
(Local law enforcement officer)

Community members might also be hindered from participating in activities, such as attending courses on offer, due to their need to look after children when such courses are held;

To get mothers on board to attend a course in the evenings is hard because afterwards they have to cook, they have to take care of the kids, so that's another reason for low participation.
(Local community worker)

Participants also spoke about the difficulties encountered by older community members, who may not be as active in the community due to physical accessibility;

Older people cannot go around to run errands such as going to the pharmacy due to steep hills.
(Local community worker)



3.5 PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO IDENTIFIED ISSUES

Participants were in unanimous agreement that more efforts should be focussed on helping foreign residents to successfully integrate into the community, and to Malta in general. The provision of language courses, which could also incorporate specially formulated integration information, was seen as being greatly needed by foreigners in the community;

I think that offering lessons of English or Maltese to foreigners, and also during these language courses, making them aware of the basic laws of Malta. One, it would help them, because without a language that you'll be able to speak in Malta, you cannot go much further, at least Maltese or English, but maybe Italian. And also about the laws - one, to know where they stand, and not to break the law, because they wouldn't even know [what the laws are]. And then they end up with hefty fines, or having to pay the lawyer, so it adds to their problems. Integrating in society... there's a programme already in Italy where they do a year-long programme, which gives them even qualifications at the end of the course, to integrate them into society, learn the native language, and also to be able to give them more job opportunities. Because they say we need a lot of foreigners in Malta, because of the workload - we have a lot of foreigners who don't work, so, it's just the colour of the skin that makes the difference?

(Local law enforcement officer)

I think another thing is to share the cultural information with foreigners, also regarding things such as their responsibilities. This could perhaps be done together with the Integration Unit, Lifelong Learning and cultural mediators - it would help a lot, a lot, a lot. There are many people who tell each other that this is the way things should be done, but then someone else says another thing. And cultural mediators help a lot, because they know the culture.

(Local community worker)

With regards to the low participation by residents in community activities and initiatives, participants discussed potential areas of improvement, with one participant highlighting a recent initiative organised in another town which was quite successful;

I think that there should be events that promote the diversity that exists. For example, recently an event was organised called 'Breakfast on the Bridge' in Marsa and I went to this. There were different groups from many countries who brought a breakfast from their culture, and the organisers had sponsors who provided things like cake, bread, etc. And they did this on the bridge in between Hamrun and Marsa, next to the council. And a lot of people showed up. There were Maltese and foreigners who went. In fact, we were thinking of doing something similar here, where we get some sponsors... We had done a similar event which targeted groups from different nationalities, we had some food to raise awareness, for example showing people the food from Somalia, Bangladesh, etc. So we share cultures and see things from others' perspectives. And for example, if you organise it at a place where many people already go to, and don't try to force anyone to go, then it would be good - but you would need to do a lot of promotion about the event. We create spaces where people can meet, without any pressure.

(Local community worker)

The importance of networking to bring together different resources from the community was also mentioned;

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*For example, I see it a lot with Appogg, that they do have a certain harmony or a certain understanding between the people [using the services] that they have something in common even though they are different. And when the different entities get together, the people notice this and appreciate it. So it is important that the entities make use of the resources that their members have - for example, I might be a member of the band club, but I don't know anything about the scouts or about football. So, between the different groups, there are resources for everything. And the people love to see this, because they say 'look at this, how much they are capable of working together'.
(Local community worker)*

Another initiative proposed by a community worker participating in this study was that of providing easily accessible and up-to-date information about the services offered within the community. This participant had already begun drawing up a detailed list of all the various services - such as shops, and government offices - which are operating in Msida, organised according to the street names. This was thought to be especially useful for foreign residents, who may not be familiar with the services that exist in their area;

*There are so many services, and I have been working on some outreach with this. I'm creating a mapping exercise with a list of all the services that are found on each street in Msida - for example, the Director of Environmental Health, pharmacies, bakeries, chinese massage... We are ready to share this and will give you a soft copy. This is definitely an advantage for people to have, to build their network.
(Local community worker)*

Improving the promotion of initiatives was also discussed as a way of attracting more people to participate, with one participant noting that the Government could perhaps assist in publicising such initiatives, so that more people are made aware of them;

*If I could make a suggestion, regarding participation and services- we have a lot of services, even every entity has projects. So if all these different entities could have their services promoted by the main government, not just by the local government, so that a lot of people see it.
(Local community worker)*

With regards to the older residents in the community, participants mentioned the idea of providing a specialised transportation service for these individuals as a means of assisting them with carrying out their daily errands;

Another thing is that there should be a transport service for older people, similar to the one in Valletta, for people who need to go shopping or go around. Because many people living here are scared to leave their house because it's difficult to walk around on the roads. Because even in summer, they could go out, not stay at home because they can't walk back home after.
(Local community resident)

3.6 CONCLUSION

This section has presented the results of discussions with various community representatives from Msida. Some key findings with reference to enhancing the community include: the importance of ensuring accessibility for all community members to be able to participate



in events and activities; the value in collaboration between several entities when organising, and promoting, initiatives in the community; the need for initiatives that are formulated specifically according to the needs of community members; and the success of initiatives that seek to promote the diversity which exists in the community.

