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## Living with ‘Uninvited Guests’ of Necessity? The Dilemma of African Migrants Sandwiched between Public Attitudes and Economic Realities in Malta

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### Abstract

This current study establishes how host-state economic realities (economic boom and labour shortages) and refugee security interact with the broader dynamics of irregular migration. It explores the circumstances in which migrant communities experience stereotypes, public attitudes, and racial discrimination in the context of contemporary Maltese immigration. Drawing on focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, sample survey and extant migration literature, the study interrogates the resilience of African refugees and asylum seekers and the political will of the Maltese authorities to protect them. It offers policy recommendations to foster social cohesion, human dignity, and equal concern which are necessary for achieving effective migrant integration.

**Keywords:** Public attitudes; refugees; migrants; economy; discrimination; immigration

### Introduction

For several years, Malta has been one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with 1,649 residents per square kilometre. Due to its location, halfway between the coasts of Tunisia and Sicily, Malta serves as a bridge between Europe and North Africa. Though Malta has initiated policies aimed at reducing illegal and unsafe crossings to its shores to avoid being “submerged by migrants,” the country still hosts the highest numbers of refugees per capita in the EU, with 25.3 per cent (137,376 people) of its population as foreigners (National Statistics Office, 2024) thereby witnessing a drastic change from a country of emigration to a country of immigration (IOM, 2016). The tiny EU frontline state- the tenth smallest country in the world- continually attracts tourists and migrants for varied attractions: moderate climate, English-speaking population, strategic geographical position or easily accessible health care and education. Malta has received a disproportionately large inflow of migrants on its shores with limited “structural capacity and the institutional means” (Fasanotti, 2021) to manage it effectively.

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Owing to the influx of people of different nationalities under varying circumstances: asylum seekers searching for better living conditions, and thousands of economic migrants from the EU, Eastern Europe, and East Asia, amongst others, Malta has become more diverse, intercultural, and cosmopolitan. Sub-Saharan African migrants constitute one of the largest groups of migrants that arrive in Malta (UNHCR, 2014). Migrants and refugees often find themselves among other people who bring a variety of cultures in addition to adverse public reaction to their arrival by the Maltese population. Given the experience of forced migration, and the multi-faceted nature of the push factors in countries of origin, such an experience can be traumatic.

While multiculturalism can catalyse social development, progress, and cultural enrichment, integrating people from different cultural backgrounds into Maltese society has been challenging given how migrants are “constantly constructed as people with transient identities” (Fabri, 2021). With roughly a quarter of Maltese children who are still hesitant and resistant towards multiculturalism (Calleja, 2019) as well as an outgroup-ingroup dichotomy, which is visible in daily engagements, the narratives about migration by different actors may have significantly influenced the worldviews, feelings, and attitudes of the native population. This is not a peculiar situation as it applies to many host communities where multiple, competing beliefs about migration are inextricably tied to social cues and identity as well as concerns raised about competition over social benefits, community identity, employment, and resources.

For a long time, Malta faced the challenge of striking a balance between population growth and the limited economic resources of the country (Amore, 2005). In recent years however, Malta has recorded the second-most significant increase in economic growth among the European countries (TVM News, 2023), having attracted investment across broad economic activities, such as high-end manufacturing, aircraft maintenance, digital gaming and financial services. Hence, with the increasing reliance on foreigners to address the shortage in the workforce (Grech, 2018) in addition to an uninterrupted flow of tourists and foreign employees who are now recognised as necessary to sustain economic growth (Drucker, 2017), Malta’s high population density is mainly driven by economic growth. Migration, in the context of large inflows of foreign workers to Malta, has a positive impact on the country’s economy because it significantly boosts employment, incomes, growth and productivity (IMF, 2020) as well as offsetting the declining working Maltese age population (Holicza and Stone, 2016). Expectedly, however, the dramatic increase in the foreign population on the tiny Island has triggered existential feelings of apprehension among a sector of the local population.

While the number of regular migrants grew exponentially in the last two decades, the influx of refugees and asylum seekers arriving by boat from North Africa has also continued during the period, straining the country’s asylum system and detention centres, and contributing to “social tension between the Maltese and the migrant communities” (Debono, 2021:280). Consequently, the issue of racism has increasingly become a critical social and political problem to be dealt with as it manifests in the implicit and probably unconscious bias of public officials. Instances of racial violence as well as discrimination in employment or the provision of services, have been documented (European Network Against Racism, 2016), and generally, “there is a fear of invasion that plagues the Maltese historical memory” (Holicza and Stone, 2016:96). According to a report by the Asylum Information Database (cited in



Taylor, 2019) refugees and asylum seekers frequently experience discrimination and negative attitudes when dealing with public officials.

