



**IN PURSUIT OF LIVELIHOOD:  
AN IN-DEPTH INVESTIGATION  
OF ASYLUM SEEKERS' BATTLE  
AGAINST POVERTY AND SOCIAL  
EXCLUSION IN MALTA**

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### Partner Organisations:

**JRS** is an international non-governmental organisation, with a mission to accompany, serve and defend refugees and forcibly displaced people. In Malta, JRS provides a number of services including information, legal assistance and psychosocial support and advocates for improved treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in Malta.

**aditus** foundation is an independent non-governmental organisation with a mission to monitor, report and act on access to fundamental human rights in Malta. Together with its advocacy activities, aditus also offers legal information and assistance to migrants and asylum seekers in Malta.

**The views expressed in this publication are those of the partner organisations and do not necessarily represent the opinion or position of any of the project funders, whose contribution is acknowledged with gratitude, as it would not have been possible to implement this project without their support.**

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**Authors:** Dr Julian Caruana & Dr Alexia Rossi

**Research Assistant:** Margaret Wright

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**Contact details:**

**Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Malta**

SAC Sports Complex, 50 Triq ix-Xorrox, B'Kara, BKR 1631, Malta

+356 2144 2751

info@jrsmalta.org

www.jrsmalta.org

**aditus foundation**

'Rhea Bldg', 1A, Triq is-Santissima Trinitá, Ħamrun MRS2280, Malta

+356 2010 6295

info@aditus.org.mt

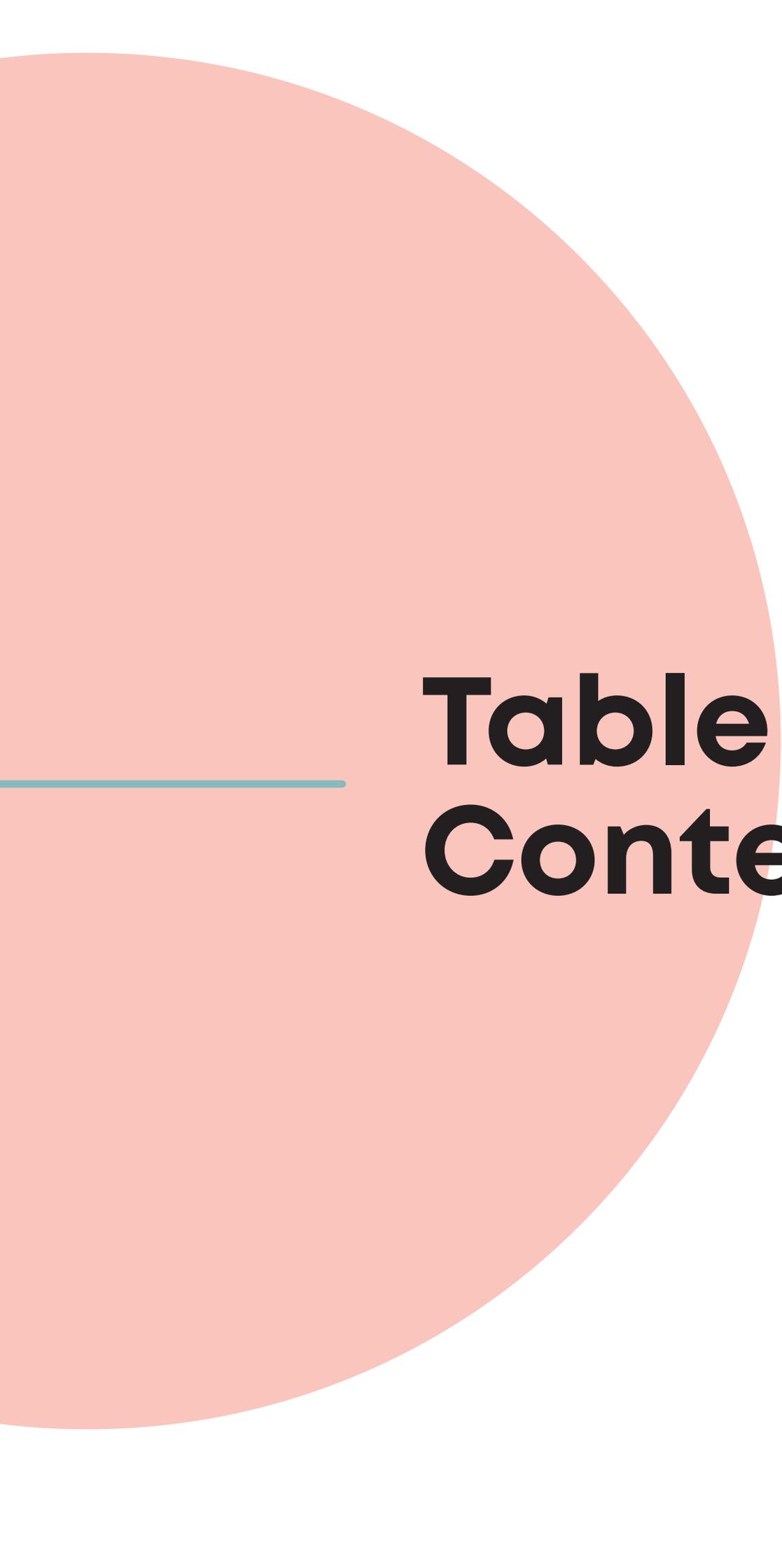
www.aditus.org.mt

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# 1. INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

## 1.1 Preface

In 2015, JRS and aditus foundation carried out an investigation into the risk of poverty among asylum seekers in Malta with the aim of assessing the extent of poverty, hardship, deprivation and social exclusion among this population, particularly when compared with that of the general Maltese population.

Data was collected by interviewing the head of household, in this context meaning the main breadwinner. Information regarding income and health indicators was collected from 72 households. Additionally, it was possible to collect information about deprivation and dwelling conditions from 44 of these households.

Data analysis indicated that whilst 54.2% of the sample enjoyed some form of gainful employment for at least 6 months of the year, only 23.6% of the heads of household were employed full-time throughout the whole time period of January to December 2015. This is in stark contrast to the unemployment rate for the general population that stood at 5.2 percent in the fourth quarter of 2015 (NSO, 2016). It is also relevant to highlight that only 1 out of the 17 households with multiple adults living there had two adults who were both in gainful employment. In fact, in this study's sample, the vast majority of adult females residing with male partners were unemployed.

Average self-employment/employment income over 2015 for participants in employment was €4,066.82, while the mean for participants employed full-time throughout 2015 was €9,892.07. Apart from salaries, surveyed households' only other source of income were social security benefits or allowances. Out of the 72 participating households, 30 received some type of benefits or allowance, with the most common form being Social Assistance. Total amounts of benefits/allowances received ranged from €260 to €10,800 in a year with a mean of €3,162.53 a year or €263.54 a month.

Data analysis revealed that the sample's average disposable household income for 2015 was €5,772.04, with the mean equivalised disposable household income standing at €4,823.45 and falling well below Malta's 2014 at-risk-of-poverty threshold of €7,672 (NSO, 2015). Using the at-risk-of-poverty threshold of €7,672 to identify at-risk households indicated that 54 households representing 80% of total participants fit this category; a rate that is approximately 5 times higher than the at-risk-of-poverty rate of 15.9% found in the general population (NSO, 2015). Similarly, the AROPE (i.e. at risk of poverty and social exclusion) rate of this study's sample stood at a markedly high level of 88.6%. Furthermore, the severe material deprivation rate for the sample of 44 households providing the relevant information stood at 49.5%, a rate close to 5 times higher than the severe material deprivation rate of 10.2% found in Malta's general population (NSO, 2015). The sample's material deprivation rate stood at 85.3%, more than 4 times higher than the rate for Malta's general population (i.e. 20.2%) (NSO, 2015).

Data analysis shed light on low levels of emotional well-being and high rates of depression in the study's sample. When compared to the incidence rate of 6.6% for depression among the general Maltese population indicated by the European Health Survey in 2014, evidence that around 70% of the heads of household may be suffering from clinical depression seems to point towards a significantly higher incidence rate for this mental health problem in the asylum-seeking population. Results also highlighted low levels of life satisfaction in this study's sample, with the mean Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) score fitting in the dissatisfied category and 88.9% of participants exhibiting a below average degree of satisfaction with life.

The results as a whole highlighted the high degree to which many people within this community are struggling financially and emotionally in their attempt to achieve a decent quality of life for themselves and, in some cases, their families. Whilst this research gave valuable insight into the extent of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion among this population, we felt that this particular phenomenon needed to be explored further, in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding.

This current research project aims to investigate the phenomenon of poverty among asylum seekers in an in-depth manner, with a focus on exploring the causes and maintaining factors of asylum seekers' livelihood difficulties.

## 1.2 Key concepts and terminology relating to migration used in this report:

For the purposes of this report, the term **asylum seeker** refers to a third country national or stateless person who has made an application for international protection, regardless of the outcome of the application.

The term **asylum applicant** is used to describe a third country national or stateless person who has made an application for international protection in respect of which a final decision has not yet been taken by the competent national authorities.

A **rejected asylum seeker** is a third country national or stateless person whose application for international protection has been examined and rejected by a final decision of the competent authorities.

European and national law define **international protection** as refugee status or subsidiary protection. The granting of international protection across the EU is regulated by the Qualification Directive; this Directive establishes a set of uniform standards regulating who qualifies for these statuses and lays down the minimum rights of holders, which are applicable in all Member States of the Union, including Malta. The provisions of the Qualification Directive were transposed into Maltese law through the Procedural Standards for Granting and Withdrawing International Protection Regulations (S.L. 420.07).

**National protection** refers to forms of protection granted by national authorities in terms of national law or policy. These types of protection are known as non-harmonised forms of protection, as they are particular to the country where they are granted and not regulated by uniform standards across the EU. In Malta, there is one form of national protection known as Temporary Humanitarian Protection.