Other findings related to the needs of the community members that require further development in order to be adequately addressed. It was deemed important to provide further support to foreign community members with respect to helping them integrate into Maltese society - such support should cover aspects such as language skills, employment advice and assistance, information about the Maltese culture and laws, as well as making individuals aware of their responsibilities as a Maltese resident.

Many practical recommendations were proposed for meeting some of the needs and issues that were identified as being present in the community. These will be outlined in the next section in further detail. However, it must be noted that solutions were not identified for all of the issues that were identified - particularly for those issues which are ultimately caused by factors beyond the control of the community or its members. Nonetheless, these will also be highlighted with a view to increase awareness of the realities facing the community.

4. Conclusions

4.1 PREAMBLE

This final section will summarise the main findings from the present study, ending with recommendations based upon these findings for the community of Msida.

4.2 KEY FINDINGS

This study adopted a participatory action research approach in order to identify the salient socio-demographic characteristics, resources, and needs that exist in the community of Msida in Malta. The researchers engaged in a collaborative relationship with local community representatives in an effort to draw upon indigenous knowledge and construct a community profile.

Data collection comprised of an interview and focus group with local community residents, members of law enforcement and the local council, and a community worker. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that salient issues faced by the community included the increasing cost of living which may lead to individuals struggling to cope and living in overcrowded accommodation, as well as families having limited opportunities to spend quality time together. The integration of foreigners residing in the community was also deemed to be a crucial need for community cohesion. The negative impact of high rates of traffic and construction were mentioned as having a detrimental effect on the physical environment of the community and impacting the daily lives of residents. A dwindling sense of belonging in the community was also perceived to be related to low participation rates in community activities.

A number of strengths and resources were also identified in the community. These included local government initiatives, specifically those which were tailored to meet the particular needs of certain groups within the community - such as programs providing assistance to vulnerable youths or to families. The passion and perseverance of the community leaders who participated in this study are undoubtedly also an asset to the community, due to their commitment and dedication to improving the lives of community members.

This study set out to empower members of a community to identify, establish, and build upon any existing networks that might allow for greater success of community initiatives and activities. Participants were given the opportunity to reflect and engage in dialogue, leading to several proposals for how any issues or needs of the community could be better addressed or overcome, respectively. Such proposals included the importance of increased collaboration between different entities, the relevance of devising training programmes and activities that are based upon the specific needs of community members, and also the need for celebrating diversity within the community.

Finally, participants in this study also mentioned potential barriers that may be preventing all community members from actively participating in community life and activities. The impact of the physical environment on older residents' ability to access local services was noted, as well as the detrimental effect of community members who lacked a sense of belonging. It was also considered important that any activities which are organised should take into account the schedule and demands of the community members, perhaps by providing childcare in conjunction with any activities that are planned outside of school hours.

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4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the constructive suggestions for solutions to needs present in the community by the participants in this study, the following recommendations for practice have been identified;

- Establish further collaboration between different entities - both within the community and together with national agencies - to enhance the promotion of activities and initiatives. This also includes requesting assistance from the main Government in publicising any local initiatives;
- Review the current integration programs, in partnership with the Government's Integration Directorate and similar entities, with a view to improving the content of such programs so that they provide relevant and practical assistance to foreigners in the community;
- Implement a transportation service for older residents of the community to assist them with carrying out their necessary daily needs, where practically feasible;
- Organise activities which seek to celebrate and promote the diversity of various groups within the community, whilst also allowing foreign residents to learn more about the local culture;
- Identify possibilities for improving the quality of existing open spaces in the community (with regards to air quality and traffic congestion) such that residents can use these to their full potential;
- Provide residents with easily accessible and up-to-date information of the local services that exist in the community, to encourage them to build their network and be more active in community life.

4.4 CLOSING REMARKS

The findings and recommendations from this study will be communicated to the project collaborators from the Msida local council, so that practical changes can be enacted that will enhance the lives of community members. Furthermore, the present research approach can be adopted as a template for similar projects in other towns in Malta and Gozo. Through building upon the strengths that exist within communities and the individuals that they are made up of, we thus hope to foster positive change and a greater sense of belonging;

"The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members."

– Coretta Scott King



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