While a considerable amount of research has been conducted regarding the prevalence of xenophobia with the rise of the refugee crisis worldwide and increasing perceptions of threat towards migrants, little attention is paid to the tiny transit Island which is increasingly becoming a destination for many migrants. Through an in-depth examination of the subject and the application of both empirical and theoretical methods of data gathering, this study mainly focuses on migrants and refugees from African countries for further analysis. It establishes how host-state economic realities and refugee security interact with the broader dynamics of irregular migration and explores the conditions in which African migrants and refugees experience discrimination. Lastly, the study offers policy recommendations to foster social cohesion and consideration for human dignity, equal concern, and respect, which are necessary for achieving effective integration in Malta.

## Research Method

Conducted between 2021 and 2022, the research integrates theoretical and empirical data by exploring primary and secondary sources. The study employs a transformative mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative epistemological techniques by administering surveys and conducting key informant interviews (KIIs) with focus group discussions (FGDs). Data were obtained from a sample size of 425 participants: 65 Maltese respondents and 360 African respondents- refugees and asylum-seekers- from 10 countries: Somalia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Libya, Sudan, Cameroun, Zimbabwe, and Eritrea. Key institutional data were obtained from 15 key informants drawn mainly from the policy sector, the civil society, regional organisations and academia. It also utilizes a methodical search to filter literature in order to gain a comprehensive and relevant insight into existing studies related to the complex nuances of racial discrimination, public attitudes, and stereotypes in the context of contemporary Maltese immigration.

## African Migrants, Public Attitudes and Economic Realities in Malta

There is an extensive literature (Mayda, 2006; McLaren and Johnson, 2007; Crawley, 2009; Calleya, 2009) on public attitudes toward refugees and migrants, who are also excluded from civic and political participation, within their host communities. Research on this issue is, however, limited in Malta despite the adverse narratives coalescing into a highly toxic bias against refugees and migrants who suffer from economic or social difficulties. Indeed, there is a considerable gap in the existing literature using empirical research to capture the lived experience of African refugees and migrants, regarding protection and unfavourable public perception in Malta. The need to fill this gap is particularly pressing, given the current dominance of irregular migration and border control in the public debate and the peculiarity of Malta's size and population within the European entity. This is more pertinent as the country published its first-ever national framework in December 2017 – *Migrant Integration Strategy and Action Plan* - a document that has been sparsely subjected to academic scrutiny.

Some academics (see Bommers and Geddes, 2000; Castles, 2006) contend that migrants deserve social protection as marginalized groups in light of the growing reports of abuse and discrimination against migrants, refugees, and other non-nationals in every region of the world. Thus, understanding public attitudes, racial profiling, and other discriminatory

practices, not only by private individuals, but by law enforcement agencies and other institutions, gives a broader perspective on how meaningful integration should be promoted in a multi-ethnic community like Malta.

The research on whether migrants are a benefit or a burden to the host country shows that their impact depends on their skills and labour market conditions in host countries (Byrne, 2018). With many European countries still grappling with high unemployment rates, the perceived competition for jobs continues to cause tensions even as they struggle to manage and assist their growing refugee populations (Stephens, 2015). At a time when new borders and frontiers are set up and policed by states based on the categorization of desirable and undesirables, migrants are seen as *Others* (de Ruiter, 1991) and, in many countries, viewed as mere labourers or economic entities.

In Malta, the initial concern among the local population, including trade unions, politicians, and media, was about the potential inflow of other EU citizens competing with nationals in the job market (Amore, 2005). These concerns were later exacerbated by irregular migration and economic migrants with the rapid expansion of the Maltese economy (Grech, 2016), which led to a growing demand for labour. In more recent years, however, the reality has been that the country desires an open flow of foreigners to mitigate labour and skills shortages, although the exponential growth of the foreign workforce is beginning to generate concerns among Malta's authorities.

Malta is a Member State of the European Union, and this has made it easier for workers from Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Romania, and other Member States hit by the economic recession to find work in Malta (Cefai et al. 2019). The fact, though, is that with 60,000 foreign workers out of a total workforce of 220,000, the society and the economy may cut off and collapse if the migrants suddenly leave the Island and emigrate (TVM's Insights, 2019). Even though unemployment in Malta continues to be among the lowest in the EU (2.92% in Dec 2022), the inflow of foreign workers in its domestic labour market remains a source of negative perception towards migrants among many Maltese who believe that "these foreign workers are substituting, rather than complementing, the locals in the labour market" (Times of Malta, 2019).