Since 2018, rejected asylum seekers who have been residing in Malta for at least 5 years and who arrived prior to 2016, may be granted a **Specific Residence Authorisation (SRA)**, if they fulfil a number of criteria related to employment, conduct and integration efforts.<sup>1</sup> SRA holders are entitled to a two-year residence permit, an employment license, access to State education and medical care, and access to core welfare benefits in the same manner as beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. New applications for SRA status were only accepted until 31st December 2020 and so far, no similar regularisation scheme has been made available for rejected asylum seekers who have arrived since 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.identitymalta.com/updating-of-the-policy-regarding-specific-residence-authorisation/>

According to the 1951 Convention and Maltese law, a **refugee** is a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside his country of origin and is unable or, owing to such fear is unwilling, to return to it. **Refugee status** is the status given by a country to a person who has been recognised as a refugee.

**Subsidiary protection** is a form of international protection given to those whose application for refugee status has been dismissed but who, it has been shown, will face a real risk of serious harm if returned to their country of origin. 'Serious harm' is defined by law as: death penalty or execution; torture or inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment; threats to life by indiscriminate violence in international or internal armed conflicts.

**Temporary Humanitarian Protection (THP)** is a form of national protection granted in terms of national policy. THP is granted on the recommendation of the Refugee Commissioner to asylum seekers whose application for international protection has been rejected. The Refugee Commissioner may recommend the granting of THP: where the applicant is a minor; where he considers that the applicant should not be returned to his country of origin on medical grounds; where he considers that the applicant should not be returned to his country of origin on other humanitarian grounds.

Upon release from detention, all migrants, even those without a legal right to stay, are provided with a document by the immigration police, known as an **immigration certificate**. This document contains a photograph, personal details and a record of any extensions of stay granted by the immigration police. It is not valid for travel, nor does it constitute a formal means of identification.

The term **tolerated stay** is used to refer to the situation of migrants whose presence and stay in Malta is acknowledged by the immigration authorities, although they have no formal legal right to stay and are therefore still subject to removal, should this become possible. It is not a formal status established by law, but rather an administrative response to the reality that some migrants against whom a Removal Order has been issued cannot be returned to their country immediately due to logistical difficulties or other legal or practical obstacles. As their presence is acknowledged by the immigration authorities and they are granted a temporary permit to stay, these migrants cannot be considered to be in an irregular or illegal situation.

In this report, the term **migrant/s** is used when reference is being made to more than one category of third country nationals present in Malta, as opposed to one specific category e.g. asylum seekers, beneficiaries of international and/or national protection and rejected asylum seekers.

The **Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS)** was formally established in July 2009 by the Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers Regulations (SL 217.11, LN 205 of 2009). It is formally responsible for the implementation of national legislation and policy concerning the welfare of refugees, persons enjoying international protection and asylum seekers. It is mandated by law to implement various tasks including: overseeing the daily management of accommodation facilities; providing particular services to categories of persons identified as vulnerable according to current policies; providing information programmes to its clients in the areas of employment, housing, education, health and welfare services offered under national schemes; acting as facilitator with all public entities responsible for providing services to ensure that national obligations to refugees and asylum seekers are accessible; advising the Minister on new developments in its field of operation and propose policy or legislation required to improve the service given and fulfil any legal obligations in respect of its service users; encouraging networking with local voluntary organisations and other public stakeholders.

The term **mainstream services** is used to refer to services provided by either government or non-government agencies which are available to the general population, e.g. the services provided by Appogg (the main governmental social services provider) or the government health service, as opposed to those which are available only to a limited category of people, such as the services provided by the Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS), which are available only to particular categories of migrants. The mainstream services encountered through the project are mostly public healthcare and social welfare providers.

**Initial reception centre** – a facility operated by AWAS, where a short-term period of detention is implemented for new arrivals until they obtain the medical clearance necessary on public health grounds.

A **detention centre** is a facility where persons held in terms of the Immigration Act (Chapter 217 of the Laws of Malta) are accommodated; detention implies complete deprivation of liberty as opposed to mere restrictions on movement. There is currently one operational detention facility in Safi Barracks.

An **open centre** is a collective accommodation facility where asylum seekers and migrants released from detention are accommodated. In addition to asylum seekers, open centres accommodate beneficiaries of protection and rejected asylum seekers. Open Centre residents are not subject to any restrictions on their liberty, and they may leave the centre whenever they choose. There are 4 Open Centres currently in use: Hal Far Tent Village, Hal Far Open Centre, Balzan Open Centre and Dar Liedna. Most Open Centres are administered by AWAS; Balzan Open Centres is administered by an NGO, Migrants' Commission in conjunction with AWAS. There are also a number of smaller accommodation facilities run by NGOs.

### 1.3 Asylum seekers in Malta

Between 2002 and 2013, Malta received a regular flow of undocumented migrants arriving by boat from Libya. Most of the migrants arriving during this time were from Sub-Saharan Africa, but more recently this route was used also by Syrian and Libyan asylum seekers trying to reach Europe.<sup>2</sup> During this period, the vast majority of individuals seeking asylum in Malta were boat arrivals. Figures obtained from the Office of the Refugee Commissioner<sup>3</sup> indicate that between 2008 and 2013, boat arrivals constituted just over 90% of all asylum applicants.

From 2014 to 2017 there was a marked decrease in the number of boat arrivals in Malta – 568 arrivals during 2014, 103 in 2015 and just 8 in 2016, compared to 2,008 in 2013 – in spite of the fact that there was an overall increase in the number of migrants entering Europe through this route. This decrease was offset by an increase in the number of so-called 'non-boat arrivals' applying for asylum, which rose from 347 in 2008, to 824 in 2014 and 1,584 in 2015. This category includes asylum seekers arriving through routes other than the irregular migration route from Libya – i.e. by air or sea, whether legally or illegally, as well as those who apply for asylum after they have been living in Malta for some time, whether legally or illegally. Most of these 'non-boat arrivals' were from Libya and Syria, with smaller number from Ukraine, Egypt and Nigeria. From the summer of 2018, boats departing from Libya with asylum seekers resumed arriving regularly. In 2018, there were 1,445 boat arrivals, and in 2019 and 2020, there were 3,406 and 2,281 boat arrivals respectively. In this time period, the main countries of origin were Sudan, Bangladesh, Somalia and Eritrea. While many of these arrivals remained in Malta, a number were transferred to other EU countries following ad hoc agreements between EU Member States.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/mt/figures-at-a-glance>

<sup>3</sup> The Office of the Refugee Commissioner has been renamed International Protection Agency (IPA)

A relatively high number of asylum seekers arriving in Malta are granted international protection. Between 2004 and 2014, out of applications that were not closed, 59% of asylum applicants received subsidiary protection and 3% received refugee status. In subsequent years, protection rates remained similar with a higher number receiving refugee status. For example, in 2018, 52% and 14% of the applications that were not closed were given subsidiary protection and refugee status respectively.

In addition to international protection needs, arrivals also include people in a particularly vulnerable situation, such as unaccompanied minors, families with children, victims of trauma and torture, victims of trafficking, elderly persons, persons with disabilities, mental health problems and medical conditions.

## 1.4 Reception and integration

Between 2002 and 2014, Malta implemented a policy of mandatory, long-term detention of all migrants and asylum seekers arriving in Malta by boat. Many asylum seekers arriving during this time spent months – in some cases up to 18 months – deprived of their liberty in difficult conditions with only minimal access to services and support.<sup>4</sup> Since 2014, following significant changes to national law and policy, asylum seekers as a rule spend far less time in detention. All asylum seekers entering Malta irregularly are, upon arrival, sent to the Initial Reception Centre in Marsa for health screening to be conducted in order to obtain public health clearance. Regulations stipulate that the maximum duration of the stay at IRC should not exceed 4 weeks, but this can be extended to 10 weeks in exceptional circumstances. After the asylum seeker is released from IRC, immigration police are allowed by law to issue a detention order, but in most cases they decide to provide alternatives to detention, which usually means that asylum seekers are directly transferred to an open centre and must abide to certain conditions.

These regulation changes imply a far greater strain on open centres, which now receive asylum seekers sooner after arrival in Malta than previously, and are currently at full capacity. The Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS), which is responsible for managing open centres, provides particularly vulnerable residents with social work support, but structured support is not offered systematically to all residents. On a general note, specialised services and support provided at open centres at an individual level unfortunately remain limited. However, it must be noted that since 2019, AWAS have set up a therapeutic team that is tasked with screening new arrivals to identify psychological difficulties and vulnerabilities, and provide professional mental health support.

Asylum seekers and beneficiaries of protection who do not live in open centres can approach mainstream service providers for assistance. In practice, however, access to such services is difficult to negotiate on account of language barriers, lack of information and lack of resources.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the limited services provided, there is a lack of support to facilitate integration. To date there is no formal programme to provide language training and cultural orientation systematically to new arrivals. Since 2020, Jobsplus have been providing beginner level language courses in English and Maltese to asylum seekers, however these are offered to those who become aware of the service and apply rather than automatically as part of the reception system.

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<sup>4</sup> JRS Malta, No Giving Up (2015)

<sup>5</sup> JRS Malta, Bridging Borders (2010)

As a consequence of the absence of a formal training programme that is integrated within the reception system, new arrivals are often completely lost, and many refugees who have lived in Malta for years are still unable to communicate in English or Maltese. The lack of language proficiency acts as an obstacle when refugees are seeking employment; it also makes it very difficult for them to further their education.

The Human Rights Directorate is currently implementing the Migrant Integration Strategy & Action Plan (Vision 2020), and offers integration programmes that are designed and implemented by the Intercultural and Anti-Racism Unit in collaboration with the appropriate institutions and organisations. The current integration programme named 'I Belong' includes lessons in Maltese language, English language and cultural and societal orientation. Attending this integration programme is on a voluntary basis, and all asylum seekers can access this programme through making an integration request. Successful completion of this programme is one of the requirements for long-term residence.

## 1.5 Asylum-Seekers' Entitlements to Social Services and Benefits

The legal framework regulating access to support and assistance by refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, asylum applicants, rejected asylum-seekers, beneficiaries of THP and SRA holders is not a centralised or straightforward one. Although the Refugees Act<sup>6</sup> and related subsidiary legislation provide a general framework, it can be said that the overall regime is actually regulated by various legal instruments and policies, the latter generally not publicly available. Whilst for individuals with refugee status entitlements to social services and benefits are relatively clear, for beneficiaries of other statuses, their particular entitlements are not always specified.

