

Training Kit for Empowering Refugee-Led Community Organisations

National Report on the status of refugee-led community organisations in Malta

Project Summary

The main aim of this project is to see a dramatic improvement in the quality of enjoyment of human rights by refugees and is based on the idea of supporting the active inclusion of marginalised, vulnerable or excluded communities. With this, the project seeks to strengthen refugee inclusion by supporting the empowerment of those refugees who want to play an active role in their communities and at the EU level. Through the project, community needs, strengths and trends will be identified, and we will seek to produce an educational package that will tackle these challenges and provide improved skills to overcome them.

Part of our project will be a training programme which will be geared at supporting the mobilisation of refugees into organised and effective communities that will be active in various spheres such as peer-to-peer support, provision of information or other community-based services, and advocacy with national governmental stakeholders. This is done in order to bring the voice of excluded groups to the attention of policy-makers, engagement in public awareness-raising, talking directly from the heart of their represented communities.

This will be the Training Kit, our ultimate deliverable which will address the challenges faced by refugees in integrating effectively in their host countries. The Training Kit will contain content addressing refugee-led groups that wish to be active at a national and/or European level. It will also be available to the public and thoroughly disseminated throughout the Partners' networks.

The project is implemented by the following organisations: aditus foundation, Cyprus Refugee Council, Dutch Refugee Council, European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Greek Forum of Refugees, Jesuit Refugee Service (Malta), Mosaico – Azioni per i Rifugiati. With Syrian Volunteers Netherlands as Associated Partners.

For further information visit the project webpage: <https://aditus.org.mt/our-work/projects/training-kit-for-empowering-refugee-led-community-organisations>.

About the author(s)

aditus foundation is a non-governmental organisation established in 2011 with a mission to monitor, report and act on access to human rights in Malta. Named for the Latin word for 'access', the organisation's work is focused on the attentive analysis of access to human rights recognition and enjoyment.

In the area of migration and asylum, aditus foundation is one of Malta's main NGOs advocating for improved laws and policies, whilst also offering pro bono legal information, advice and interventions.

The **Jesuit Refugee Service in Malta** seeks to accompany, serve and defend the rights of asylum seekers and forcibly displaced persons who arrive in Malta. Each arrival's story bears witness to traumatised, disrupted pasts but also to a remarkable will to survive against all odds.

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National Context

Historic information

Malta starting receiving significant numbers of refugees in the mid-90's. Since at the time Malta had not signed up to the United Nations Refugee Convention, all refugees were resettled out of Malta to start their new lives in countries like Australia and Canada.

In 2001 and 2002 refugees starting leaving Libya by boat in high numbers in an attempt to reach European safety. Most of those arriving in Malta through this route were from Sub-Saharan Africa, however in recent years Syrians and Libyans make up the largest groups in terms of arrivals.

Between 2002 and 2013 Malta received an average of 1700 boat arrivals per year. From 2014, there was a marked decrease in the number of boat arrivals through the central Mediterranean route¹ in spite of the fact that there was an overall increase in the number of persons entering Europe through this route.

This decrease was due to the fact that all those saved by the Mare Nostrum operation, and later by Frontex's Operation Triton, were taken to Italy. It should be noted that this decrease was offset by an increase in the number of asylum seekers arriving in Malta by plane or by commercial vessels by sea.

Since the election of the League-M5S coalition government in Italy in May 2018, the systematic disembarkation in Italy of persons rescued at sea has ceased. From June 2018, frequent arrivals of people rescued at sea increased in Malta, with 1445 in 2018, 3,406 in 2019 and 2,256 up until October 2020².

Due to the large numbers of arrivals in the past years both reception and asylum systems are under severe strain, which leads to delays in accessing the asylum procedure and a degeneration in reception conditions generally. The policy of mandatory detention seems to have been re-introduced and a number of asylum-seekers were found to have been detained illegally under "health grounds"³.

¹ Figures as reported by UNCHR Malta: 568 arrivals during 2014, 104 in 2015, just 25 in 2016, and 21 in 2017 compared to 2008 in 2013.

² *Figures at a Glance*, UNCHR Malta, <https://www.unhcr.org/mt/figures-at-a-glance#:~:text=2020%20Arrivals%20and%20Asylum%20Trends,in%20Malta%20during%20this%20period.>

³ Times of Malta, *Court orders release of migrant held illegally for 144 days - Magistrate raises concerns about 'substantial number' of similar cases*, October 2020, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/court-orders-release-of-migrant-held-illegally-for-144-days.828202>; Times of Malta, *Migrants' detention beyond 10 weeks 'on health grounds' is unlawful – Court The case was instituted by six migrants*, October 2019, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/migrants-detention-beyond-10-weeks-on-health-grounds-is-unlawful-court.743718>.

Demographics

Since 2001 and until recently, most refugees reaching Malta were Somali, Eritrean and Sudanese and this explains the relatively high level of positive acceptance rates registered by Malta. It is only recently that the profile of refugee arrivals changed, with Syrian and Libyan nationals becoming the larger groups due to the eruption of civil war in Syria and Libya. Also in these cases, Malta registers a high rate of positive decisions, in acknowledgement of the impossibility of returning Syrians and Libyans to their countries of origin.