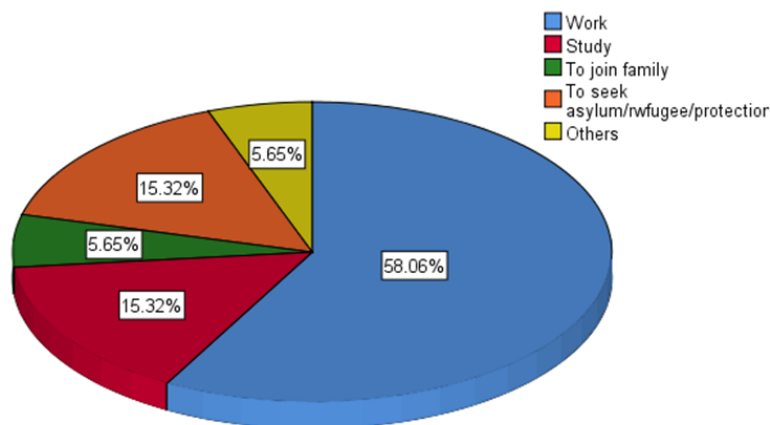
Currently, irregular migration is the most topical issue discussed in the country considering that Malta's population growth stems from migratory flows. However, as Camilleri (2004) explains, the worries over irregular migration and the general protectionist approach to migration in Malta are confronted daily by a different reality whereby many migrants, including those in an irregular situation on the island, are employed in various sectors, especially the construction and catering industries. Migrants are over-represented in low-paid jobs, experience high rates of in-work poverty (OECD/EU, 2015; OECD, 2013) and face greater exposure to risky or harmful working conditions, which may have implications in terms of lower health outcomes.

It is posited that migration is most beneficial for both receiving countries and migrants themselves if they find jobs and integrate well; migrants can make valuable contributions by increasing labour market efficiency, relieving labour shortages, and acting as catalysts for job creation, innovation, and growth (Canoy et al. 2006) as the case in Malta. When asked what motivated them to migrate to Europe, 58 percent of the respondents in this study (see figure 1) revealed their aspirations for a better life in Europe while searching for better jobs (though



almost all claimed asylum seekers when they arrived in Malta). Few of the migrants (15.3%) came to Malta for study purposes and another 15 percent came to seek protection, while very few purposely migrated to meet their relatives through irregular migration routes. It was later revealed during focus group discussions that many of those who claimed to have migrated for study came by air, outside the target population for the survey.

**Figure 1.** Pull factors in migration flows to Malta



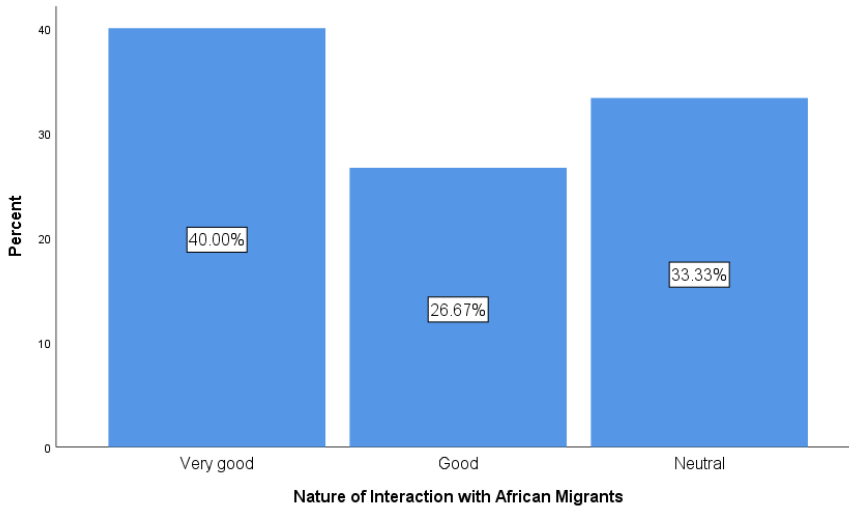
Source: Fieldwork, 2022

Apart from the policy and circumstances of detention considered the most observable factors conditioning the lives of migrants and refugees in Malta (European Network Against Racism, 2016), human rights violations, bullying, violence, and racist attacks against migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees are also prevalent. In 2019, two Maltese soldiers faced charges of inciting hatred based on race and racially aggravated murder after killing a migrant from the Ivory Coast, Lassana Cisse Souleymane. The victim was walking home along a road when he was shot by a passing car which then sped off, leaving him dead and two others injured. According to Human Rights Watch, after migrants are released from detention in Malta, they can find it hard to integrate into Maltese society: “They sometimes experience xenophobia and racism, have trouble finding work, and have uncertainty around their legal capacity to stay” (HRW, 2012), while being accused of stealing jobs and taking advantage of the social welfare system in the country.

