IN PURSUIT OF LIVELIHOOD: STORIES FROM ASYLUM-SEEKERS FIGHTING POVERTY IN MALTA This publication is part of, and funded by the Malta Community Chest Fund Foundation.

#### **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.

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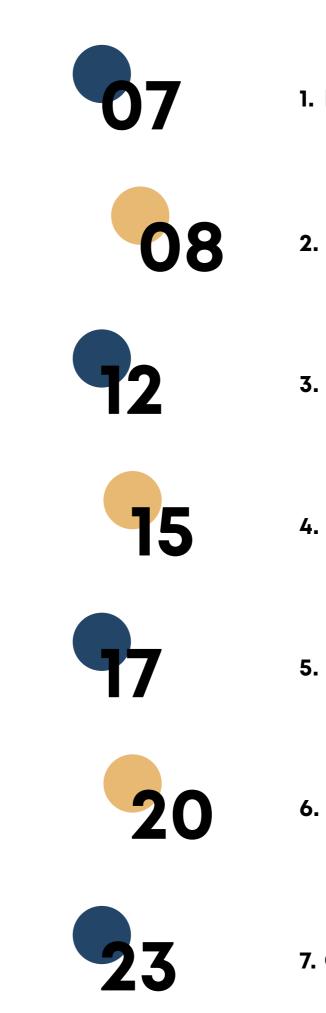
#### Note

The photographs used in this publication do not portray the persons whose stories we are sharing.