In the majority of cases, a greater number of men arrive when compared to the number of women. Simultaneously, when referring to the major age group, the range is prominently that of 18 to 34 years old.

Until 2013, the main countries of origin of these individuals were Somalia and Eritrea, however starting in 2014 there was a significant rise in the number of Libyans and Syrians granted protection. In fact, in 2017 the top nationalities for beneficiaries of protection were Libya, Syria, and Eritrea. The number of unaccompanied or separated children remains high, comprising 23% of all arrivals in 2019⁴ and 24% in 2020⁵.

UNHCR estimates that around 8,000 beneficiaries of international protection are currently living in Malta.

Political Context

In general, the discourse surrounding migration is a negative one that dehumanises them and treats them as social burdens. This is experience in their daily lives on the bus, in the streets, at their workplaces. We conducted research into levels of well-being of refugees and revealed that this negative environment results in their inability to engage socially with people outside their immediate communities, and in places where we would expect people to socialise. Furthermore, Public discourse by public figures, politicians and public officers has also been criticised as xenophobic and racist, many times without any consequence for the perpetrators.

Verbal violence and racial abuse by groups and individuals seem to be worryingly spreading on social media, particularly on Facebook⁶.

⁴ https://www.unhcr.org/mt/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2020/05/Malta-Sea-Arrivals-and-Asylum-Statistics_2019_UNHCRFactsheet_allyear.pdf.

⁵ https://www.unhcr.org/mt/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2020/11/Malta-Sea-Arrivals-and-Asylum-Statistics_UNHCR_October2020_final.pdf.

⁶ Platform of Human Rights Organisations in Malta, *Submissions to the Universal Periodic Review Of Malta*, 31st Session (2018), http://www.humanrightsplatform.org.mt/phromdocuments/PHROM_UPR_Submissions_28032018.pdf.

In 2019, Lassana Cisse Souleymane was shot dead whilst walking home in a racially motivated attack. Another two men, Ibrahim Bah and Mohammed Jallow, were also injured during the shooting. The shots were fired from a moving car by two off-duty army officers whilst the three men were walking in a country lane. Charges have been brought against the two men and the case is pending at the time of writing. Some months before another migrant, May Malimi, was hit by a moving car thought to be driven by the same two army officers⁷. An internal inquiry carried out by the Armed Forces of Malta found no sign of racism in the army⁸. The inquiry report was not published or made available to the public.

This recent racial attack comes several years after the deaths of Ifeanyi Nwokoye and Mamadou Kamara. Nwokoye died on his way to hospital after being beaten by three former AFM soldiers⁹ in 2011, whilst Kamara died in 2012 whilst in the custody of Detention Services and AFM personnel¹⁰. No one was held accountable.

With very limited chances of ever becoming Maltese nationals, refugees are constantly reminded that they are not welcome and that they will always be (unwanted) guests in Malta.

Access to Rights

When refugees are rescued at sea and brought to Malta, they are placed in a detention centre where their living conditions can – at best – be described as extremely challenging, particularly for vulnerable persons such as unaccompanied teenagers, persons suffering from disabilities and persons suffering from mental health problems such as trauma, anxiety, depression, etc. In detention, their details and asylum applications are registered, although there are currently delays in the registration process.

From the year 2005 to 2015, 34% of asylum decisions resulted in rejection, whilst the majority (53%) were provided with subsidiary protection. On the other hand, a smaller percentage received refugee status (4%).

They are released from detention after some months, and offered accommodation in the open centres. Depending on the outcome of their asylum procedures, they would be entitled to a series of rights but

⁷ Times of Malta, *Who shot Lassana Cisse? Court hears of conflicting accounts*, 3 July 2019, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/who-shot-lassana-cisse-court-hears-of-conflicting-accounts.718930>.

⁸ Times of Malta, *AFM inquiry finds no sign of racism in the army*, 24 May 2020, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/afm-inquiry-finds-no-sign-of-racism.794081>.

⁹ Malta Today, *Soldiers acquitted of involuntary homicide of Nigerian asylum seeker*, 27 October 2017, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/court_and_police/81693/officers_acquitted_of_involuntary_homicide_of_nigerian_asylum_seeker#.X0n3jsgzZPY.

¹⁰ Malta Today, *Mamadou Kamara's murder: migrant repeatedly kicked as he tried to stand up*, 14 March 2017, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/court_and_police/75315/mamadou_kamaras_murder_migrant_repeatedly_kicked_as_he_tried_to_stand_up#.X0n4IsgzZPY.

all persons are permitted to access the labour market. Refugees enjoy the broadest set of rights, with this ‘rights package’ shrinking with every legal/immigration status.

“... concerns have ... been raised about the lack of a comprehensive policy framework to facilitate permanent settlement and local integration of beneficiaries of protection in Malta. While it is acknowledged that key fundamental rights are in place - among them access to education, health care, and the labour market – there are still significant obstacles to long term solutions, such as limited prospects for family reunification and naturalisation in the country”¹¹.

People granted protection in Malta enjoy freedom of movement, access to the labour market, education and health services. Nevertheless, in practice integration remains problematic for many. Accessing the labour market and/or securing stable employment, remains difficult and the social support provided extremely limited. Moreover, family reunification, long term residence and citizenship opportunities are governed by extremely restrictive laws and policies, particularly for those persons granted subsidiary protection for whom family reunification is banned.