In many countries today, migrants’ fear of exposure and possibly detention and deportation, if they confront xenophobia, has compelled them to live with some irritating attitudes. Despite the increasing perceptions of threat towards migrants, many Maltese respondents claim to have a good relationship with the African migrants, as shown in figure 2 below. It is a confirmation of existing opinion polls which show that the most extreme anti-migrant views are rarely in the majority, yet they often set the terms of the debate<sup>2</sup>. For instance, 67.7 percent Maltese respondents revealed that they have good interaction with African migrants in the country, while 33.3 percent of the respondents are indifferent.

<sup>2</sup> The World Values Survey, for example, covering more than 50 countries (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>), shows 11% of respondents calling for prohibiting any immigrants from coming, 38% for setting strict limits on immigration, 39% for allowing immigration as long as jobs are available, and 13% for letting anyone come who wants to.

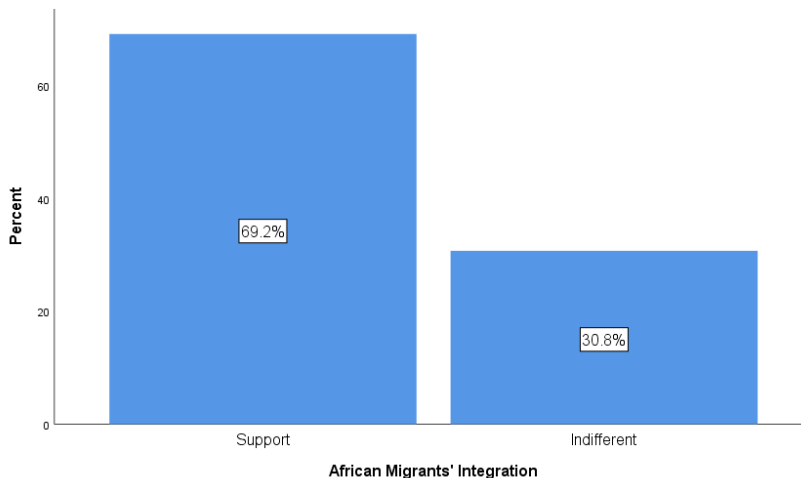
**Figure 2.** Interaction of the Local Population with African Migrants in Malta



Source: Fieldwork, 2022

The media background to the refugee crisis in 2015 showed that migrants, in general, were subject to media profiling that, either openly or implicitly, involved racist stereotypes (Megrelis, 2017). However, beyond how these views are often portrayed by the media and individuals, it is imperative to unravel public attitudes towards migrants and how government response has shaped interactions, orientation, and activism among different elements. These major intersections in migrants’ experiences in the Maltese context are further examined to properly espouse the reality. For instance, despite the challenges faced by the native population in terms of job competition and other factors, most of them still prefer the integration of African migrants into Maltese society. Figure 3 illustrates this, showing that 69% of respondents favour the integration of African migrants into Maltese society. Some of the respondents are, however, indifferent about the idea.