As will be noted below, the legal norms establishing access to fundamental services such as healthcare, housing, employment, education and social support are rather vague. This lack of legal clarity is exacerbated by an apparent lack of consistency between legal instruments and the absence of publicly available information on policies that complement or at times fulfil the role of legislation.

Regulation 20(1)(c) of the ***Procedural Standards for Granting and Withdrawing International Protection Regulations***<sup>7</sup> states that refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are entitled to "access to employment, social welfare, appropriate accommodation, integration programmes, State education and training, and to receive State medical care", with the added proviso that the social welfare entitlements of beneficiaries of subsidiary protection may be limited to core social welfare benefits. In addition, Regulation 20(2)(a) and (b) extend these rights to the family members of the protection beneficiaries.

Within these broad categories, vulnerable persons and unaccompanied children are singled out as being in need of specific attention. Regulation 20(3) specifies that vulnerable persons should be granted "adequate health care", whereas children in need of care – irrespective of asylum or migration status – are granted the same protection granted to Maltese children in similar situations, in terms of the application of a Care Order placing the child under the responsibility of the Juvenile Court or a Review Board depending on the nature of the case.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chapter 420 of the Laws of Malta, available at <http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=10663&l=1>.

<sup>7</sup> Subsidiary Legislation 420.07 of 11 December 2015, available at <http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=10663&l=1>.

<sup>8</sup> In terms of Article 13(3) of the Refugees Act.

Whilst the above provisions apply to international protection beneficiaries, Article 13(2) of the Refugees Act grants access to state education and training, and state medical care and services to asylum applicants. The social protection of this particular group is further regulated in the **Reception of Asylum Seekers Regulations**<sup>9</sup>, with Regulation 11 stipulating the rules on material reception conditions within reception centres. In particular, the Regulations establish the following:

- Asylum applicants are to be granted access to emergency health care and “essential treatment of illness and serious mental disorders”;
- Asylum applicants having particular needs are further entitled to “medical and other assistance...including mental health care”;
- Access to the above support is subject to means-testing, thereby excluding it from those asylum applicants who have means to cover the costs of their health care;
- Housing provided to asylum applicants should “guarantee an adequate standard of living”, with particular attention to the situation of vulnerable persons;
- Generally, vulnerable persons should be given particular attention. These are defined as including minors, elderly persons, victims of trafficking, pregnant women, persons with disabilities and survivors of physical, psychological or sexual violence.

The social protection of rejected asylum seekers is limitedly regulated in the legal regime regulating return to their countries of origin: **Common Standards and Procedures for Returning Illegally Staying Third-Country Nationals Regulations**.<sup>10</sup> These Regulations do not offer much in terms of clarifying the situation of this category of persons, saving that:

- If availing themselves of the period of voluntary departure, they should – as far as possible – have access to emergency health care and “essential treatment of illness”;
- Minors, also within the voluntary departure period, should have access to state education;
- The special needs of vulnerable persons, also within the same voluntary departure period, should be given due consideration;
- Vulnerable persons detained pending their removal are entitled to emergency health care and “essential treatment of illness.”

SRA is not based on legal norms, but emerges from policy decisions; the entitlements of SRA holders are also nowhere found in legislation.

THP (Temporary Humanitarian Protection) was introduced by means of a policy decision, with a view to regulating the situation of those persons who could not be returned to their country for humanitarian reasons, although their application for international protection had been rejected. The rules regulating the granting and withdrawal of this status, and outlining the benefits attached, were contained in a written document entitled **‘Administrative Procedure for granting Temporary Humanitarian Protection’**,<sup>11</sup> which was first published in 2008. These rules have been now put into law under the International Protection Act.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Subsidiary Legislation 420.06 of 22 November 2005, available at <http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=10662&l=1>. The Regulations largely transpose the provisions of Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast). The Regulations largely transpose the provisions of the EU Recast Reception Conditions Directive.*

<sup>10</sup> *Subsidiary Legislation 217.12 of 11 March 2011, available at <http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11637&l=1>. These Regulations transpose Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedure in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32008L0115&from=en>.*

<sup>11</sup> A copy of this document is attached in Annex 1 for ease of reference

<sup>12</sup> Refer to Subsidiary Legislation 420.07 on <https://legislation.mt/eli/sl/420.7/eng>

## 1.5.1 Social Security Benefits and Assistance<sup>13</sup>

In Malta, persons recognised as refugees enjoy the same rights and obligations as Maltese nationals, including with regard to non-contributory support<sup>14</sup> and Unemployment Assistance.<sup>15</sup>

Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection (SP) are only entitled to 'core welfare benefits', which is interpreted as including only Social Assistance<sup>16</sup> (in practice they are sometimes considered for rent subsidy on a discretionary basis), in spite of the fact that the *DIRECTIVE 2011/95/EU OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast) clearly states that core benefits should include "at least minimum income support, assistance in the case of illness, or pregnancy, and parental assistance, in so far as those benefits are granted to nationals under national law".* The actual monetary amount provided as social benefit or assistance depends on family size. In the case of contributory benefits, asylum seekers, like Maltese nationals, are subject to the same system of contribution regulations per specific pension, benefit, grant or allowance. However, in practice, through our experience in the field we are aware that, sometimes, rejected asylum seekers and asylum seekers are refused contributory benefits, they are on paper eligible for, due to the fact that they don't possess a residence permit.

In addition to Social or Unemployment Assistance, refugees are entitled to receive children's allowance. Such an entitlement is however not specified for any of the other migrant groups in law or publicly available policy.

Housing subsidies are another social benefit, to which, according to current law and policy, only beneficiaries of refugee status are entitled. In practice, however, our work in the field confirms that, in some cases, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection have applied for such subsidies and these have been granted. The amount of subsidy provided depends on the condition of one's accommodation, is paid once a year and the maximum given is around €100 a month. Beneficiaries of refugee status are also eligible for social housing, i.e. alternate accommodation provided by the State. As with Maltese nationals seeking social housing, chances of success are severely limited due to long waiting lists.

For an individual to receive the social benefits they are entitled to, they must be able to provide relevant authorities with a rent contract, residence permit (ID card) and protection certificate issued by the International Protection Agency (IPA). In the case of Social Assistance, the residence permit of the head of household is required while for children's allowance, the applicant must provide the residence permits of all their children. In practice, stringent requirements for the issuing of residence permits often result in obstacles to accessing benefits to which beneficiaries of protection are otherwise entitled.

Recent law changes stipulate that THP holders should have access to non-contributory benefits similarly to beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. However, up to mid-2021, as JRS, we are not aware of any case where this change was implemented in practice.

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<sup>13</sup> Detailed information of all available forms of support, eligibility criteria and application procedures can be found on the website of the Department of Social Security, at <http://socialpolicy.gov.mt/en/Pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>14</sup> The Social Security Act (Chapter 318 of the Laws of Malta) regulates social protection in Malta, establishing benefits, pensions and other forms of assistance, together with relevant eligibility criteria. The Act divides all such forms of support into two distinct groups: those forms of protection that require payment of national insurance (NI) contributions, hence Contributory; and those forms that do not require NI contributions for persons to be eligible for them, hence Non-Contributory. The Act is available at <http://justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8794>.

<sup>15</sup> Support provided to the head of household who is registering as unemployed, therefore classified as "actively seeking employment". Further information available at <https://socialpolicy.gov.mt/en/Social-and-Unemployment-Assistance/Pages/Unemployment-Assistance-.aspx>.

<sup>16</sup> Defined as "payable to head of households who are unemployed and seeking employment or who due to a medical reason are unable to work and/or seek employment, and where the relative financial means falls below that established by the Social Security." Further information available at <https://socialpolicy.gov.mt/en/Social-and-Unemployment-Assistance/Pages/Social-Assistance.aspx>.



## 1.5.2 Healthcare

On paper, beneficiaries of refugee status, subsidiary protection and THP are all entitled to receive state medical care, meaning that they should be granted the same level of access to the healthcare system as a Maltese national. Rejected asylum seekers and asylum seekers, whilst obviously not excluded from accessing private health services against payment, have comparatively limited healthcare entitlements. Asylum seekers are entitled to receive the necessary health care which shall include, at least, emergency care and essential treatment of illness, while rejected asylum seekers have access to life saving treatment.<sup>17</sup> In our experience, in practice, the interpretation of these guidelines is subjective and what health service an asylum seeker or rejected asylum seeker will be billed for varies across cases. There are also other instances where the medical services and treatment that individuals with other asylum statuses are actually entitled to is unclear. For example, whilst dependent family members of a beneficiary of refugee status should, in theory, also receive the same treatment as Maltese nationals, through our work on healthcare assistance, we have observed that individuals with this status are sometimes charged for certain medical services, such as dialysis. With regard to mental health services, the main public in-patient mental health facility, Mount Carmel Hospital, generally offers treatment free of charge to all asylum statuses. This also applies to outpatient mental health consultations.

## 1.5.3 Education

All migrant children, regardless of their protection status, are entitled to receive both primary and secondary school public education. Entitlement to tertiary education is not specified in existing law or publicly available policy for any of the asylum-seeking groups. In practice however, all may apply to follow a course at the University of Malta or MCAST and for all groups, students may apply for a fee waiver. Students at tertiary level may also apply for a student maintenance grant, but this is only granted to individuals with international protection who have been residing in Malta for 5 years or more. Moreover, should the individual with international protection be receiving Social Assistance, this cannot be supplemented with the maintenance grant. Finally, there is once again no specified entitlement for migrants to life-long learning courses<sup>18</sup> in existing law and policy. However, in practice, all migrant groups, regardless of protection status, may apply to follow such courses, as well as for an exemption from payment.

## 1.5.4 Open Centre Allowance

When residing at an open centre, all migrant groups are entitled to a per diem allowance, but the amount received varies according to protection status (refer to Table 1). This allowance is usually given for a year, but exceptions are known to have been made on a case-by-case basis, depending on the individual's need and degree of vulnerability. Once in employment, migrants are no longer entitled to a per diem.