#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

2. SALIF

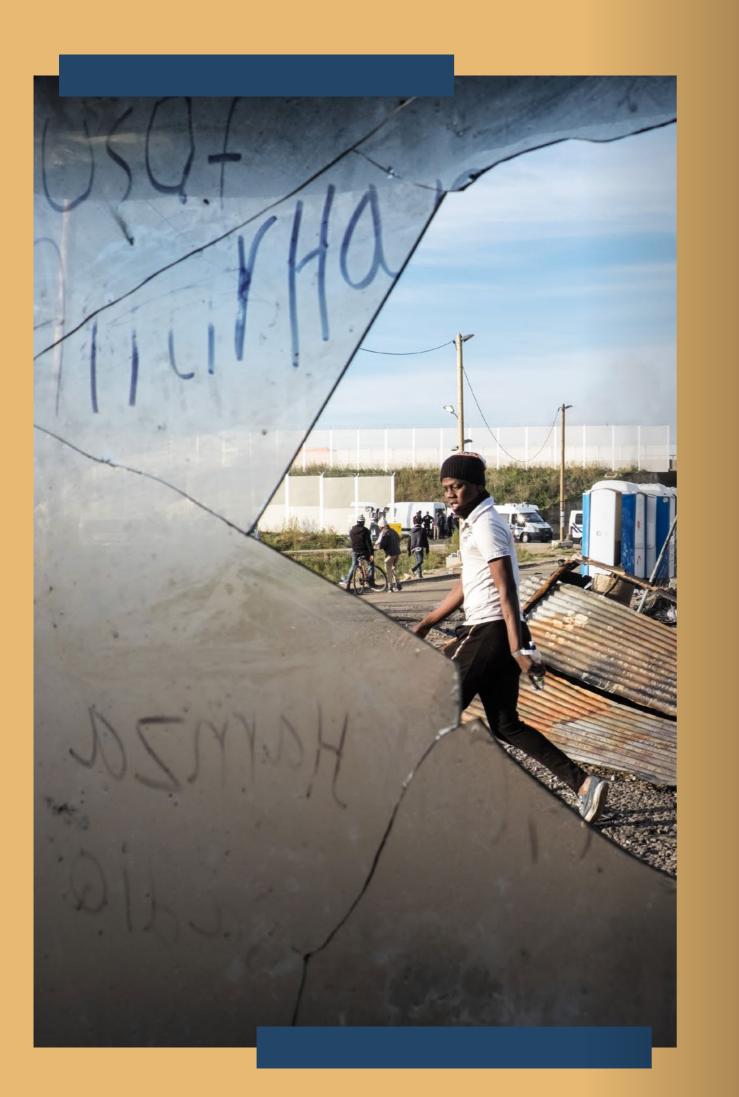
3. JATO

4. FATIMA

5. DANIEL

6. FRANK

7. CONCLUSION



### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In 2016, JRS and aditus foundation carried out an investigation into the risk of poverty among asylum seekers in Malta, in order to effectively assess their experience of poverty, hardship, deprivation and social exclusion, particularly when compared with that of the general Maltese population. The results that emerged, published in Struggling to Survive, highlighted the extent 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. The outcomes of that research motivated us to look into the causes and maintaining factors of poverty in this population. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the personal experiences of asylum seekers in this regard, we adopted a more qualitative approach in this follow-up study. We interviewed five individuals who, as you will read, have shared their experiences in trying to achieve a decent quality of life, and the hardships they have faced along the way.

The prevalence of issues such as low wages, a lack of suitable opportunities, the rising cost of rent, and exploitation in the workplace is apparent in the stories shared. Each individual recounts his or her personal struggles, both past and ongoing, in not only trying to achieve selfsufficiency and live with dignity, but also in trying to give back to the Maltese community. They all call on the government to respond to this widespread suffering with greater urgency, and deeper compassion and understanding for the thousands of people in Malta who are plagued by financial difficulties, and are living in impoverished conditions.

With this ongoing research, we hope to increase awareness of the staggering level of poverty among the asylum seeking population. By identifying some of the key reasons for this poverty, we hope to work towards addressing the situation more effectively, with the overall aim of improving the quality of life of people within this community, and help them achieve a sense of autonomy.

By presenting these stories we hope to further the public's understanding of this population at the fringe of Maltese society. We hope that these stories serve to give the reader a glimpse into the harsh reality of the daily life of many asylum seekers in Malta.

### 2. SALIF

Salif, a Gambian native, arrived in Malta on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2014. He is 26 years old, and is currently in full-time employment as a support mechanic in aircraft maintenance. He has worked and lived independently since December 2015. Despite this, Salif lived as a rejected asylum seeker for four and a half years, unable to even open his own bank account. He was granted the status of temporary protection in November 2018.

When it comes to work, there aren't many opportunities for migrants in Malta. When I first started looking for a job, I went around so many shops and bars, handing out my CV, but no one would hire me. Most people pass through the same thing, and you're eventually forced to go to Marsa and stand there all day, until someone stops and offers you a day job. In my case, it took a few days; a man offered me €15 for a few hours' work, and I jumped at the opportunity. I'll never forget that feeling, sitting in his car, thinking, "Wow, I'm going to have €15." At that point in my life, I would often have to sacrifice going to bed without eating because there wasn't enough food in the open centre; I would often have to choose between buying a bus ticket or a few pastizzi for lunch. At that point in my life, €15 was a very big deal for me.

I was one of the lucky ones. That man believed in me enough to give me a part-time job, where I earned  $\in$ 160 a week—enough to live more comfortably than before but I couldn't afford my own place until I was eventually given full-time hours. I moved into a flat with two friends, paying  $\in$ 550, at the time, between the three of us. I was earning 720 euro a month, and with all my expenses, it was just about enough to carry me from one month to the next. Some months, it still wasn't enough.

I worked hard, and I rose through the ranks to the position of stock keeper. But my salary never increased. I was being severely taken advantage of. This went on for two and a half years, until I told myself that enough was enough. I refused to keep struggling to provide myself, when I was working so hard. So, without having any other job prospects, I left.

Again, I was lucky. Within weeks, I landed a job as a support mechanic with an aircraft maintenance company, where I still work today. My salary increased to over €1000. I was so happy.

But then, our rent increased. The cost of our bills increased. The food in the supermarkets slowly started to increase. In two short years, I've seen prices skyrocket. Although my housemates and I buy food and house supplies together in order to keep costs low, that €1000 does not get me as far as I'd like it to. The Gambian culture is also one of interdependency: if you see someone who is struggling, you will do your best to help them. Even with the little money I have, when I meet people who are worse off than I am now, I cannot see them go hungry while my belly is full.





I realise that it's not just migrants who face these difficulties. The increased cost of living in the country is affecting Maltese people too. The problem is not a lack of job opportunities. The wages are too low. The basic needs of a lot of people in this country are not being met. They lack housing, food, and day-to-day necessities. It's even worse for families, who need to provide for their children.