Refugees are a far higher risk of poverty than the national population. This is due to several factors, including difficulties accessing regular employment, vulnerability to labour exploitation, limited access to language education, insufficiency of social protection for persons unable to work, social protection dependant on immigration status rather than on individual need, limited access to psycho-social support for rehabilitation, no regulation of temporary employment¹².

Refugees are entitled to the same benefits as Maltese nationals, under the same conditions. In practice, refugees are rarely able to benefit from Malta’s Contributory Scheme since they are not present in Malta for a sufficient number of years to have paid the minimum number of social security contributions required for some benefits¹³.

Subsidiary protection beneficiaries are, for their part, only entitled to “core welfare benefits” which is interpreted as being limited to social assistance¹⁴. They are, however, eligible for contributory benefits if they are employed, pay social security contributions and satisfy the qualifying conditions¹⁵.

¹¹ UNCHR Malta, *MY DIVERSITY: Age, Gender and Diversity Perspectives in the Maltese Refugee Context*, 2015.

¹² JRS Malta and aditus foundation, *Struggling to Survive: an Investigation into the Risk of Poverty among Asylum Seekers in Malta*, October 2016, available at, <http://aditus.org.mt/Publications/strugglingtosurvive.pdf>.

¹³ European Council of Refugees and Exiles, *Asylum Information Database, National Country Report: Malta*, 2019, <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/malta>.

¹⁴ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, *Letter to the Minister for Home Affairs, National Security and Law Enforcement of Malta*, CommHR/NM/sf 043-2017, 14 December 2017, available at, <http://bit.ly/2o5Bwr6>.

¹⁵ European Council of Refugees and Exiles, *Asylum Information Database, National Country Report: Malta*, 2019,

Mapping

Refugee-led community organisations:

“The main aim is to gather ... in one place, have fun, activities, campaigns learn from each other, support each other, and share our struggles”¹⁶.

There is no publicly available information on the exact number of refugee-led community organisations. There exist a number of diaspora organisations reflecting the variety of nationalities residing in Malta that have formally registered as non-governmental organisations¹⁷, whilst others have a looser organisation¹⁸. There is also a number of generic organisations that do not represent a specific diaspora but have a sectoral approach, yet also here their level of activity is unclear¹⁹.

NGOs working with refugees recently established the Malta Refugee Council²⁰, as an informal network to coordinate our advocacy work for the betterment of refugees' lives in Malta.

In this regard, the researchers limited their interviews and data collection to those organisations that either self-identify as refugee-led organisations or are representative of the diasporas that come from countries from which refugees originate. We estimate that there between 8 – 10 refugee-led or migrant-led organisations that focus on refugee issues. In the course of the mapping exercise, 8 refugee-led or migrant-led organisations with a focus on refugee issues were interviewed. A further focus group collected data from 3 other non-refugee led organisations that work in Malta whose primary focus is migration and integration, whilst a further 3 were interviewed individually.

The African diaspora RCOs have created an African platform that consists of members from different groups and organisations in Malta who are African. The main aim of the platform is to be the voice on behalf of all the African communities and groups²¹. They plan to register the platform as an official organisation in the near future.

<https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/malta>.

¹⁶ Representative of Syrian Solidarity in Malta.

¹⁷ These include organisations that represent migrant groups originating from Serbia, Philippines, Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Pakistan, Morocco, Nigeria and Russia:

<https://maltacvs.org/vo-directory/>.

¹⁸ The Eritrean and Ethiopian communities have their separate community groups which are not formally set-up.

¹⁹ These include a migrant-led youth organisation, a migrant women organisation and a migrant-led equality group:

<https://maltacvs.org/vo-directory/>.

²⁰ Malta Refugee Council:

<https://malta-refugeecouncil.org.mt/>.

²¹ Representative of the Sudanese Community Malta.

Informal groups

The Eritrean and Ethiopian communities have organised themselves in a non-formal group. Publicly available information is scarce; however they have spoken out about the desperate living conditions of migrants in Malta²². More recently, the Eritrean community was attempting to register itself as an organisation²³. However, this seems to have not been successful.

National Operational Context

The main refugee-led organisation currently operating in Malta are the following:

Syrian Solidarity in Malta²⁴

The main focus of the organisation is to provide support and assistance to the Syrian community in Malta. Although there was a well-established Syrian community in Malta before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, those that arrived as refugees in recent years established their own refugee-led organisation. The organisation, with over 200 members, assists by giving information to asylum-seekers in relation to applying of asylum, family reunification and documentation. They work on a referral basis and refer legal issues to other NGOs that have specific expertise. During the COVID crisis the organisation provided food packages to needy Syrian families.

Sudanese Community Malta and the Sudanese Migrants Association²⁵

Although two separate entities, these two associations work in close contact with each other and share the same contacts. Together they represent the Sudanese community in Malta, which is composed of around three to four hundred people. The Sudanese Community in Malta provides support to other Sudanese refugees and migrants in Malta, with a focus on new arrivals²⁶. The Sudanese Migrant Association provides computer, art, English and Maltese language classes, among others. It also has culture and sports coordinators, who encourage members to take part in local events such as marathons²⁷.

²² Times of Malta, *New parish set up for Eritrean community in Malta*, 2016

<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/new-parish-set-up-for-eritrean-catholic-community-in-malta.599147>.