**Table 1 - Per Diem Allowance Amounts**

Payment Status	Daily Rate	Payment at 28 Days
Asylum Applicant	4.66	130.48
Child Only	2.33	65.24
Temporary Humanitarian Protection	4.66	130.48
Refugee receiving no social security benefits	4.08	114.24
Rejected Asylum-seeker	3.49	97.72
Returned Asylum-seeker	2.91	81.48
Single Parent	4.66	130.48

<sup>17</sup> Entitlement Unit, Malta - <https://s2.eessi.gov.mt/en/health-entitlement-to-refugeesmigrants/>

<sup>18</sup> The Life-Long Learning centre offers a range of courses for adults across various fields and competencies with the aim of enhancing knowledge and sustaining growth in the Maltese economy.

<sup>19</sup> <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/malta/reception-conditions/housing/types-accommodation/>

## 1.6 Employment and Childcare services

All migrants seeking asylum are entitled to apply for and receive an employment licence, though with some variations. Individuals with RS, SP, THP and SRA are entitled to receive an employment licence in their own name, and this is generally valid for one year. This licence is subject to a first-time fee of €58 and a renewal fee of €34. Asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers can receive a licence in their employer's name instead and this would be valid for 6 months in the case of asylum seekers, and 3 months for rejected asylum seekers. The fees for asylum seekers and rejected asylum seekers are also €58 when initially issued, and €34 for renewal. All migrant groups are allowed to hold additional part-time employment contracts, apart from asylum seekers and rejected asylum seekers. Should migrants wish to seek self-employment, all groups, except for rejected asylum-seekers, would need an employment license but would be exempt from third country national self-employment conditions. Rejected asylum seekers on the other hand would not be exempt from these conditions.

The Job Brokerage Office is an entity within Jobsplus that is tasked with regulating temporary labour by acting as an intermediary between service users and service providers seeking short-term self-employment. Currently the Job Brokerage Office offers this service exclusively to asylum seekers.

Finally, all migrants, regardless of their protection status, are entitled to access state childcare services with the same conditions as Maltese nationals.

## 1.7 Poverty and Deprivation Defined

Poverty in Europe in the post war period has been understood as a relative concept that goes beyond the lack of basic physical needs, and also encompasses the individual's aspirations to social participation or human functioning. The European Commission's joint report on social inclusion (2004) defined poverty in the following way:

*"People are said to be living in poverty if their income and resources are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living considered acceptable in the society in which they live. Because of their poverty... they are often excluded and marginalised from participating in activities (economic, social and cultural) that are the norm for other people and their access to fundamental rights may be restricted."*

In the line with this definition, the accepted EU approach to poverty is based on national standards, meaning that people can be poor with rather different incomes in various countries. In the conceptual framework underlying the assessment of poverty in the EU, deprivation is defined as unmet basic human needs and social exclusion is understood as the inability to participate in society because of a lack of resources that are normally available to the general population. This study, though not employing a quantitative methodology, will be adopting the same definitions for these key concepts.

## 1.8 Studies about Poverty in Malta

Within the European Union, poverty is measured quantitatively using the Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) data collection tool. The SILC is an annual EU-wide survey collecting data on income, poverty, social exclusion, employment, housing, education and health. In Malta, the survey is conducted annually by the National Statistics Office (NSO), with the sample being selected from the general population as measured by the last Census conducted in 2011. This survey provides the most reliable, comprehensive and generalisable source of data about poverty and related factors such as employment, social exclusion and living conditions in Malta.

The latest findings of the EU-SILC study indicate that the current at risk of poverty (ARP) rate in Malta in 2019 stood at 17.1 percent (NSO, 2020), representing a slight increase from the 16.8 per cent in 2018 (NSO, 2019). This means that while 78,685 persons were at risk of poverty in 2018, in 2019 this had grown to 82,758 individuals. The at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) stood at 20.1 percent in 2019 (NSO, 2020) compared to 19.0 percentage points in 2018 (NSO, 2019). The AROPE rate indicates the share of the population who are either at-risk-of-poverty, severely materially deprived or residing in a household with low work intensity. The severe material deprivation rate (SMD) stood at 3.6% in 2019 and 3.0% in 2018.

The latest AROPE breakdown by nationality that this study had access to, indicated that, in 2016, with the average AROPE rate at 20.1%, non-EU nationals were by far the group most at risk of poverty and social exclusion (AROPE rate – 33.9%) when compared to Maltese nationals (AROPE rate – 19.1%) and EU nationals (AROPE rate – 17.3%) (Darmanin, 2018). A study by Borg (2018) similarly indicated that when comparing the risk of in-work poverty by nationality, in 2017, the risk was highest for non-EU nationals working in Malta (13%), and lowest (7.6%) for EU nationals.

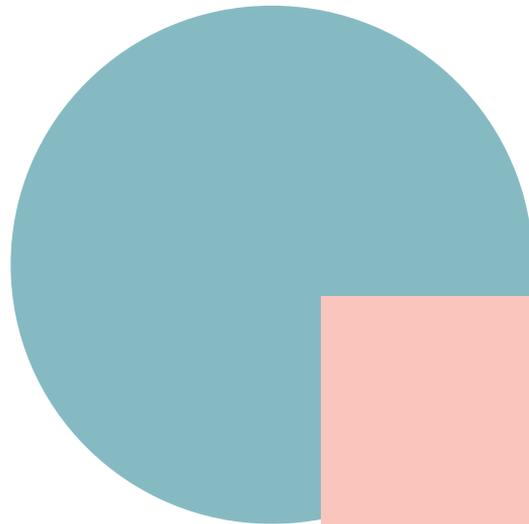
However, given that the participant sampling for the SILC survey, as conducted in Malta, does not differentiate between various forms of migration, and that therefore the above-mentioned rates for non-EU nationals cover disparate types of immigrants such as forced migrants and skilled labour migrants, it would be erroneous to simply assume that these rates are similar among the asylum-seeking population. Furthermore, the SILC survey is household-based, and does not capture the reality of individuals living in residential institutions, where a great number of the asylum-seeking population reside. As mentioned in the introduction, research conducted by JRS in 2015, though not based on a representative sample of asylum seekers, provided a strong indication that the ARP and AROPE rates among this population are actually significantly higher than the rates for non-EU nationals as a global group.

In comparison to the quantitative data available about poverty and social exclusion in Malta, there is a relative dearth of qualitative studies providing an in-depth analysis of these phenomena in the migrant population, but also among the general population. A study by Spiteri and McKay in 2007 looked at how a sample of 123 families in Birkirkara suffering from financial difficulties construct opportunities and strive to set and reach life goals within the financial constraints they face. This research highlighted 4 overarching issues that can be considered as casual and/or maintaining factors of poverty; elderly age, unemployment, health difficulties and marital conflict. Residence in sub-standard housing and illiteracy also emerged strongly as factors that either lead to or exacerbate the risk of poverty and social exclusion.

In 2010, JRS carried out a qualitative study investigating destitution specifically amongst the asylum-seeking population in Malta. Through purposive sampling, 27 asylum seekers fitting the definition of destitution were selected and interviewed, so as to garner a picture of their situation and highlight possible causative and contributing factors. The results of this research highlighted several factors that appeared to contribute to asylum seekers' vulnerability to destitution; these included an ambiguous legal framework that failed to clearly specify the content of welfare benefits asylum seekers were entitled to, benefits available being inadequate to cover basic subsistence costs and, similarly to the study by Spiteri & McKay, difficulties in accessing housing offering decent living conditions. This research provided a valuable glimpse into the factors that exacerbate the deprivation asylum seekers face; however it did not explore the phenomenon of poverty in a holistic manner.

## 1.9 Objectives

This current research project aims to investigate the phenomenon of poverty among asylum seekers in an in-depth manner, with a focus on the exploring the causes and maintaining factors of asylum seekers' livelihood difficulties, as well as garner a holistic picture of the real life consequences of these difficulties. It is this project's hope that the results of this investigation can shed light on effective ways to alleviate poverty and augment financial self-sufficiency amongst asylum seekers in Malta.





## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Methodology and Design

A qualitative methodology was deemed most suited to fulfil the set research aims. More specifically, a transformative research framework was employed. This investigative lens consists of incorporating an intent to advocate for an improvement in human interest and society, through addressing issues of power and social relationships. This entails framing the research aims within an advocacy stance, understanding participants in their own terms, being sensitive to issues of diversity and oppression in the data collection and analysis stages, engaging stakeholders in dialogue, and encouraging a democratic role for participants in the research process (Mertens, 2007). Ultimately the objective of research adopting a transformative framework is to elicit outcomes that benefit the population of concern (Mertens, 2007).

In terms of research design, this study endeavoured to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of interest by comparing and contrasting the perspectives of two distinct points of view. In this regard, this study aimed to collect data from both asylum seekers and service providers, and through data triangulation, compare and contrast the data collecting from these two sources.

### 2.2 Sampling

The population of interest for this study consisted of asylum seekers residing in Malta and service providers involved in offering some form of support to this particular group. For the purpose of the study, asylum seekers were defined as individuals who had at some point applied for asylum in Malta irrespective of the outcome of this application,<sup>20</sup> and asylum seekers still going through the asylum process are referred to as asylum applicants. This study targeted asylum seekers who had been residing in Malta since 2014, so as to be able to capture the experience of individuals who had moved past reception stage and had been facing the challenges of settling in Malta and adapting to Maltese society for a number of years.

As explained above, this study aimed to collect data from both asylum seekers and service providers and through data triangulation, compare and contrast their views and experiences. This study aimed to recruit asylum seekers with a variety of asylum statuses and service providers providing a range of support services to this population. In total, 9 interviews were conducted, five with asylum seekers and four with service providers. From the sample of asylum seekers, 3 have international protection, 1 has temporary humanitarian protection and 1 was rejected (refer to Table 2 for further details). Several service providers working with individuals facing financial difficulties were contacted, however in the end, 4 responded and agreed to participate. These were: Millenium Chapel, Foodbank Lifeline Foundation, St Jeanne Antide Foundation and African Media Association. The first three offer services to the general population, while the latter works exclusively with the migrant population (refer to Table 2 for further details)

**Table 2 - Participant Profiles**

Individual Participants	Gender	Country of Origin	Asylum Status
Participant 1	Male	Gambia	Temporary Humanitarian Protection
Participant 2	Male	Gambia	Refugee Status
Participant 3	Female	Somalia	Subsidiary Protection
Participant 4	Male	Eritrea	Refugee Status
Participant 5	Male	Gambia	Rejected Asylum Seeker

<sup>20</sup> In line with this definition, from this point onwards the term asylum seeker will be used to refer to all migrants who have sought asylum.