**Figure 3.** Opinions of Locals about African Migrants Integration

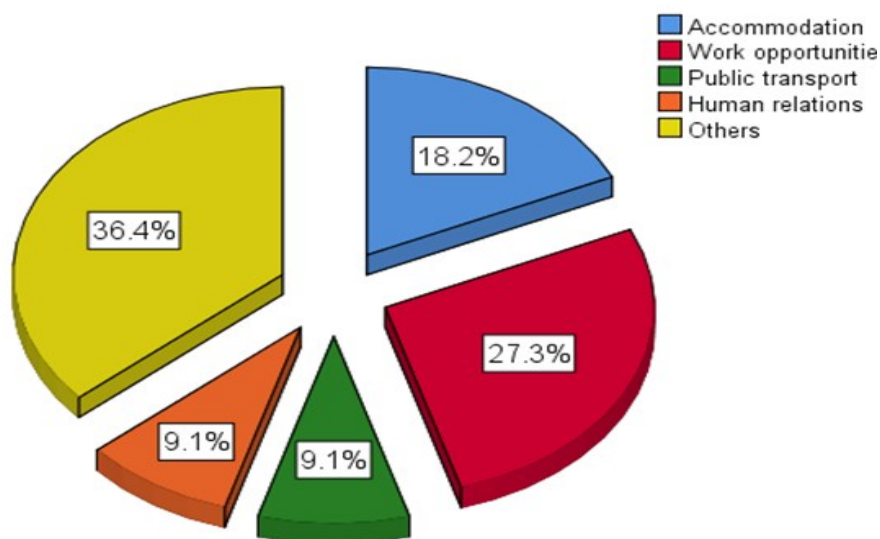


Source: Fieldwork, 2022



In Malta, the massive inflow from Africa and African migrants from Italy (economic migrants) seemed to have overwhelmed existing infrastructure, thereby straining human relations. According to the former Central Bank governor, Mario Vella (Times of Malta, 2018), “the rapid economic expansion and population growth have put pressure on the country’s physical infrastructure, in particular regarding road transport, health and educational facilities.” Figure 4 reveals several ways perceived by the local population in which migrants and refugees put pressure on the existing infrastructure. About 18.2 percent of the local population revealed that they had accommodation problems with the inflow of African migrants and refugees. In comparison, 27.3 percent and 9.1 percent expressed some reservation about pressure being generated because of job competition and public transport, respectively.

**Figure 4.** Areas of infrastructural pressure perceived by the locals



*Source:* Fieldwork, 2022

### Between Economic Opportunities and Local Resentment

Migration is a natural consequence of a fast-growing economy, and Malta is fast approaching EU averages. During the third quarter of 2018, Malta continued to show its economic strength, as real GDP grew by 7.5 percent, making it the second fastest-growing economy in Europe, after Romania (Guggenheim, 2019). The real GDP growth rate for 2023 was said to have remained robust at 6.1%, following the remarkable growth of 8.1% in 2022. Between 2019 and 2023, real GDP increased by 18.0%, whereas the Euro area's GDP growth rate was only 3.3% (Morningstar DBRS, 2024). Malta's economy is dependent on foreign trade, manufacturing, and tourism. The country is experiencing an unprecedented upsurge in tourism, surpassing the two million inbound trips milestone in 2017. Nearly 2.8 million inbound tourist trips were registered in 2019, an increase of 5.9 per cent over the same period in 2018 (Malta Independent, 2020).

Malta has one of the EU’s most successful citizenship-by-investment programmes and remains one of the top destinations for migration investment, with high-net-worth individuals, such as entrepreneurs, funnelling direct investment from abroad (Guggenheim,



2019). In January 2016, the International Monetary Fund released a report confirming that increased labour mobility to Malta had a positive impact on the country's economy. As of June 2018, figures given in the Maltese Parliament showed that there were 12,407 non-EU workers in Malta, along with 30,564 from the EU (Zammit, 2018), totalling 42,971. Two years after, separate statistics made available by JobsPlus, the national employment agency, showed that by the end of 2020, employed foreign nationals amounted to 70,402. Workers from EU member states made up 44% of total foreign employment in Malta while non-EU nationals accounted for 56%. It is, therefore, a fact that the main contributor to the increase in the Maltese labour force has been foreign labour.

There is a growing body of evidence that diversity and immigration drive economic prosperity and reflect it (Alesina et al. 2016). Indeed, extensive academic evidence, as established in McKinsey Global Institute's report (2016), shows that "immigration does not harm native employment or wages, although there can be short-term negative effects if there is a large inflow of migrants to a small region, if migrants are close substitutes for native workers, or if the destination economy is experiencing a downturn". It is also documented that migrants from Africa, particularly those from poor areas, generally send higher remittances to their relatives that serve as a countercyclical instrument during adverse shocks (Bigsten and Shimeles, 2008). It suffices to say that a well-managed migration process is based on a free, voluntary, and well-informed decision to migrate and this is profitable for both the sending and receiving countries.

The emigration of skilled workers can generate substantial benefits for the origin countries through remittances, contacts with foreign markets, technology transfer, enhanced skills of returning emigrants, and perhaps increased demand for education in the origin country (Ratha et al 2011). While this is true of skilled workers, the majority of the "irregular" migrants and refugees in Malta, like in many other European countries<sup>3</sup>, engage in low-skilled jobs to keep body and soul together, though some respondents revealed that they could still make remittances from their savings. This reinforces the hypothesis that job quality is one area where the inequalities between native-born persons and migrants are particularly noticeable. Migrants are more likely to work in low-paid jobs and are twice as likely to experience in-work poverty than natives.

Figure 5 indicates the current job category being engaged in by most migrants in Malta. Many of them work as construction labourers, store/restaurant/hotel cleaners; At the same time, recently, a few got trained as carers to assist health workers either at home or in existing facilities. The category of "Others", as revealed through participant-observation method, includes babysitters, nightclub strippers, commercial sex workers and the unemployed. The "earning activities" category involves cab drivers, and those who operate restaurants/bars or 'African Shops' where mainly African foodstuffs are sold.