²³ Times of Malta, *Eritrean community seeks reunification of families, resettlement or integration*, 2018

<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/eritrean-community-seeks-reunification-of-families-resettlement-or.673758>.

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/The-Syrian-Solidarity-in-Malta-S-S-M-342005993016692/>

²⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/Sudanese-Migrant-Association-Malta-1842278612727341/>

²⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/mt/13991-malta-through-the-eyes-of-a-refugee-abbas.html>

²⁷ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/we-are-all-in-maltaand-we-need-to-integrate.657272>

Somali Community in Malta²⁸

Somali Community in Malta is a community that works for all refugee Somalis regardless of their background.

Eritrean Migrant Community Association

Although not formally registered as a voluntary organisation, the Eritrean Migrant Community Association advocates with government representatives, together with other NGOs and migrant communities, on issues such as integration and refugee policy in Malta. Their mission includes making a more inclusive community and not just focusing on the Eritrean community. There are currently above 1200 Eritrean in Malta (including asylum seekers). However, active members are not more than 200.

Libico²⁹

Libico is an independent, a non-profit, non-political and non-discriminatory organisation that aims to connect the Libyan community within Malta. In Libico, the core value of integration and cultural exchange between different diasporas within Malta can be realised. It aims to empower individuals to take an active role within the local society and to help their integration in different sectors.

Migrant Women Association Malta³⁰

Established on 15 April 2015, Migrant Women Association in Malta (MWAM) is committed to empowering migrant and refugee women to help enable them to fully integrate within the Maltese society. The association focuses on assisting mothers and women asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

Migrants Network for Equality³¹

The Migrants' Network of Equality is a network consisting of representatives of different immigrant communities in Malta. It was set up in 2010, aiming to promote the human rights of migrants, to fight racism and to work for the inclusion of migrants living in Malta.

²⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/Somali-community-in-malta-1935396823352984/>

²⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/libicomalta/>

³⁰ <https://migrantwomenmalta.org/>; <https://www.facebook.com/MigrantWomenAssociationMalta/>

³¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/246817862005076/>

Spark15³²

Set up in 2017, Spark15 is a youth refugee-led organisation which came together to address the different challenges that are being faced by refugee and migrant youth. The organisation's main aim is to advocate with the authorities to provide refugees and migrants on the island with full access to education and employment.

³² <https://www.facebook.com/spark15/>

Part III – Environment

A refugee-Led Community Perspective

Triggers that led to the formation of a RCO

There have been a variety of triggers for the formation of RCOs. The triggers depended on the different situation of the members of those communities. The Eritrean community was set-up once resettlement from Malta was completed and in order to focus on integration, whilst the Ivorian community was set up to address the issues of detention that they faced in the early 2000s.

“... we like to support each other, an example would be is when anyone of us has a problem, we help them together as a community. Therefore, the idea of creating a community was vital”³³.

Other RCOs were set-up to address specific sectoral issues, such as refugee and migrant women or refugee youth.

Although there could be slight differences in the reasons behind the setting up of RCOs, the common underlying reasons could be summarised as follows:

- i. Integration and learning about Malta;
- ii. Mutual support after passing through traumatic experiences and suffering;
- iii. Provision of information;
- iv. Meeting compatriots and having a sense of community.

“We lacked the “get together” place”³⁴

Main mission

Many RCO's focus on integration issues, mental health support, language classes and information. Language classes were mentioned by all RCOs and with Malta being a bi-lingual country these presented its own challenges. For example, those RCOs with Arabic speakers as members find it easy to learn Maltese, however they also want to learn English as it widely-used in professional settings.

Furthermore, RCOs in Malta felt that their mission is to advocate for full protection and full recognition of their community in Malta.

RCOs are also seen as a method of the collection of funds for individuals with financial difficulties in the community in order to be used for different occasions, such as weddings, funerals and for other expenses.

³³ Representative of the Sudanese Community Malta.

³⁴ Representative of Libico.

In addition, some RCOs work towards helping their members to realise that they need to get along, to embrace the lifestyle and to upgrade their skills, learn. In other words, to be part of the host country even if they don't have expected protection.

The Ivorian community, for example, spoke about creating awareness and introducing residents in Malta to African culture. Libico cites *"the crucial role that Libyan communities in diaspora play in advocating for unity and development in Libya"*³⁵.

Sectoral RCO's, i.e. those that focus on specific cohorts such as women or youth, see as their main mission the empowerment of their members, education and issues relating to equality.

The one underlying theme of all RCOs is that of brining the community together, of organising activities through which people can socialise.

*"... we try to be as creative as possible, as us as a community we love fun, and it what brings us together, fun and food, what better could they ask for and enjoy!"*³⁶.

RCOs and governance

Governance

The vast majority of RCOs are run by a board of persons who are active in the community on a voluntary basis. Some RCOs were more organised than others and had specific roles assigned to individual board members.

However, it was noted that one issue that these organisations faced was the fact that many times people moved away from Malta and continuity was therefore difficult. In many RCOs it is the board that meets, decides and organises activities as they do not have staff on their payroll.