Service Providers	Mission Statement and Aims
Millenium Chapel	<p>A faith-based organisation whose aims include:</p> <p>Offering care and understanding as well as professional counselling to people who seek it.</p> <p>Offering first aid help in a crisis situation to drug, alcohol abusers and other addictions.</p>
Foodbank Lifeline Foundation	<p>Foundation based in Valletta whose mission is to provide a service to those in need by engaging with the public, companies and all of society to ensure that we have the resources to prevent those passing through difficult circumstances from suffering from hunger</p>
St Jeanne Antide Foundation	<p>A family and community focused organisation whose overarching aim is to provide professional support services to very vulnerable individuals and families who are sliding into poverty and are socially excluded.</p>
African Media Association	<p>A media NGO aims to promote the African perspective in news, develop an inclusive multi-media network and empower and advocate for migrants</p>

### 2.3 Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were the data collection tool considered most suited to the aims and methodological approach of the study. An interview schedule was designed for the first data collection stage, i.e. interviewing asylum seekers, comprising 3 sections; how the participant views their financial situation, their experience of working towards or maintaining financial stability, and their views about poverty reduction in Malta on a macro-level.

Following a preliminary analysis of the data collected in this first stage, a second interview schedule for service providers was compiled with additional questions asking for participants' views regarding main themes that emerged from the first data collection stage.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis was the method utilised to analyse the data collected from the interviews. The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are significant and relevant, and use these themes to answer the research questions. Specifically, Braun & Clarke's (2006) 6-step framework for Thematic Analysis was the approach chosen for this study.

Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework distinguishes between two levels of themes: semantic and latent; the semantic level focuses on the explicit or surface meanings of the data, whilst the latent level looks beyond what has been said and attempts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations that shape or inform the semantic content of the data.

After familiarisation with the data, initial codes were extracted on a line-by-line basis and then grouped into sub-themes. Subsequently themes were created by grouping the sub-themes, and finally themes were reviewed and refined.



# 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter provides an outline and a discussion of the themes and corresponding sub-themes as they emerged from the data collected. As each theme is explained, quotes directly taken from participants' interviews are provided to elucidate the themes.

## 3.1 Vulnerable to the pull of precarious employment

### **Limited job opportunities**

Participants spoke overwhelmingly of the difficulties when it comes to employment. Many struggle to secure stable, full-time employment for a variety of reasons.

*"Trying to find a job is difficult especially since nothing is constant, things are always changing"*

*"It's also about not having a steady job"*

Such reasons include the fact that this population often has limited job opportunities - asylum seekers are often restricted to lower skilled plus that tend to be more strenuous and dangerous in nature. They also tend to be dependent on seasonal work and a number of participants described being treated as disposable labour rather than valued members of a company's work force.

*"our jobs are limited to the hospitality and construction industry"*

**“ As disposable labour, they can employ us quickly and then once you don't need us, you ask us to leave ”**

*"Employers make promises they don't end up keeping like offering a job with a certain salary but then asking me to leave after a short time, even though I was working well"*

A number of participants also highlighted the barriers to obtaining documentation that would allow them to obtain legal and stable employment. Participants explained that asylum applicants and rejected asylum seekers have a right to work, but their work permit is dependent on a particular employer. For many, this means that less job opportunities are available to them as employers tend to prefer employing those who already have a work permit at hand. Furthermore, the fact that the work permit is not in their name makes them more vulnerable to exploitation. Moreover, a number of participants highlighted the lengthy duration to obtain a work permit as a barrier to becoming stable and self-sufficient.

*"A lot of fail asylum seekers because they need an employer to apply on their behalf...it [work permit] has to be renewed every three months... a lot of paperwork...it is very discouraging"*

*"Many employers can't wait three weeks before the delivery of the proper working permit. Even the asylum seekers say 'I can't wait for three weeks because I need that job'"*

### **Perils of unregulated working arrangements**

Faced repeatedly with these barriers, asylum seekers feel forced into unregulated, ad hoc working arrangements in order to make enough money to get by.

**“ Eventually you're forced to go to Marsa to stand there and find a day job ”**

They explained that the irregular job market is often attractive because financial remuneration is obtained quickly, and they are not hampered by issues related to their protection status and bureaucratic documentation procedures. While many participants expressed that they are often left with few options for stable, regulated employment, they are also aware of and expressed concern about the perils unregulated working arrangements bring with them. They spoke of workers' rights not being respected and individuals being more vulnerable to exploitation as they don't have recourse to local monitoring and enforcement bodies if conditions are not respected. Furthermore, both asylum seekers and service providers highlighted how, due to lack of adequate health and safety measures, individuals working irregularly tend to be at a higher risk of workplace accidents and injuries.

*"Rejected asylum seekers and asylum seekers are more vulnerable to exploitation because of how the law works because the working permit is not in their name"*

*"The work is not steady so they can lay you off at any point"*

Participants recommended the need for increased government intervention to promote legal employment and emphasised two particular areas they feel would make a difference for asylum seekers: Incentivising employers to offer employment contracts, especially indefinite ones, and clamping down on illegal employment by imposing harsher penalties.

### **3.2 Fighting a losing battle to keep up with cost of living**

#### ***Being in a financial trap***

All participants spoke about the struggle to keep up with the rising cost of living, and many expressed the sentiment that this feels like an uphill struggle with no end in sight. A number described feeling stuck in a financial trap caused by low wages with little to no increments on one hand, and the exponential rise in cost of living on the other. Participants spoke about an inability to keep up with daily family needs, even food sometimes. This, together with few opportunities for a promotion or other means to better their financial situation, leaves many participants feeling permanently stuck.

#### ***Rising rent prices impacting access to decent housing***

A spotlight was also shone by the majority of participants on housing. They explained that the rising rent prices are impossible to keep up with for people on salaries around the minimum wage. Unfortunately, this results in overcrowding, as groups of people try to fit in one apartment to make it affordable. Tenants are also more liable to exploitation as they often feel forced to take whatever option is presented to them, even if the physical conditions of the building and/or the rent conditions are poor. Participants were of the opinion that they have little leverage to push for better conditions with landlords, as they know they might easily be asked to vacate the property and rendered homeless. To this end, a number of participants suggested that urgent regulation of the rental process<sup>21</sup> is required to prevent a significant proportion of asylum seekers becoming homeless and/or falling below the poverty line.

#### ***Collectivist cultural norms acting as an added strain***

On a different note, several participants explained that specific to the asylum-seeking population is that fact that many feel obliged to help others in need and their families back home. Collectivist cultural norms often act as an added strain on asylum seekers, as despite their financial struggles, they still feel obliged to send some money back home to support their families. A few participants also spoke of helping others in need within the migrant community in Malta. While this practice is common and cherished within their communities, it creates an added burden for people who are already in a financial trap.

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<sup>21</sup> In 2020, after data collection, amendments to rental regulations were introduced.

### 3.3 Lack of a secure foundation

#### ***Struggling to meet basic needs***

As explained previously, a number of participants highlighted their difficulties to meet basic needs such as shelter, but some continued to explain that their struggles with material needs meant that at certain points they even struggled to have enough food to eat.

***“ Sometimes I had to sacrifice, to go to bed without eating ”***

Being so financially strained appears to force people to prioritise even amongst the most basic needs, in this respect examples given included prioritising food over public transportation and shelter over food. Some participants' experiences highlighted how intrinsically linked some of these needs are and how sometimes they need to make tough choices. For example, a participant explained that he had to prioritise public transportation over food at a point as he needed to go to work to earn some money and walking to work was not feasible.

*“You had to sacrifice as well, to buy a bus card to go to work, and then buy two pastizzi or something to eat, expecting to have 150 or 160 at the end of the week.”*

The struggle with the most basic human needs such as food was prodigiously highlighted by one of the participant organisations when they explained that their organisation was under a great deal of pressure to expand as the need for food is increasing to an overwhelming extent. The demand is coming from a range of nationalities including Libyan, Syrian, Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern European.

*“When we first started, we maybe had 20 a week, now we have over 100 packs per week coming so it's grown...In August last year we had around 60 families a week, between August last year and now, it has gone up to 100”*

*“Our main problem is the demand out there is putting us under exceeding pressure. The amount of money we're spending and the amount of donations we need to keep this facility running are astronomical compared to what they were 12 months ago.”*

***“It's costing around a quarter of a million euro a year in food alone to feed the demand of the people we're feeding at the moment, and that is totally done by donation”***

#### ***Limited access to banking services***

Participants also described the struggle to save money, together with their limited financial resources, because of their limited access to banking services. Many banks often refuse their request to open an account and they are often left having to seek legal advice and the support of NGO services in order for them to have a chance at opening a basic savings account.

*“We struggle to save without a bank account... because imagine I have 1000 euro and it's in my pocket, I'm tempted to buy things I see...and I mean having your money on you always, sometimes no matter how much you try to control yourself...it's like you need to go to the bank to get money, “I cannot buy this, I have no money on me, okay leave it”*

This restricted access to banking services<sup>22</sup> means that in most cases asylum seekers can't even make optimum use of whatever limited financial resources they possess.

<sup>21</sup> Since the data analysis was conducted, Maltese banks (credit institutions with five branches or more) are now obliged to provide a payment account with basic searches to individuals residing legally in Malta subject to reasonable due diligence procedures.

### **No safety net**

A factor that strongly aggravates an asylum seeker's financial struggles is the fact that asylum seekers tend to lack the resources that would often serve as a safety net for the local population. In this respect, participants spoke of the lack of prior savings, relatives and friends that could help out if their rent is terminated or when they are struggling to make ends meet. For many, very little support exists and if one of the variables that keeps them afloat ceases to exist, they face the reality of destitution.

*"Employment termination or loss of flatmates, leaving individuals unable to cope with the rent of an apartment"*

Some participants explained that they are currently in a better position after working very hard and sacrificing even the most basic of needs, but acknowledged that many of the asylum seekers they know are living in extreme poverty.