Another problem is that a lot of people, especially employers and landlords, look at us as only migrants. Nothing more. The university degrees obtained from our home countries are rarely recognised, resulting in situations whereby individuals with years of specialised experience end up working as rubbish collectors and cleaners because they are the best jobs they are offered. That's all they're good for here

The attitude towards migrants needs to change. There needs to be greater emphasis placed on empowering migrant communities. Educate them. Support them. Most importantly, inform them of their rights—people are being exploited because they don't know what they are entitled to. I have a lot to be thankful for. I could have perished at sea, like so many of my brothers who were not as fortunate as I was. Being rescued from that boat was the most crucial moment: I was given a second chance at life. And I'm trying to make the most out of this second chance but it's still so difficult. Even after three and a half years of consistent work, I am still struggling financially.

I have dreams, like most young people, to one day be able to pay for a car and a house, and even to be able to get insurance. If things continue as they are now, these are things I will never be able to afford.

#### 3. JATO

Jato arrived in Malta from his native country, Gambia, in 2014. He has refugee status, and began full-time employment shortly after arriving in the country.

When I think of the situation I am in today, I would say I am lucky that, for the most part, I have a normal life. I have a full-time job, and I was able to leave the open centre some time ago to rent a house with some friends. My life could improve, however. I manage to pay my bills and cover my basic needs every month but that's it—I manage. It's not about living comfortably at this point in my life, it's about managing. Living independently and being able to afford more than what is necessary for me would be ideal but right now, that kind of life is not within my grasp. I've accepted this, and am therefore trying to make the best of the situation I am in.

I got my first job quite easily, after people from a networking company came to the open centre I lived in, and informed us of their open positions. This was not too long after I was released from detention, so I consider myself lucky to have found an opportunity so quickly. After a straightforward application process and interview, I got the job as a sales representative. At first, I found the work good—it wasn't too challenging, and I got into the flow of things quite soon after starting. However, the demands of the job started to increase gradually, until I reached a point where I felt I couldn't handle the workload anymore. I felt as though far too much was being expected of me, and that I was being taken for granted in many ways. Although I had stable work, and did not know how long it would take me to find another job, I had to make the difficult decision to leave.

My second job came along after a month of handing out CVs and talking to people, and I was chosen almost instantly after my interview. Although my integration into the company has proved to be quite challenging—as I do occasionally feel intimidated by my colleagues—I'm much happier now than I was in my previous position. My workload is not as demanding, and my employers treat me well. After a few months, I was delighted to be promoted to a higher position. There are opportunities within the company for further promotions but I am not eligible for these unless I complete additional courses. At the moment, I'm waiting to see if I meet the requirements to do them.

I think that lack of educational opportunities is contributing to poverty in the country, for both Maltese nationals and migrants. Asylum-seekers in Malta are given very little help once they are released from detention, although there is so much we need to learn about the country: the law, the language, the culture, and systems of operation that are in place. It's quite unrealistic to expect an individual to go far without that kind of knowledge; it's like throwing somebody who can't swim into deep water, and telling them not to drown.