Membership

Most RCOs allowed for membership by any member of their community or the community they represented, but did not require any active participation in activities. Some organisations requested a nominal membership fee or contribution of roughly 10Eur per month. The membership or contribution fee for the large part were collected in order to assist members of the community, whilst in one other situation the fees were used towards the rental of offices and expenses relating to such.

Funding

Many RCOs reported that they were funded exclusively by small amounts collected through membership fees. Furthermore, some stated that they were unable to apply for public or project funding due to a lack of capacity to fulfil the obligations required by funding programmes. Some RCOs

³⁵ Representative of Libico.

³⁶ Representative of Syrian Solidarity in Malta.

highlighted that difficulties in opening bank accounts have affected their capacity to fundraise and to apply for projects. A few RCOs rely on public funding and project funding.

Challenges, fears, limitations

The fact that most of the people working with RCOs do so on a voluntary basis, whilst juggling full-time employment or education and family life. A youth-led RCO highlighted that the lack of stability and reliance of volunteers was especially difficult for those who are studying³⁷. This was found to affect many aspects of keeping an NGO running: registering, reporting, funding and working on projects.

“Part of the reason we are working alone, people are being very occupied by the challenges they are facing in their everyday life: going to work, worrying about their status, wanting to discover other places to ask again for protection if not fully protected in Malta, they are not stable in Malta because of their protection and also the work does not give people time to fully be part in the communities.”³⁸

The lack of office space or the funding to rent office space was seen as a major challenge to many organisations. The lack of space from which to operate affects the efficiency of the organisation but also has an impact on the lack of privacy and confidentiality that is needed at times.

For those RCOs that rely on public funding, they found that one of their challenges was that of project stability and keeping those going in spite of challenges that may crop up, such as the COVID crisis. This is also echoed in the problems faced in keeping up the services they offer over a period of time. As mentioned above, a major challenge for RCOs is opening a bank account due to excessively burdensome requirements for NGOs, exacerbated by the problems encountered when presenting their documentation to banks.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, many persons involved in RCOs eventually settle in another country, as Malta is many times seen as a “stop” before moving to mainland Europe.

Another challenge that some RCOs faced was that people did not have hope and motivation that the work done by RCOs would lead to a change in integration strategies and the like. Many members of the communities did not feel that they would benefit from the work done by RCOs. One organisation mentioned that they wanted to get younger people involved in their organisation to become the future leaders of the community, as they need the *“touch of young people and we are aiming to train them and teach them until they are qualified enough for such a responsibility and challenges”³⁹*.

One challenge pointed out by the Somali Community was that they wished to support Somalis that were being held in detention centres but *“but access denied.”⁴⁰*

³⁷ Representative of Spark15.

³⁸ Representative of the Eritrean Migrant Community Association.

³⁹ Representative of the Sudanese Community Malta.

⁴⁰ Representative of Somali Community in Malta.

A common challenge was the lack of legal expertise within their organisation and also in relation to their members' needs. A lack of *“trained lawyers in our field, who are professional and have a background in legal advice, advocacy, documentation, migration, rejected asylum seekers etc. Hence there are only the lawyers in JRS and aditus where all the pressure is put on them. More lawyers are needed due to the spike of new arrivals and asylum seekers in Malta”*⁴¹.

Collaboration

Public Authorities

There has been limited contact with the Ministry for Home Affairs and National Security in order to discuss the issues of the community. RCO's are in closer contact with the Integration Unit⁴² within the Human Rights Directorate. However, many do not take part in the activities suggested by the Unit.

*“We have spoken a long time ago with the Home Affairs and Security. We exchanged letters regarding our situation... 2 years after we were able to meet them.”*⁴³

One RCO cooperated with the local council in which the majority of their members live. The collaboration focused on the giving of practical information to their members on things such as garbage collection times and the like. This same RCO participated in an annual festival within this locality and are planning to embark on an environmental project with the same local council.

Some RCOs, such as the Ivorian community, stated that they were in contact with the Ivorian authorities to lobby for the opening of a consulate in Malta.

Non-RCO NGOs

RCOs participate in trainings, meetings and seminars organised by other organisations. Some RCOs, whose members practise Catholicism, mentioned cooperation with local church organisations with reference to religious community celebrations. Others collaborate with other non-RCOs by offering services to their members, such as English language courses in preparation for entry to university.

One organisation stated that they regularly collaborate with non-RCOs in projects, however they would *“we need to agree with the objectives of the project. We need to see and learn how to complete each other with the partner organization, which happens via sharing experiences, resources, values, and common values.”*⁴⁴

Referrals to non-RCOs, mainly for legal advice, was also a frequent method of collaboration.

⁴¹ Representative of the Sudanese Community Malta.

⁴² <https://humanrights.gov.mt/en/Pages/Intercultural%20and%20Anti-Racism%20Unit/About-the-Intercultural-and-Anti-Racism-Unit.aspx>.

⁴³ Representative of the Eritrean Migrant Community Association.

⁴⁴ Representative of the Migrant Women Association Malta.

Refugees

The main form of cooperation with refugees comes in the form of social events that bring different communities together. Different RCOs come together due to the fact that the common underlying thread between all are the similar challenges refugees all face.

Some RCOs also reported that they have provided financial assistance to members of other RCOs.

Level of impact

Some RCOs have reported that the level of impact is impaired due to the bureaucratic obstacles in registering a voluntary organisation, finding office space and lack of funding.