*"The condition I'm living in now is better than before but I'm working hand to mouth...we are more well-known but there's an awful lot of people that are living in poverty that have had nowhere to go"*

## **3.4 Reception system not functioning as a stepping stone**

### **Scant support received at reception stage**

Participants spoke of the scant government support they received at the reception stage, explaining that apart from the Open Centre accommodation and the per diem allowance (refer to Table 1) received during their stay there, they received no other support.

*"But moving forward, the support that was received from the government, the 130 euro that was given to us, after I was released from detention...that was the only support I received from the government"*

Participants specifically highlighted support to access education, further training and employment as vital for integration and self-sufficiency.

*"Support is needed from the government for us to begin to be employed - I know they need nurses and I know I am competent"*

*"I expected support from the government on education, employment etc but I didn't get anything"*

For several participants, getting a stable and legal job is complicated. Despite having qualifications and for some, professional status, in their country of origin, in Malta these individuals face numerous bureaucratic obstacles as they attempt to have their qualifications recognised. For many, these qualifications remain unrecognised, making finding employment even harder. For others, issues around documentation e.g. not being entitled to a work permit in their own name, presents another barrier to getting a job. For these individuals, government support to access education and training relevant to the job market at the initial stage of their stay in Malta would be vital to allow them to become more self-reliant. In this respect, many participants explain that this lack of support following arrival disrupts the integration process from the very beginning and leaves them dependent on government benefits and services for longer.

Another barrier imposed by the reception system highlighted by some participants is the fact that often their per diem allowance is lost when they are still not financially stable. Until they find stable, full-time employment, many asylum seekers will find temporary, casual jobs. However, because of the requirement for people to sign three times a week in order to qualify for their per diem, they often lose this allowance despite only having casual employment which alone does not offer financial stability.

*"I was not entitled to that because I had to sign Monday, Wednesday and Friday. So I had to sacrifice that 120 a month to get my wage"*

### **Open centre system: difficulties transitioning to self-dependence**

The deficiencies present in the reception system were further highlighted by participants who explained that the way the open centre system was set up made transitioning to independence a challenge. The lack of government support with accessing employment and education explained previously, the high rent prices and the distant location of many open centres meant that many asylum seekers struggled to get permanent jobs and save sufficient funds to rent their own accommodation and meet their needs.

*"But even those moments, I couldn't leave the open centre because the money I had did not allow me to rent, it wasn't enough, I had to spend nearly a year in the open centre."*

*"Those who are in HTV [Hal Far Open Centre] are very far away from any jobs...so we got to a point two years ago where some people were not able to be hired because they were too far away or the bus was not on time for the shift or whatever"*

One of the service providers interviewed supported the asylum seeker's experience when saying;

*"We had many cases of not being able to present some candidates to an employer because they would not arrive on time because they didn't have the bus or the shift would not match the schedule of the buses"*

A participant specifically spoke of Hal Far (the location of two Open Centres) as being isolated in several ways. Its geographical location makes it distant from major service providers as well as from local communities, activities and recreational spaces that support a person's integration.

**“ The isolation of Hal Far in itself, the geographical isolation, it's not only geographical. It's isolating in many ways ”**

### **Time spent in detention as a missed opportunity**

The reception system also included, for some participants, mandatory time in detention centres. Participants spoke of the time spent idly in detention as a missed opportunity to better themselves; learn the language, further their education and orient themselves into the country they will be living in. Several participants expressed that detention serves to inhibit rather than facilitate one's integration in society, resulting in a greater number of people that are dependent on, rather than contributors to, the country.

**“ Somebody consider two years of their life been wasted, in that almost two years, you've not provided anything ”**

*like sort of...there was not vocational training, there was not even a language course. So what has Malta benefitted in detaining people two years?"*

*"One year six months [in detention], if you start teaching in Maltese, I will understand the basics"*

### 3.5 Lack of adequate opportunities to better oneself

A theme that emerges clearly from this research is the general perception, both from asylum seekers and service providers, that for individuals encountering financial difficulties, despite effort from both sides, there are few opportunities to ameliorate their situation in the long-term. For many asylum seekers, support, such as food and shelter, is given in crisis, but this is mostly provided on a short-term basis and according to most participants, long-term durable solutions do not seem to be available.

*“What we’re finding at the moment is that there’s no long-term solutions being put in place so the people are coming back more and more and their circumstances don’t seem to be changing”*

*“I’m having discussions with social workers from Appogg and Leap and they’re saying “We don’t know where to move people onto.”*

Currently it seems that asylum seekers facing poverty rely on NGOs for financial and material assistance. However, providing such support indefinitely is unsustainable for NGOs and participants voiced their concerns that currently the government is not providing adequate opportunities for individuals and families to move out of poverty. Participants suggested that people need to be supported with accessible rent options, increased training opportunities, and supplementary forms of financial assistance where necessary, in order to enable individuals to better themselves and become self-sufficient.

*“Their circumstances hadn’t changed in a longer period of time because they were relying on the services we [NGO] provide...there should be some long-term solution put in place from a financial aspect to aid and assist them moving forward.”*

*“I will emphasise that the help we provide is only short-term crisis help...people re-referred because their circumstances don’t change but what we try to do is, after three referrals we do an assessment on people. Three referrals for six weeks each.”*

#### **Deprived of choice and control**

Participants emphasised the lack of choices and control that often characterise their life and the frustration and loss of motivation this leads to, as people feel weighed down by several external factors.

*“Life is ok but we can’t live comfortably or in the ways we desire e.g. would prefer to live alone but it is impossible. We feel forced to accept challenging conditions because we have no other option”.*

In this regard, participants spoke about the perception that the main factors impacting their financial situation are outside of their control and therefore feeling a distinct loss of control. For example, several participants expressed that they strongly desire to move out of the Open Centre and rent their own accommodation, but the current rent prices are so high that it makes it impossible. Another experience shared by both asylum seekers and service providers, is the fact that there are many instances when couples are both able and willing to work, but the type of jobs they get, and the hours provided by childcare centres make it impossible for both to work. Most participants feel that employment is the foundation to bettering oneself as it provides the basis through which a person can realise their goals. It enables them to depend on themselves, leading them to feel like they are in control of their lives.

*“Finding a job is the foundation and will pave the way for other things...in terms of skills, employment is definitely on the top of the list”*

*“That will have a direct impact on how people will earn their life and how they improve themselves and get out of poverty”*

It is therefore not surprising that the barriers to securing legal full-time employment mentioned above are factors that seem to contribute significantly to asylum seekers experiencing a loss of control.

Another factor that was highlighted emphatically by participants, both asylum seekers and service providers, as contributing to a low sense of control is the lack of a centralised and reliable source of information as they try to navigate the fields of employment, housing, education etc. Some participants have expressed that this lack of information makes integrating into the host community infinitely more challenging.

*“Definitely the lack of centralised information, which for me is something that refrains people from progressing at another pace”*

*“Maybe you have some information around but there’s no focal point where we can have information about different subjects”*

*“No one has it where they explain to you, that they have the opportunity to go to university, the opportunity to improve your career, where to find job vacancies...no.”*

Participants emphasised that this loss of sense of control is even more pronounced for rejected asylum seekers. This is due to the fact that they are more likely to be exploited by their employer or landlord and have difficulties accessing financial services, given the limited rights and entitlements tied to their legal status.

*“The rejected asylum-seekers, you have no legal status, still you can work, you can pay tax and social security, but you cannot even open a bank account”*

*“We can’t always complain because we don’t have much security like stable employment or a rent contract in our name”*

**“ All these years, as a rejected asylum-seeker, changing my work permit every three months. Sorry for my language, but what the hell is this? ”**

Many highlighted the fact that language training is imperative for them to access education, employment and all the other factors that allow them to navigate through life in Malta, helping them also to become independent and integrate with the local community. They expressed the impression that those individuals with language skills are often those that are more successful in developing themselves and becoming stable, as it allows and supports them *“to get to know and love the place you are in...and then getting an education”*.

*“Migrants are at risk at work due to language barrier and the fact that employers can’t communicate health and safety policies”*

*“The fact that there are no English lessons is already the first obstacle”*



**English made a difference, for sure. I was able to communicate, I know what I said and that helped me out**



The absence of a comprehensive language programme at reception stage means that many asylum speakers lack the most basic tool needed to attempt to settle in Malta; i.e. language skills necessary to communicate with local community and authorities. The lack of this most basic tool also manifests itself as a general sense among asylum seekers that their life is determined by factors outside of their control.

### **Struggling to access education and training**

Both service providers and asylum seekers spoke about a large proportion of this population lacking the skills needed to compete in many sectors of the Maltese labour market. For many, this is the result of barriers to completing formal schooling in their country of origin in conjunction with few opportunities to further their education or upgrade their skills in the host country. In the case of the latter, a number of participants spoke about difficulties accessing educational opportunities due to the language barrier, as well as difficulties keeping up with courses while working or trying to care for their children.

Participants who tried to access tertiary or adult education spoke about difficulties, such as obtaining the necessary IELTS grade, financial restrictions as well as the poor living conditions in sub-standard housing and open centres making it difficult for them to focus on their studies.

*"I had difficulty getting into university because it is difficult to get the IELTS qualification despite the financial support"*

*"Telling me, okay you do full-time studies, and okay I have to work part-time, I need 400, 500 euro a month after earning 1000+ euro, how can I manage?"*

*"My wife hasn't completed her studies yet but failed exams because she couldn't study well as the children wanted her even though I was available to help out"*

A participant explained that courses offered to migrants need to be tailored to their specific learning needs, and those offered by the government or voluntary organisations don't always meet these needs.

Participants who arrived in Malta with qualifications from their home country spoke at length of the struggles to get their qualifications recognised. Unfortunately, for various reasons, none of them managed; the course completed was not considered to satisfy the criteria of the equivalent level of qualification in Malta and/or they didn't have hard copies of certificates as proof and were unable to obtain them and/or the awarding educational institutions were no longer functioning or contact with them was close to impossible.