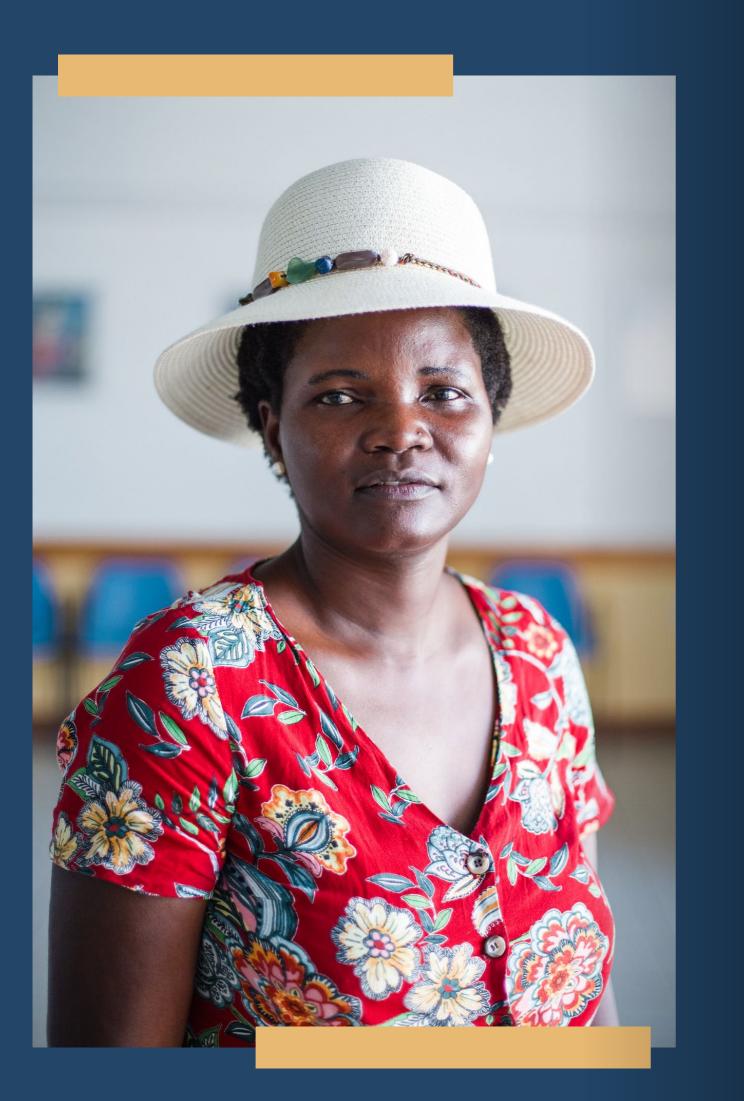
In my opinion, one of the starting points to tackle the problem of poverty in Malta would be to provide more opportunities for people to learn the necessary skills for the working world, be it if they choose to do manual labour or open their own business. At the moment, many people who would like to improve their situation do not have the means to do so, and this diminishes their sense of hope. I think most people who are struggling financially would quickly and whole-heartedly jump at any opportunity to better themselves and their lives.

The country's low wages are also a huge problem, especially as the cost of rent rises exponentially. An average wage of  $\in$ 800 is not sustainable, when the average cost of an apartment is  $\in$ 600. People need to be earning at least  $\in$ 1100 to keep up with Malta's cost of living at the moment. Even those who are working full-time hours are finding themselves trapped in this cycle of poverty, unable to get out. And it shouldn't have to be that way.

The government could be doing more to help people in these situations. The provision of tailored, affordable courses that teach employment skills would be a step in the right direction. But I also believe that the mentality towards asylum-seekers needs to change. What people need to keep in mind that for these people, who have risked their lives in acutely distressing ways, Malta is now "home". Whether or not they are struggling financially or otherwise, they are going to remain here because they have nowhere else to go. For many people, the alternative—being sent back to their home countries—could mean death. I am not unlike these people, and I understand their pain because it was once my pain.

As I have already said, I do consider myself lucky. In terms of work, I was lucky; I know that many people in Malta struggle for quite a long time to find work, so I am grateful that these opportunities presented themselves to me without much searching from my end. In terms of help, I was lucky; I have received psychological and legal help from JRS, and social help from FSM. This support was indispensable at the beginning of my life in Malta, and I know that not everyone is given access to this kind of help at the start of their journey. This is why I so strongly believe that the government needs to step up and offer greater support to those who are suffering, and to help asylum-seekers in a systematic way from the moment they arrive in the country.

I am just one man who has been quite fortunate, in a pool of people who have not. I speak as someone who has witnessed, and continues to witness, the struggles of people who come from backgrounds that are not too different from mine. With the way things are at the moment, it would be very difficult for those people to find a way out. We can't rely on them getting "lucky". Simple changes from the government can effect big changes in the lives of these people. There is no need for all this suffering.



#### 4. FATIMA

Fatima left Somalia in 2013. After a period of uncertainty, he was given subsidiary protection, and was able to start looking for stable work. In his current full-time work position, Fatima earns €700 a month, and cannot afford to live independently.

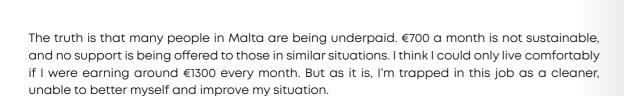
I came to Malta to find peace, get an education, and fix the many parts of my life that had been broken. When I first arrived in Malta, I compared my life then to the life I had in Somalia. At the time, Malta seemed a lot better to me. I was ready to improve my life. But the longer I've been here, the more I've realised just how difficult life in Malta is, for so many people.