Although the level of impact on a national policy level was low, the impact on the individual members of the communities was felt to be high. This was specifically in relation to financial assistance to the members of the community, counselling sessions, training of members and language lessons. The COVID crisis also provided the need for communities to assist their members with numerous issues, such as financial and food assistance and access to documentation.

A positive impact that was felt was the gathering of people from the same community together, in particular women. One RCO provided counselling session for migrant women who were victims of sexual violence and set up “empowerment” circles for other groups of women.

Differences between RCOs and non-RCOs

Refugee led organisations are led or organised by refugees themselves. It is felt that these organisations have lack of expertise, however they speak the same language, they know the struggles, share the same experience and therefore have first-hand experience. There is also an element of trust between RLOs and their members as they share the same community as the organisation is *“more aware of what their members are facing, sympathy and empathy, they don’t just help fix their problem, but rather they understand”*⁴⁵.

Furthermore, members of refugee-led organisation felt that they *“are contextually speaking about Malta... it’s advocating about issues that are directly impacting refugees. In a way that really reflect refugees.”*⁴⁶

Non-RCOs are organisation that are run by either experts or experienced people who have all the means, resources and more capacity. This is due to the fact that many non-refugee-led organisations employ full-time staff whose main focus is the running of that organisation.

*“Non refugee led organizations have bigger chances to be efficient due to the education background of their members, capacities, knowledge.”*⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Representative of the Syrian Solidarity Malta.

⁴⁶ Representative of the Eritrean Migrant Community Association.

⁴⁷ Representative of Somali Community in Malta.

It was felt that these organisations need to work together in order to complete their missions and improve migrants' situation in Malta.

Representation

Some felt that it was important to not exclusively represent the community that they belong to but to speak and act as one community of migrants as a group. This was due to the fact that their voices would be stronger together than as separate communities.

Others felt that they had the mission to represent their particular country or culture in a good light. This was being done by introducing Malta and the Maltese to cuisines, music, dance, clothes and culture from countries of origin.

Skills

In this regard training in advocacy, organisational skills, management and media communication were seen as being of benefit to the RCOs. Due to difficult to access funding, training on how to apply for and manage funds was also noted as being beneficial.

Most organisations also mentioned that they would benefit from legal advice. Specifically, one RCO mentioned that it would be particularly beneficial if they received updates whenever there are changes in legislation affecting refugees.

Furthermore, a need was felt for information on what type of collaborations with other non-RCOs were possible.

A non-refugee-Led Perspective

Value of refugee-led organisations

Through the setting up of RCOs, both the active members of the organisation and the members of the community they represent, have an active role and voice in Maltese society. It is a means by which refugees take back control of their own lives and become a role model for the younger members of the community. This form of empowerment is beneficial in a two-fold manner: (i) firstly it gives a first-hand voice of the experiences and aspirations of refugee communities and (ii) secondly it gives people a certain element of control after not being in control for so long.

“It is a bit different between us speaking on their behalf and them speaking for themselves. When we speak about narratives or about changing the discourse, those are different stories that cannot come from me: ‘I can retell them, but I cannot tell them’”⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ Representative of Kopin.

As also mentioned by RCOs, there is an already existing basis of trust between refugee-led organisations and members of the communities they represent. The organisations themselves act as a trusted link between Maltese society and the community.

It was also noted that the representation of refugees has been critical, and there is an important need for collaboration and partnerships. In this way, local NGOs with their expertise linked with refugees and their personal experiences and their own expertise would be extremely effective. However, it was also noted that *“we need to break that dichotomy where we come in as experts and they come in as experienced”*⁴⁹.

Collaboration with refugee-led organisations

The vast majority of non-refugee-led organisations cooperate with refugee-led organisations. The collaboration ranges from the practical level, for example assisting with homeless asylum-seekers to cooperating and consulting on policy and advocacy issues. There has also been an element of peer-to-peer referrals where a non-refugee led organisation refers an individual to their peers that are members of RCOs.

The cooperation has developed over the years, becoming more and more a partnership. In temporal aspect, refugees are becoming more confident in finding a voice, more familiar with the local context and more secured in their social/economic positions. That level of security is needed to be able to speak out and to develop that knowledge and the know-how of how the Government and the institutions work.

Requirements to work with RCOs

Formal collaboration with RCOs, through project partnership, is not common. However, if there would be an opportunity to collaborate then non-RCOs would look for shared values, transparency and a relationship of trust. Any formal collaboration would have to be established contractually.

Some NGOs required that RCOs need to be registered as a voluntary organisation in order to partner with them for local or EU-funded projects.

Challenges faced by RCOs

The challenges reported by the non-RCOs mirrored those that were mentioned by refugee-led organisations. Firstly, the lack of capacity of member of the of the refugee community who are struggling with meeting their daily needs and therefore having additional time is extremely difficult. It is also very difficult for a refugee to move from full-time employment to working with an NGO which might not provide the financial stability needed.

The bureaucratic processes, including problems to open bank accounts, were seen as a major challenge. These challenges are also faced by non-refugee-led NGOs, with one of them reporting that it took them over two years to open a bank account for the organisation.

⁴⁹ Representative of Integra Foundation

“it took us... over two years to open a bank account which was a really demanding process and we had to bring in documents again and again and it didn’t work out. The processes are very long and very complicated, and people might not want to commit to that much time without getting validation for the resources they are putting in”⁵⁰.