There is a substantial body of literature arguing that economic, cultural and security concerns about refugees and migrants gain significant traction in people's minds because they feed into a worldview where cultural outsiders are perceived as a threat (Esses et al., 2017). Fears and

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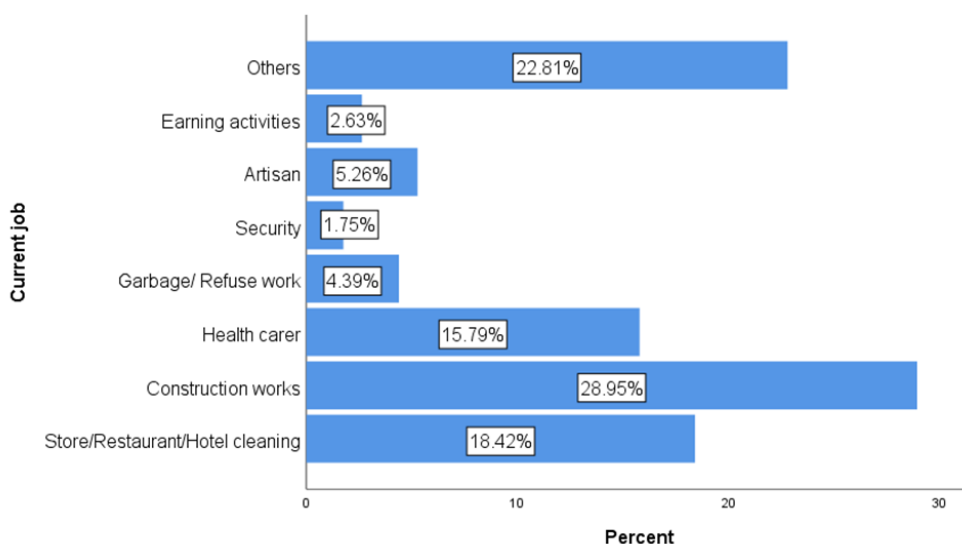
<sup>3</sup> Immigration by non-EU (third-country) nationals represented two-thirds of the EU population growth in the past decade and half of the employment growth between 2010 and 2015 (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. (2015). The average employment rate of working-age non-EU migrants residing in the EU was 55% in 2017 (European Commission, 2017).





prejudices are usually tied to migration discourse, particularly within socioeconomic and security policy nature. Racism in Malta for instance, as aptly posited by Pisani (2021), “cannot be divorced from economic policy and two decades of racialised political rhetoric around ethnicity, nation and belonging that have fed into deadly policies on asylum, exploitative labour practices, human rights violations, grotesque racist attacks and, ultimately, the brutal murder of Lassana Cisse”. Those granted refugee status and allowed to apply for a three-year renewable residence permit, according to a report by the Asylum Information Database (Taylor, 2019), reported “strong negative attitudes, comments, rebukes, dismissals, and instances of disrespectful behaviour by public officials. Discrimination and exploitation were widespread, with low and unpaid wages, long working hours and unsafe working conditions”.

**Figure 5.** Migrant’s types of job



Source: Fieldwork, 2022

In light of this, public attitudes towards refugees and migrants are best understood within the regional and national contexts in which they are formed (UNHCR, 2017). In many cases, migrants’ racial and ethnic groups are different from those of the native population, and they have different religious, political, and cultural backgrounds. Inflows of groups with a different religion, language, or culture may be perceived as undermining existing institutions and threatening the way of life and social status of current residents. Furthermore, the unfamiliarity of immigrants may attract hostility, stemming from the displacement of aggressive impulses caused by stress in the social environment (Levine and Campbell 1972). Most often in Malta, the majority of the African migrants are confronted with the disparaging cliché: “You can go back to your country”, and as expressed by the respondents in Table 1, they are mostly angry with such a phrase, while some are sad. Nevertheless, some of them still feel indifferent.

Owing in part to labour shortages in specific sectors, an expanding global economy and the long-term trend of ageing populations, many industrial countries need migrants. They face shortages in highly skilled areas such as information technology and health services, as well as

in manual jobs in agriculture, manufacturing, and construction (Mutume, 2006). In this instance, even “irregular” migrants may fill the vacuum because, as observed by Karagueuzian and Verdier-Chouchane (2014), ignoring them constitutes both an economic and social cost not only for “irregular” migrants, but also for the host country. It forces these populations to find a job in the informal market, thus expanding the informal economy in the host country.