*"Here was no certificate to show that...even if there was, if I had those certificates, my qualifications will still be a bit less to that of here, so I couldn't get a job as a teacher here"*

*"It was difficult to get all the necessary paperwork to prove my degree from Eritrea and so we are left with nothing"*

*"My degree was not recognised in Malta"*

### **Further governmental integration measures required**

While highlighting these barriers, participants were very vocal about the measures they feel government institutions need to put in place to increase educational opportunities for migrants, facilitate access to the labour market, support asylum seekers' integration in Malta and thus enable them to better themselves and take ownership of their lives.

Examples provided by participants included;

*"Set up systems that allow people with qualifications to have the chance for apprenticeships or to become assistants and then make some transfer exam to ascertain that they have the necessary skills for the job"*

*"Making better use of reception stage by offering opportunities to people to better themselves through language and vocational training"*

*"Mentoring service to support clients with all their needs including integration. Such service needs to include informing migrants about their rights including workers' rights"*

*"Government needs to provide more in-depth support with rent assistance and access to employment when people have first arrived and for vulnerable individuals"*

Participants expressed their view that without such measures individuals will continue to live with a deficit, always with a desire to improve and live their lives at a higher standard but lack the opportunities/structure that enables them to do so.

## **3.6 Feeling Disempowered**

### **Facing discrimination**

Asylum seekers participating in this research highlighted the issue of discrimination, both when it comes to housing and in the workplace. Regarding the former, several participants feel that they are at a disadvantage when it comes to finding a place to stay as: "landlords don't want to rent to migrants". Workplace discrimination was mentioned by the majority of participants, both in relation to getting a job, but more compellingly in reference to the perceived lack of respect from employers and co-workers. Several spoke of not being treated fairly at work, and one participant also mentioned a situation where they felt *"co-workers were sabotaging [their] job opportunities"*.

Participants also felt that they had little space and support in order to safeguard their rights as workers. In some cases, they spoke of the employers seemingly being unaware of their entitlements as workers when it comes to matters such as sick leave and overtime. In other cases, participants spoke about not knowing what their entitlements are, or else knowing but feeling they couldn't request for them to be granted. A number of service providers also mentioned being aware of cases where employers did not respect the conditions and entitlements stipulated by employment law.

*"They [employers] didn't even know that as asylum seekers they were entitled to have a contract because as asylum seekers here in Malta, the employer can employ on your behalf... It's a spiral of migrants not knowing they can have a contract, and it's not only that, and then employers abusing"*

*"I didn't ask my boss for a raise...and funnily enough when I handed my resignation letter, that's when the company was thinking of increasing my salary"*

When it comes to seeking employment, a number of participants interestingly highlighted a hierarchy when it comes to migrant workers, and were of the opinion that employers more commonly prefer to employ certain groups like Filipinos over African migrants.

*“We’d also have employers who told us that because we have in particular one employer who was really honest and I appreciate...he said ‘We now have Filipinos.’ What he told us is that Filipinos are better cleaners and he also say Filipinos are whiter. Lighter. Skin colour. That they are lighter so it’s easier to integrate them with Maltese employees, those who sometimes don’t want to work with African... so even in the labour market, we now have classes of migrants, we now have Filipinos who are a little bit on the top of Africans so an employer will prefer a Filipino to an African”.*

As this quote makes abundantly clear, racism and racial stereotypes might be the reason why employers prefer certain migrant groups over others. The sad reality is that Malta is importing foreign workers to do jobs that refugee and asylum seekers facing poverty aspire to do.

### **Facing ostracism and hostility**

Participants continued to expand on the treatment they faced at work, describing how they feel either ostracised or distant from their colleagues. For many, the fact in itself that they are in a minority in the workplace makes them feel isolated. A service provider also highlighted the employers’ view of migrants isolating themselves, *“they create even ghettos at work by nationality because there’s no communication”.*

*“We have reports of maybe they don’t want to work with them, with the colleagues,*

**“ They don’t talk to us at work, they don’t say hello” there’s that discrimination factor ”**

Along with ostracism, some participants also experienced open hostility towards them from the host community at work, from colleagues and employers as well as from landlords. In the case of the latter, participants spoke of landlords potentially fabricating bills. Participants also spoke of the general feeling of hostility they encounter that is evident through fights that arise between locals and asylum seekers and hostile comments directed at them while going about their day.

A service provider was speaking of a client’s experience, saying,

*“She’s a very committed worker and she had trouble during Ramadan, not with her boss but with the team. They were just making fun and she’s been in the firm for two years, so she’s a stable and committed person. So I think religion is also a discrimination factor. They were eating in front of her, proposing a sandwich with pork...Taunting her basically.”*

Another participant shared the following experience of hostility experienced at work, both from colleagues and from employers;

*“[He] resign from his job because he will arrive at work, say hello, no one will reply and after some time he said he can’t stand it anymore, no one would ever talk to him apart from giving orders”*

*“Or the employer say he can’t stand it, “He’s not working” so they might get fired, not officially because of that, but sometimes they are just fired so that a kind of harmony comes back to the workplace”*

A number of participants felt that being in a minority is one of the factors that allows such hostility to be fuelled and affords asylum seekers very little support to stand up to the aggression.

*“So if the group is larger, it’s supportable but if you are the only one or two of all of them then sometimes you just give up the job”*

## **Diminished sense of agency**

Following repeated experiences of discrimination, hostility and ostracism, participants poignantly expressed the emotional impact this had, resulting in a general diminished sense of agency in their lives. Facing the very real prospect of stagnation and having few opportunities to better themselves, several participants felt stuck, useless and started to believe that they will never amount to much. They spoke about experiencing low mood, frustration and hopelessness, with some describing a negative impact on their mental health.

*"People have no opportunities to improve their situation..."*

**“ The conditions make me feel useless ”**

*"Even me I say, I will never be something in my life"*

*"No change since I arrived."*

**“ I am frustrated that I am stuck in one place and cannot move forward ”**

Some participants specifically pointed out that feeling under-recognised was a major factor in the way they struggled to live their lives and fulfil their aspirations.

*"People don't get the opportunity to work in employment that is in line with their profession and years of study. Sometimes if they have qualifications, it will not be recognised so they cannot work as what they have certification in, they cannot work accordingly".*

**“ Even migrants that have professions in their countries, in Malta the only thing they're good for is like, garbage collection ”**

For some, these experiences do not only result in them struggling to fulfil their aspirations but also affects their desire to aspire to anything in the future.

*"I've never seen any improvement of any migrants, maybe there are cases, but the salaries attached to those jobs will not in 80 years provide the good quality of life. In 80 years, one will not get to where one wants to be"*

*"But even earning 1100, 1050...it is still difficult for someone like...example, if I want to...let's assume that there's a Maltese youth who has huge aspirations, like I do...wants to go get married, have a flat. In 50 years, with this wage, I cannot do that."*

Another experience participants shared was the experience of feeling worse when compared to other migrants who are managing to live a better life.

*"Some people I come with are living well"*

*"I want to be like them, but I can't"*

Amidst this discourse about disempowerment, some participants expressed the positive impact having a career and being valued at work has. It emerged as an important protective factor for individuals allowing them to safeguard their sense of self-worth, to find meaning in their life, and to empower them to regain a sense of direction in their life.

*"First I was part-time, but boss saw in me the potential, because I can read and write, and lucky to learn from him, which I managed to do very well and I rose through the ranks to the position of stock keeper".*

**“ Being treated well and given a promotion makes me feel valued as a good worker and encourages me to push more ”**

*“With a professional career, even though there is sort of a discrimination against you, blah blah, but then your living condition standard will not be the same as that of somebody living in Hal Far Tent Village. Working in my profession will increase my personal esteem and job satisfaction and that is why I need to push for it and not salary.”*

### **3.7 Accessing limited resources as a lifeline**

#### **Valuable role of NGOs**

Participants spoke of NGOs filling existing gaps in welfare and support for this population by providing services that are either not provided by the government or are more accessible than those provided by the government. They mentioned relying on NGOs for a variety of needs including legal guidance, psychological services, emergency financial assistance, material assistance such as clothes and food, employment support such as CV writing and English and Maltese language courses.

*“JRS provided a job orientation programme that helped me learn important skills like how to perform in an interview.”*

*“Support from NGOs with job search, psychological support and legal support was indispensable at the start of my life in Malta as it allowed me to become stable and get on my feet with a job.”*

They also emphasised that they found the NGOs reaching out to asylum seekers in detention centres and open centres as particularly supportive.

*“To have people coming from different organisations, to be there with us to show us we’re not alone in this.”*

In general, they described NGO services as being relatively quick and easy to access and as providing the basic needs required when they are in a vulnerable situation. In this regard, NGOs’ role emerged as being akin to a lifeline when asylum seekers are at risk of being overwhelmed by their financial needs.

#### **NGOs having their limitations**

On the other hand, both asylum seekers and service providers acknowledged that NGOs have their limitations; they do not have the capacity to comprehensively serve the whole asylum seeker population, nor are they able to meet a particular need effectively, except for a limited timeframe through funding that is project-based.

**“ We face several obstacles to work effectively with migrants, as an NGO we have financial limitations, for example we can’t afford interpreters. ”**

Asylum seekers spoke about being grateful to NGOs but also understanding that they can’t rely on these organisations indefinitely.

### **Migrants managing to create support networks**

Many participants spoke about having witnessed directly or indirectly how migrants tend to create their own support networks based on nationality, ethnicity or religious grounds and how these networks sometimes serve to limit the adverse impact of an asylum seeker's financial difficulties. Furthermore, it seems that for the majority of asylum seekers these migrant support networks are the first port of call when basic needs are unmet, or even when seeking employment opportunities.

*"We have noticed many clients finding employment through their own contacts and communities."*

### **Beneficial impact of certain government initiatives**

Among the limited resources and support measures currently available to asylum seekers, participants also mentioned certain governmental initiatives as being particularly beneficial. Participants particularly emphasised the positive impact of the employment support provided by Jobsplus, who over the past years expanded their service and started offering support to beneficiaries of Subsidiary Protection and THP, the creation of SRA as a means of regularisation for rejected asylum seekers, and the courses offered by the Intercultural and Anti-Racism Unit.