My first priority was securing my protection in the country. That took some time but I received help from JRS. I did not have any financial stability, although I eventually managed to find a part-time cleaning job while I was still in the process of applying for protection. It wasn't easy to find work, and even now that I have been granted subsidiary protection, the situation has not improved much. I now work as a full-time cleaner with another company but it's difficult; I work long hours for very little money. I am paid €4.50 an hour, which barely adds up to €700 a month.

With what I am earning at the moment, it's not possible for me to cover all my basic needs. Every month, I pay for as much as my money will allow me to: clothes, food, and the money I send to my family in Somalia every month, to help them. The money runs out quickly, and then I have to wait, and often struggle, until I am paid again. Some months I have to go without certain comforts, barely able to cover the cost of food. I can't afford to leave the open centre and find a place of my own because the rent prices are above what I can afford. The cheapest on the market is about €350 for a room in a shared house. With all my other expenses, I would not be able to live sustainably if I were to rent a room at that price. I wouldn't even be able to afford the deposit.

Another problem is that, although I have a full-time job, I don't have a fixed contract or full job security—if I were to rent a place and then lose my job, I wouldn't be able to pay rent. Or if I'm sharing a house with other people and they decide to leave, I would have to cover their rent until I find somebody else to fill the rooms. Renting a place comes with a lot of responsibility and requires a lot of money. I don't have that money.

One of the biggest problems I have faced in Malta is the language barrier. My English is not very good and, apart from my native language, I don't know any other languages. This has limited the work I can do and the opportunities I can avail of in the country. I'd like to improve my English and further my studies in other areas but I haven't had the chance to do so. If I could confidently communicate in English, I would like to do training in food or drink preparation, and get a better job than the one I have now. But It's challenging to balance work and studies, and if I were to seek out courses myself, I would have even less money. It would be great if the government were able to provide English lessons to facilitate our integration, and allow us to give something back to the community. As it stands, though, the government has offered little support since I arrived in Malta.



New people arrive in Malta all the time. They are escaping poverty, violence and hardship in their countries, in search of a better life for themselves and their families in Malta. They want to rebuild themselves after being broken. I was the same. But the reality in Malta is not what most people imagine. It's not what I imagined.

Whether you arrived six years ago, like I did, or now, it doesn't make a difference. The situation is the same. It doesn't offer much hope to new people arriving in the country, if they turn to people like me, who have been here for years, and see that I'm no different to them. Six years of hard work, and little to no improvement. A life of poverty. That's the message we are sending.

### 5. DANIEL

Daniel, a father of two, fled the hardships of life in Eritrea and came to Malta in search of a better life for himself and his family. Since his arrival three years ago, he has been unable to secure a stable home for his family, and his qualifications have not been recognised, denying him the opportunity to pursue a career in his field.

I didn't expect my life in Malta to be as difficult as it has been over the past three years. We have faced so many challenges, and still face these challenges today. If I were to sum up my situation in Malta in a few words, it would be this: at the moment, I'm not living, I'm just surviving.

At first, finding work here was tough. I am a qualified midwife, and I would like to further my studies and work as a nurse, but for now I am not able to do that here. The main reason for this is that the qualifications I obtained in Eritrea are not recognised in Malta. I struggled to find work in my area; eventually, with the help of JRS, I got a job as a carer, a position I've now held for two years. The work can be quite physically demanding, and I've had back problems as a result. At the start, I also found it very difficult to integrate effectively with my colleagues; they wouldn't accept anything I had to say or offer. I felt like I was being attacked. But things have improved now—I've always been friendly towards them, and they make more of an effort now.

I am happy to be working but my ambition, still, is to pursue a career in nursing, and I almost got there. After eight months of persistence and trying to prove that my qualifications are valid, I was able to enrol in the nursing course at the university. In order to start the course, I was asked to do an English exam, which, at the time, I didn't think would be too difficult. I soon realised just how much preparation is required for the IELS exam, and how little access I had to the resources necessary to pass it. I was able to attend English lessons but the teachers were volunteers, not experts. I think there needs to be a specialised IELS programme for people, like myself, undertaking the exam. It would be helpful to work with an expert who could identify my weaknesses and help me work on them in order to pass the exam. Otherwise, the English lessons are a waste of time for people in my position.