**Table 1.** Peculiar phrase of resentment

<b>“You can go back to your Country”</b>		<b>Feelings of those who experienced it</b>	
Those who experienced it	69.7%	Angry	50.0%
Those who never experienced it	30.3%	Sad	21.4%
		Scared	3.6%
		Indifferent	25.0%

*Source:* Fieldwork, 2022

With 10,000 jobs being created annually in Malta, according to the Ministry of Labour, it requires 30,000 foreign workers within four years, commencing in 2018. In reality, Malta’s working-age population can only fill a quarter of the available jobs (Tory-Murphy, 2018). The country entered the pandemic crisis on a relatively firm economic footing. Its economy boomed in the years before the pandemic, with GDP growth averaging 6¾ per cent in 2014–2019, significantly higher than the EU average of 2 percent (IMF, 2021). The economy of Malta grew 10% year-on-year in the fourth quarter of 2021, following an upwardly revised 12.7% rise in the previous quarter. In seventeen months, despite the pandemic, full-time jobs increased by 8,054 while the number of part-time jobs went up by 2,231. That is nearly 10,300 additional jobs, or approximately 20 new jobs per day in 2021 (The Journal, 2022).

The paradox, however, remains that while there is a stable and thriving economy, Malta still has over 103,329 citizens (20.3% of the population) living below the national poverty line (Galea, 2022), in part because median and minimum wages have not increased alongside profits. The Maltese minimum wage is among the lowest in the EU (Guggenheim, 2019). Similarly, there seems to be a contradiction between the economic boom and labour shortages and “Malta’s determination not to receive any of the thousands of African migrants who risk their lives to cross the Mediterranean” (Tory-Murphy, 2018). Recently, many of those whom Malta had refused to allow ashore ended up in southern Italy, where one in five working-age people is jobless and youth unemployment is running close to 50 percent. Now, an increasing number of these mainly sub-Saharan African migrants and asylum seekers are finding their way into the informal economy of Malta. After obtaining a temporary permit to stay in Italy, which allows them to travel in the E.U. but theoretically only work in Italy, migrant workers are being lured by jobs in Malta without legal contracts (Tory-Murphy, 2018). Corroborating this, Regine Psaila (Personal communication, 2021) explains that the economic context of Malta is attractive to migrants living in Italy:

We have reports of migrants whose claim for asylum was registered in Italy. However, due to the lack of job opportunities, they come to Malta, request asylum, hoping that the system will take as long as possible before discovering that they have their fingerprints in another EU country. In the meantime, they can be hosted in a refugee camp and legally work if they are lucky to find a contract.

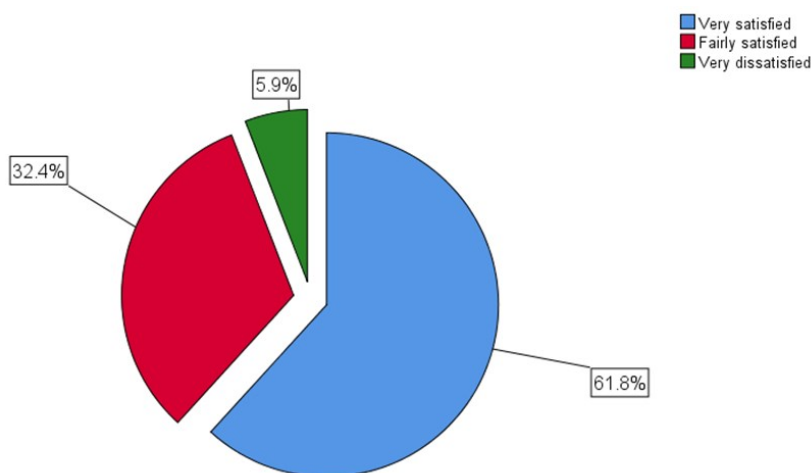
Consequently, more migrants exist under irregular living and working conditions, with higher risks of exploitation, accidents, illnesses and, ultimately, deportation (Dünnwald, 2011). A



survey of 72 migrant households conducted by the Jesuit Refugee Service and the Aditus Foundation found that only around a quarter of heads of household are employed full-time, and the average household income in the sample was below Malta's poverty threshold of €7,672 (approximately US\$9,340) per year. Almost a third could not afford to keep their home warm in winter, and half complained of a lack of space in their accommodation (Repeckaite, 2018). However, many of my respondents (about 61 percent) revealed that they were delighted with their present jobs in Malta compared to their countries of origin. While about 32 percent revealed that their satisfaction with their jobs is just fair, only about 6 percent of the migrants were very dissatisfied with their current jobs (See Figure 6).