**“ Initiatives like SRA are important as they allow for stability for the migrants and that allows them to be more productive and ultimately self-sufficient. ”**

*"I was impressed, the integration office in Paola has started receiving applications from migrant communities...teaching migrants in Maltese language, bit of English."*

## **3.8 Cyclical Relationship between poverty, social exclusion and health**

### **Poverty leading to marginalisation**

Theme 8 outlines how, among the asylum-seeking population in Malta, poverty, social exclusion and mental health are intertwined in a cyclical relationship, with financial difficulties leading to marginalisation and poverty/social exclusion, and poor mental health reinforcing each other. A number of participants pointed out that, without the income necessary to buy new clothes and pay for leisure activities, socialising with locals becomes trickier. A particular participant spoke about his perception of European society, expecting individuals to appear clean and smart and own a car, and that being unable to afford a vehicle and the latest clothes makes him feel that he does not belong to Maltese society. Another asylum seeker stressed that poverty is visible through a person's attire and that being self-conscious about his appearance makes him reluctant to interact with locals. This data indicates that poverty leads to social exclusion by restricting opportunities for leisure and socialisation, and by impacting the individual's willingness to socialise when they feel unable to fulfil social norms regarding appearance.

Due to these barriers, and probably others such as language, asylum seekers tend to mainly interact with members of their ethnic and/or national community and avoid places predominately frequented by the local community;

*"There are places that are not forbidden but they feel that they are not places for them because of the different economic realities"*

According to one participant, this leads to the creation of what he described as ghettos;

**“ So there are ghettos that are created socially, just because of social economic realities ”**

It seems that for asylum seekers financial difficulties lead to marginalisation and social exclusion by discouraging interaction with the local community and consequently increasing their social reliance on their ethnic and/or national community.

### ***Inter-relationship between poverty and mental health difficulties***

Several participants spoke of the adverse impact of the circumstances faced by an asylum seeker attempting to settle in a new country without the necessary financial means. These include experiencing loneliness, disillusionment and frustration. These emotional experiences eventually take their toll on the individual's mental health and their ability to persist in their struggle to improve their life situation.

Some participants spoke about their observations regarding how psychological difficulties originating from experiences prior to an asylum seeker's arrival in Malta may also play a role in their ability to cope financially. A particular participant spoke about how the psychological effects of traumatic exposure impacted his ability to attend and process information regarding asylum and integration.

*"I was so traumatised I wasn't even paying attention".*

These last two codes outline the manner in which financial difficulties lead to mental health difficulties and vice versa and give a clear picture of the significant role psychological health plays in the maintenance of poverty, especially among a population that is at a higher risk of mental health problems.



## 4. CONCLUSION

This qualitative piece of research clearly indicates that there are several extrinsic factors that appear to foster and maintain poverty among the asylum-seeking population. The combined impact of a steep rise in cost of living, including an exponential surge in rent prices, on one hand, and stagnant wages on another, emerged clearly as one of the main factors. Another significant factor appears to be the reality that most asylum seekers, due to a mix of poor English or Maltese, basic levels of education, racial discrimination and low transferability of job-related skills and competencies, are restricted to a very limited section of the employment market. At best, participants could aim for jobs slightly above the minimum wage, with no or little chances of progression. In this regard, in Malta's current economic climate, the best they can aim for may still not be enough to lift them out of poverty, especially if they need to support a family. Furthermore, limited access to financial services appears to act as another barrier towards financial stability for this population.

Research data also indicated that asylum seekers face poverty and social exclusion from the very start of their life in Malta. The interviews painted a picture of a reception system that fails to act as a stepping stone towards self-sufficiency due to the absence of a language and/or vocational programme that is intrinsically linked to the reception stage and the meagre per diem allowance. Participants left the open centre with the same deficiencies in skills, competencies, savings and job prospects they had when they entered.

Constrained by these extrinsic factors, asylum seekers struggle to make ends meet and fulfil the most basic of needs including food, clothing and shelter. In this struggle they receive some support from NGOs, government welfare agencies and informal support networks they would have developed, including migrant communities and sometimes Maltese friends, neighbours or acquaintances. Whilst these forms of support have limited resources to offer, as emphasised by both asylum seekers and service providers, they do serve as a lifeline in times of crisis.

Research interviews also highlighted how this struggle to make ends meet tends to contribute to social exclusion and to varying extents tends to have a negative impact on psychological well-being. Participants spoke about a demoralising perception that they have limited or no chances of bettering their life and aspiring for a brighter future - a deeply disheartening sentiment that life won't get better than this. They spoke about their financial struggles and the constraints imposed by their environment as leading to a loss of agency and a diminished sense of control, which can eventually have a deleterious impact on the asylum seeker's mental health. In this regard, it is important to note that this population is already at a relatively high risk of mental health difficulties due to adverse and potential traumatic experiences in their country of origin and/or during their migratory journey. Data analysis shed light on how the factors of poverty, social exclusion and poor mental health can thus create a self-reinforcing cycle in the lives of an asylum seeker causing hardship on many levels.

In conclusion, this research paints a picture of poverty being more of an unavoidable reality rather than a simple risk for asylum seekers in Malta. As our recommendations clearly outline, given the environmental and systemic constraints hampering an asylum seeker's pursuit of financial stability, we are of the strong opinion that the only way to achieve meaningful change in this area requires the Maltese government taking on more responsibility and ownership of asylum seekers' welfare and integration in order to give them a realistic shot at not being poor.

## Recommendations

As mentioned above, this research is a follow-up from the 2016 research *Struggling to Survive*, where we presented a list of recommendations covering the specific themes that emerged from that first exercise. The recommendations of this present report build on our 2016 input and adopt a more systemic approach, based on the main finding highlighted above that the high poverty levels within the asylum-seeking community are in fact directly linked to a series of institutional obstacles rather than personal challenges.

Yet in taking stock of the current situation with a view to developing our 2016 input, we are keen to note that in the five years since publication of *Struggling to Survive*, a number of positive measures have been introduced. The introduction of the *I Belong* programme by the then Ministry for European Affairs and Equality<sup>23</sup> is certainly a major development in Malta's policy regime. The programme offers learning opportunities with a view to strengthening employability and promoting a more stable integration process. It forms part of the broader *Migrant Integration Strategy and Action Plan: Vision 2020*, launched in 2016, positioning migrant and refugee integration at the inter-ministerial level within Government and seeking to create "the migrants' own sense of belonging to Maltese society and the space Maltese society allows for such integration."

Together with this programme, we also welcome the increased services offered by Jobsplus to various groups of migrants and refugees including the possibility of Employment Licence holders to take up part-time employment, a range of educational services geared towards facilitating access to the labour market, and an EU-funded project specifically targeting migrants and their employment challenges and opportunities. We also feel that the psychosocial services being offered by AWAS, starting in 2019, have the potential to dramatically improve the well-being and long-term prospects of those asylum-seekers whose individual circumstances present serious obstacles to their education, employment and social interaction.

Whilst these positive developments will certainly go a long way towards improving prospects for the asylum-seeking population, the institutional barriers preventing people from moving out of the cycle of poverty need to be addressed. Together with reiterating the specific measures identified in *Struggling to Survive*, this report emphasises the need to go beyond the personal approach, and therefore beyond a service-based understanding of poverty alleviation, and to move towards a contextual approach that looks at the social norms, values and structures that foster poverty creation or the maintenance of the status quo. In essence, our recommendations centre on the key premise that refugee integration needs to be truly owned by the nation in order for it to happen. By this we mean that the integration process, whereby refugees are able to fulfil their potential for their own benefit and that of their host communities, must start from Government itself demonstrating a real commitment towards achieving it, through the implementation of measures that truly and visibly underline the idea of belonging.

Firstly, we urge Government to revise regulations on access to public positions that prevent refugees from ever holding such positions. Malta's public service remains the almost exclusive domain of Maltese nationals, whilst nationals of other EU member States and third-country national holders of Long-Term Residence are also eligible to apply. Whilst we understand the public policy rationale at the heart of this approach, we nonetheless find that it is untenable for Government to encourage and support the employment of asylum seekers in the private sector whilst simultaneously sustaining a policy of exclusion from public employment to refugees who might be qualified and competent for the job. Opening public employment to refugees would send a nation-wide message that Government trusts refugees to be part of its machinery and that – consequently – all other sectors should follow suit.

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<sup>23</sup> The *I Belong* programme is now managed by the Ministry for Equality, Research and Innovation.

Secondly, it is clear from the interviews that the institutional frameworks intended to stamp out racism and also to protect workers from exploitation, abuse and ill-treatment are not working in relation to the discrimination suffered by refugees. Our interviews confirmed the challenges faced by refugees to secure a job, fair working conditions and deserved promotions, often based on the underlying sentiment that refugees are undeserving of humane and just treatment. Furthermore, recent events in Malta have more than underlined the need for the nation to take very seriously the threat posed by racist sentiment. We therefore strongly urge Government to tackle racism in a firm manner as national efforts so far have been weak, invisible and half-hearted.

Finally, we believe that after more than twenty years of Malta offering protection to and hosting refugees, the time is ripe for Government to fully embrace their integration by elevating their position in Maltese society as objects of political discourse to subjects of political activity. It is in the interests of Government, Local Councils and local communities and refugees themselves that refugees and Malta's political environment are brought closer together. Refugees represent a significant political community, varied as much as other communities are varied, deserving to participate in formulating those decisions affecting their lives. Their political inclusion would also facilitate the adoption of national and local policies and initiatives targeting refugees, either directly or as part of a large local community. In essence, we believe refugees should be given the right to vote and stand at national elections, constituting a core step towards their true belonging.

As mentioned above, our conclusions to this research seek to tackle the core elements inhibiting effective refugee integration. When integration is understood as that process wherein host and refugee communities are enabled to live together in harmony and to achieve their potential, it becomes evident that tackling institutional obstacles to integration will have a direct impact on the poverty risks faced by refugees.

***We urge Government to revise regulations on access to public positions, in order to enable beneficiaries of protection to access such positions.***

***We urge Government to strengthen the institutional frameworks intended to stamp out racism and to protect migrant workers from exploitation, abuse and ill-treatment.***

***We recommend that refugees should be given the right to vote and stand at national elections, and believe that this constitutes a core step towards their true integration and belonging.***

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