As also mentioned by RCOs, many refugees and migrants do not see their stay in Malta as permanent or long-term and therefore there could be a lack of commitment or sustainability. This could also be the result of the fact that diaspora organisations in Malta are relatively new and therefore there could be a lack of support of the individual or of the organisations. This lack of support can also bring people to move on out of Malta.

Furthermore, one NGO stated that *“to expect a refugee because he is a refugee to take an active role is a bit hypocritical. To actually engage in a political process is challenging and scary”⁵¹.*

Useful tools for RCOs

Access to resources, in particular financial support, would be a game-changer to most RCOs. Funding should be available to RCOs to increase their capacity by employing staff members which would increase stability and expertise. It was pointed out that it could be that it was not in the government’s interest to have strong RCOs, as they would be too local and vocal.

Beneficial skills for RCOs

Information on legislation, policy and in specific the legal framework for setting up an organisation was seen as a crucial skill to have. One NGO pointed out that it was also extremely important to know who the key players are in the particular sector that one is working in. Therefore, knowledge of Malta’s system of governance and the structure of authorities and agencies is essential. Training on acquiring advocacy skills and capacity building in general were also seen as important skills to acquire.

Furthermore, communication skills and learning how to engage with the media would benefit RCOs in getting their message across and building networks. Like RCOs, learning basic accounting, project management and budgeting was also seen as a key skill.

⁵⁰ Representative of HalFar Outreach

⁵¹ Representative of Integra.

Perspectives of Government & International Intergovernmental Organisations

Collaboration with refugee-led organisations

“Refugee-led organisations are an untapped resource in terms of the services they can offer in cultural mediation, supporting strengthening of intercultural competences, community building, and consultative support”⁵².

The International Protection Agency does not engage with RCOs, as the nature of their work strictly relates to assessing cases individually. The Integration Unit within the Human Rights Directorate actively seeks the involvement of RCOs in its operations. They have contributed to policy formulation, projects, services and assistance with clients of the Unit.

International intergovernmental organisations, such as the UNCHR and IOM, engage regularly with RCOs. They work with them to organise consultations, outreach activities and have been providing capacity-building support.

Furthermore, they collaborate with work with refugee-led organisations to share information with communities (e.g. most recently on COVID-19-related measures and service updates) and, in turn, refugee-led organisations raise protection gaps or concerns.

At times, these organisations engage the services of the RCOs if the organization provides the needed service, such as cultural mediators.

Requirements to work with RCOs

Although no formal partnerships were formed, when approached by refugee-led organisations considerations to take into account are definitely the quality of representativeness and also their underlying interests and agenda. Furthermore, government entities have a preference for those RCOs that are registered as voluntary organisations.

It was felt that RCOs needed guidance and support when compared to non-refugee-led organisations due to their relative lack of experience, technical knowledge and capacity.

Existence of RCOs

The issue does not seem to be that refugee-led groups are few in number (relative to the refugee population in Malta) but rather that there are few refugee-led groups which have strategies and action plans in place to see them through from the initial stages of setting themselves up (devising statutes, setting up boards, finding a meeting space, etc) to sustainably being able to strengthen membership, administer effectively and implement projects or activities.

⁵² UNCHR Malta.

It was felt that public discourse by non-refugee-led NGOs is almost always about what migrants and refugees need, and how they should be treated. There is rarely any display by refugees and migrants themselves about how they see things, which could be different from what non-refugee-led NGOs advocate. There is a lack of space for refugees and migrants to make their voice heard, and their needs are always highlighted via the intercession of non-refugee-led NGOs.

Public Support for the establishment and effectiveness of RCOs

It was felt that Government could have a more open disposition to having discussions with RCOs on issues of concern. Authorities should be more active in reaching out to newer or lesser-known organisations to include them in relevant fora, working groups and/or consultative bodies.

Public entities could offer coaching or training support to build up the basic capacities needed to manage a voluntary organisation. Furthermore, they could provide assistance and facilitate the administrative set-up of organisations.

Specialised material or financial support (e.g. project funding, office space) for organisations originating from vulnerable social would help even the playing field for refugee-led organisations, supporting them to be on par with organisations with a stronger volunteering background. This could include targeted measures to support initial enrolment and registration as an organisation, whilst taking into account the specific needs of each RCO.

Beneficial skills for RCOs

In this regard, having a better understanding of the services available in Malta and how to make use of such services like contacting stakeholders would be beneficial. It was also felt that language skills were also important for RCOs to function properly. The Integration Unit pointed out that cultural mediators could also be beneficial.

In addition to this, strengthening community organizing skills (including community outreach and finding a community-support base). Furthermore, increased capacity to identify issues, build strategies to address issues and speaking skills.

Training to improve advocacy skills (including effective advocacy techniques, advocacy planning and implementation skills, presenting fact-based solutions, understanding the policy and political context, working with media, building networks, writing skills, etc) would help refugee-led groups be more effective.

Analysis

There have been themes that have arisen consistently throughout the research from all of the stakeholders. It is interesting to note that the emergence of RCOs is a relatively new phenomenon in Malta, and we could say that we are seeing “first generation” type RCOs with varying levels of expertise and organisation. We have seen a good variety of RCOs with a mix of diaspora-focused organisations and themed-focused organisations.