The IELS exam, at the moment, is what's stopping me from starting the nursing course. I know that there is a shortage of nurses in Malta, so I don't understand why the current system is prohibiting so many people from acquiring the necessary skills and qualifications. This needs to be revised. I believe I am competent enough in this area; perhaps I could provide nursing assistance until I complete my full training. But this needs to come higher powers. There is little more I can do to improve the situation myself.

While my work situation has not been ideal, my housing situation has been worse. In my opinion, one of the biggest problems many people in Malta are facing today is the imbalance between rental costs and wages. The cost of rent seems to be rising rapidly, while there is little increase in the average wage. At the moment, you would be lucky to find a decent, two-bed apartment for less than €600. Some time ago, I found a place being advertised at €500, and after I paid a deposit, I was told the apartment was unavailable; they said the place was too old, and they were going to refurbish it and sell it. They gave me back my deposit and I was back at square one.

We viewed a place for  $\leq 600$ , for just one room. One room for a family of four, with no space to even hang clothes. This is the reality of the rental market in Malta; where, three years ago,  $\leq 280$  could get you a room, now even  $\leq 600$  is barely sufficient, especially for a family of four. One source of household income certainly won't cover the costs; I don't think two sources of income would be enough either.

Malta is a small place, which makes the housing market very competitive. A lot of landlords will only rent to people they know or to whoever offers them the most money. Foreigners coming from richer countries are willing to pay higher prices, so landlords are raising the cost of rent. Many of these people are not looking for a permanent life in Malta; they come here for a few years on a work contract, then leave. They have big houses with rooms they don't use at all. My family of four has to live in one room.

I work as hard as I can but I struggle to provide for my family. My wife would like to work but there are limited opportunities. She has tried to continue studying but it's not easy when she has to care for the children. I try to take care of them myself to give her more time to study but I don't have much time myself because I work full-time. It will be easier for her to study once the kids are old enough to go to school but the expenses will increase. At the moment, it's nappies and baby food but we need to put aside money for their education. There are so many expenses. With my current wage, I can't pay for them all. I've had moments where everything seemed to be going wrong. I've felt so frustrated, so scared, so low. Sometimes it feels as though I'm only living to pay these expenses; to pay to help someone else get rich.

The government needs to do more to improve the lives of people in Malta. More information needs to be provided because people don't know what they are entitled to. Rules need to be applied in relation to rent and wages: wages should be increased, and landlords should not be allowed to rent out their properties at exorbitant prices. People are becoming greedy, and others are suffering greatly as a result. I don't understand how I, a tax-payer, am not entitled to anything with regards to accommodation and healthcare. It feels as though I am being systematically cheated. I've wasted so much time trying to get clear answers, and still I've come up short.

I believe that a lot of people in Malta distance themselves from our backgrounds, our stories, and the hardships so many of us have endured in our home countries. They don't realise how hard we are trying to rebuild our lives. We want to give back to the community, not just take from it; if given the chance, we have a lot to offer.

The system is not only failing us. So many Maltese people are living in poverty. The quality of life has dropped. What the government needs to realise is that if its people are suffering, the country as a whole will suffer with them.



## 6. FRANK

Frank arrived in Malta five years ago. Though he has been active in his search for full-time work, he has not been able to secure stable work, and has hence struggled financially since his arrival.

I started looking for work as soon as I left detention. I've worked a number of short-term jobs, often assisting someone for a day or two. I've only had one full-time job, as a dishwasher in a restaurant, but even then, I only worked for four months. It was a good job, I often worked for eight hours a day, and I was happy. But after a few months, I started to feel very unwell; I suffered with constant stomach aches and dizziness, so I took some time off work. The chef told me he would call me when I could go back to work. He never did. Eventually, I called him myself, and he told me that my contract had been terminated.

I never gave him a medical certificate, so that was my mistake. Still, losing that job was hard, and I haven't been able to find another stable job since. I used to go to Marsa, and stand there for hours; if I was lucky, someone would stop and offer me work for a day or two. I would usually get paid around €35 for a day's work. But we're not allowed to stand at the Marsa roundabout anymore, so I can't do that now.