By way of preliminary comment, RCOs underlined that challenges in operating as solid organisations when they were struggling to meet their basic needs and those of their communities. This point emerged clearly in the interviews with RCOs as a major obstacle to the formalisation of their organisations and activities.

Time & Money

The most problematic of all issues raised by all stakeholders is the fact that RCOs lack the time and the money to consolidate their work in a sustainable way. Firstly, it was acknowledged that almost all RCOs work on a voluntary basis without paid employees, mainly due to the fact that the members were juggling full-time employment or study and their family life on top of the work of their RCO.

The effect of the voluntary nature of the members active in the RCOs is that it is extremely difficult to sustain long-term projects and to handle the day-to-day administration of the organisation. This impacts the long-term vision and aims of RCOs, and also their ability to build capacity to grow. Furthermore, the lack of employees to handle the exhausting bureaucratic processes in setting up and administering a voluntary organisation, including the almost impossible task of opening a bank account, could have a discouraging effect.

Due in part to the voluntary nature of the RCOs, there is a serious lack of financial capacity. It was highlighted that since RCOs do not have full-time employees to handle administration and financial matters, then they could not apply for available public and EU funds. The impossibility of applying for funding means that these organisations encounter difficulty in securing office space, in carrying out long-term projects and have to rely on member contributions. This has serious effects on the ability to focus on advocacy and sustainability.

However, in spite of the lack of time and money, many RCOs have had a tangible impact on the lives of their members, if not so much on policy and legislation. This was through financial assistance to the members of the community, assistance to homeless refugees, counselling sessions, training of members and language lessons.

Skills

The skills-gap that can be found in RCOs links to the above point and the lack of finances to employ full-time employees. Having a key person employed full-time in the organisation would increase its capacity through targeted training, networking and creation of know-how.

The needs that were identified are the following:

- a. basic accounting, project management and budgeting;
- b. English and Maltese language fluency;
- c. legal advice and information relating to policy and legislation;
- d. media communication;
- e. knowledge of system of government and related authorities;
- f. training in advocacy and public speaking;
- g. capacity to identify issues and to build strategies to address issues.

This again leads us to the issue surrounding the lack of public funding or public support to RCOs for them to build the basic capacity needed for an NGO to function.

However, the innate skill that comes with personal experiences of being more aware of what their members are facing, sympathy and empathy should not be ignored. Furthermore, it was also pointed out that there was a need to break the dichotomy that non-refugee-led NGOs had the expertise and refugee-led NGO had the experience. Non-refugee NGOs and also international organisations frequently used members of RCOs for the provision of services, for consultation purposes and also for information sharing within their communities.

Many RCOs played a big role in supporting their community members during the COVID crisis, by assisting with homelessness, food packages, information and also advice as to documentation.

Collaboration

Collaboration was key to the working of RCOs in Malta and this was being done on multiple levels: collaboration between RCOs themselves, collaboration between RCOs and non-RCOs and also collaboration with governmental and intergovernmental organisations.

The network built between RCOs looks to be the backbone and support structure of the work of the RCOs themselves. The African diaspora organisations took this collaboration a step further and are currently setting up a platform of African associations in order for them to be able to speak as one voice. Collaboration took various forms, it ranged from access to office space to joint social or sport events. In times of need RCOs would financially assist members of other RCOs.

Things are a bit different with regards to collaboration between RCOs and non-RCOs, this mainly stems from the requirement that RCOs be registered as a voluntary organisation in order for there to be formal project partnerships. However, outside formal partnership there was a healthy amount of collaboration between organisations. The collaboration ranges from the practical level, for example assisting with homeless asylum-seekers to cooperating and consulting on policy and advocacy issues.

Despite this, many RCOs commented on the lack of trust in advocacy efforts engaged in by non-RCOs based primarily in a lack of understanding of the broader advocacy aims and objectives.

It was felt by non-RCOs that cooperation had developed over the years, becoming more and more of a partnership on an equal footing. This could be due to the fact that refugees are becoming more settled and familiar with the local context and more secured in their socio-economic positions. However, RCOs felt that the cooperation mainly focused on participation in trainings, meetings and seminars organised by other organisations

Although, there was mention of participation in workshops organised by government agencies, RCOs did not highlight any particular forms of cooperation. In contrast, the Integration Unit stated that the Directorate actively seeks the involvement of RCOs in its operations and that their members have contributed to policy formulation, projects, services and assistance with clients of the Unit.

Government Engagement

It was felt that there was limited engagement by the major players within Government with RCOs. These organisations felt that although they tried to engage with Government there was limited response. Although the relationship with the Integration Unit was slightly better, some RCOs stated that they did not participate in their activities. Things improved at the local level with RCOs collaborating with local council on practical local issues and small project.

However, it was suggested that Government would be more open to having discussions with RCOs on issues of concern, policies and legislative changes. This would need to be done by having an open and transparent process when legislative or policy changes are being discussed. Furthermore, there needs to be an open dialogue between Government and RCOs on key issues such as detention, rescue at sea and the asylum process.

In conjunction with improved collaboration, there needs to be an equitable method of supporting RCOs through financial assistance, the provision of office space and support in setting up and administering a VO.