At one point, I got a job as a rubbish collector from Burmarrad to Xemxija. I thought that job was alright, and I was ready to work there for some time. But I was not treated well on my first day; the driver would drive off while I was collecting rubbish, and I would have to chase him down the street. The next day, my boss told me the driver would pick me up in Burmarrad, so I went early and waited. I stood there for a long time, and the driver never turned up; no one even called me. I called my boss later that day, and he said that the driver had waited for me and that I was not there. So after just one day, I lost that job.

A lot of people in Malta are living in poverty. I am living in poverty. I'm struggling very much with my financial expenses, and I can barely afford to eat two out of three meals a day. With Malta's cost of living at the moment, an individual needs to be earning a minimum of  $\in$ 1200 a month to cover his or her basic needs: food, transport and accommodation. I think that would be the amount people need to improve their quality of life. The minimum wage is too low, people should be earning at least  $\in$ 6 an hour. And while many people talk about the cost of rent as the main issue, it's not just that. If you are lucky enough to find a place of your own, you have to put some money aside for bills and other expenses for the house.

My friend and I were living in a house in Bugibba, and every month, the water bill was extortionate. To this day, I can't understand why it was so expensive because we were the only two people living in the house. We think he must have been altering the bill to get more money out of us. My friend was the one who always dealt with the landlord, so he said he would talk to him about this. I don't know if he did talk to him, in the end, but the situation never changed. I have noticed that some landlords are very quick to arrive at your door when they need to collect money but when there is a problem with the house, they take their time.



I would also like to open a bank account, something I have been unable to do so far. Before I had a bank card specifically for the social benefits I received from Marsa; they set up an account for you that they could put money into. But it wasn't like an actual bank account because you couldn't save any of the money or put money into it yourself. That account is closed now, so I have to keep my money in the house. I'd like to be able to put it in a secure bank account, and to be able to save money. For the first time, I'm receiving help from JRS in this regard. I wasn't given any help in the open centre—everyone was given a yellow paper but I wasn't. There seemed to be some confusion about my age, and they wouldn't accept my age when I told it to them. I was interviewed and they signed different years on different documents and papers, but whenever I said my correct age, they told me to prove it. Because of this, I have not been able to open a bank account.

People in this country shouldn't have to go on living in poverty. I think that those who are in more fortunate positions could be doing a little more to help those who are struggling. Most importantly, help should come from the government. Those in government are elected by the people, to stand for the people, and to fight for the people. Those in government should not stand idly by while many people do not know where their next meal will come from. I don't expect them to solve everything but there is certainly more that could be done. More opportunities should be provided, and people should be informed of their rights. At one stage, somebody was explaining my workplace rights to me, and someone else said, "Why are you telling him this?" He said that I had the right to know. Many people are left uninformed because nobody will explain their rights to them.

I don't know what the next five years of my life will look like but I do know that these past five years have been extremely difficult for me. I feel as though other people don't see my worth. I don't think I am useless. I think I have a lot to offer but the conditions surrounding me are making me useless. When I am given the chance, I work very hard and do my best to make the manager happy but I never get a call back. Sometimes the pain of all this gets very intense, and I wonder why all this is happening to me. But I have to force myself to keep pushing on, through the stress and the challenges.

That's why I have not given up on finding a job and improving my life. I've sent out many CVs, and I've gone into shops, factories and big companies, and spoken to people individually. I'm doing all I can to find work, and even though nobody has called me back, I will not stop trying because I want to work every day, and I want to pay taxes, and I want to live like a normal citizen. I want a house to call my home, and a place to call my workplace. So even though things are difficult, I will not give up, and I will not stop hoping that one day, sooner rather than later, things will change.

### 7. CONCLUSION

These stories clearly indicate that there are several external 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.

These stories also indicate 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. Asylum seekers tend to leave 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.

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 the below 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

Together with reiterating the specific measures identified in Struggling to Survive, this report emphasises the need to go beyond the person centred 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.

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 halfhearted.

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 exercise seek to tackle the core elements inhibiting the effective integration of individuals like the five protagonists of the stories above. 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.