Respondents in focus groups also confirmed being beneficiaries of the government's social welfare packages<sup>4</sup> for refugees and asylum seekers as documented in a paper issued by the *EU Commission's Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion* in 2016 which sets out the different forms of support offered to refugees, asylum seekers, recipients of subsidiary protection, and Third Country Nationals (TCNs) in Malta (DeBono and Garzia, 2016). Malta has a consolidated social benefits system that supports those with low incomes; in addition, health care and education are available free of charge (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2019). Although social security policy and legislation preclude asylum seekers<sup>5</sup> from social welfare benefits, except those benefits which are defined as 'contributory', persons with refugee status are treated like all Maltese nationals and are, therefore, entitled to all benefits and allowances under the Maltese Social Security Act (CAP 318) as defined in the Legal Notice 243 of 2008 [Article 14.1.a (iii)]: 'to have access to employment, social welfare, appropriate accommodation, integration programmes, state education and to receive state medical care, especially in the case of vulnerable groups of persons' (DeBono and Garzia, 2016).

**Figure 6.** Satisfaction with the current job compared to Country of origin



*Source:* Fieldwork, 2022

<sup>4</sup> Social welfare is a complex issue that ranges from food and shelter to financial entitlements to education and job opportunities to medical and health coverage.

<sup>5</sup> These groups of persons receive other financial aid from the AWAS, the per diem allowance. This allowance is mainly used to cover food and transport and the amount of such allowance varies according to the asylum seeker's status.

Bearing in mind that the social-beneficiary *status quo* of asylum applicants (by providing them with welfare benefits and the necessary access to education, language and the social infrastructure) may increase the budgetary costs (Kancs and Lecca, 2018) of host countries, it is revealed in research carried out by Mayblin (2019) that governments in Europe, and indeed beyond, use many different tools in attempting to decrease the numbers of people arriving in their countries<sup>6</sup> to seek asylum:

Many politicians believe that a large number of asylum seekers are not genuine refugees but are instead economic migrants trying to cheat the system. As the number of asylum applications from non-Europeans increased at the end of the twentieth century, these sorts of assumptions around asylum seekers not being 'genuine' or as deserving as those in the past, have become ever more popular.

Though most empirical studies, for example, World Bank (2015), find that immigration can bring relatively immediate benefits to receiving countries' economies, depending on how quickly accepted refugees find jobs and to what extent their skills are complementary to the existing workforce, the movement of peoples across sovereign borders often still triggers a deep sense of fear and uncertainty (Steiner, 2019). For instance, the arrival of persons seeking asylum or social protection, who tend to be of African origin and of Muslim faith, frequently attracts backlash from some segments of the Maltese population. This is especially true in towns that host or are close to the more extensive open centres. According to the Eurobarometer survey of April 2018, 63 percent of Maltese respondents view immigration as a problem, while 64 percent disagree entirely that immigrants enrich the cultural life of the country. Another Eurobarometer survey (September 2018) indicated that 55 per cent of the Maltese respondents resorted to language labelled as hate speech -the highest percentage in the entire EU (Grech, 2019). Regine Psaila of the African Media Association in Malta, (Personal communication, February 4, 2021), observed in an interview:

From the reports we receive from migrants working and dealing with administrative staff, the reception is not easy. Migrants are not accepted readily as there is a perception in the country that the small island will be invaded.

## **Addressing integration challenges and racial discrimination: Policy recommendations**

### *Commitment to Anti-discrimination legislation*

The past two decades, according to Pisani (2021), have been marked by inexcusable violence and collective failure to address institutional racism in Malta. As noted in this study, a combination of internal and external dynamics shapes public attitudes about migration. Thus, to defuse adverse reactions to forced migrants and create the space needed for community cohesion, the Maltese authorities should start with effective management of high inflows of new arrivals/migrants, considering broad accusations of ignoring the plight of migrants stranded at sea, as well as delaying assistance. The protection offered by the law within

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<sup>6</sup> According to the OECD, the cost of processing and accommodating asylum seekers is estimated to be around ten thousand euros per application for the first year but can be significantly higher if integration support is provided during the asylum phase. Since the practice of providing international protection is costly, states have the incentive to discourage asylum seekers from seeking international protection in their territories and instead encourage them to do so in other EU member states with better conditions (Petroni, 2019).



workable anti-discrimination legislation and policy is critical to successful migrant integration. At the regional level, The EU has one of the most robust legal frameworks against racial discrimination and encourages Member States to develop and adopt national action plans against racism and racial discrimination with close involvement of civil society and equality bodies.

In Malta, the first national action plan against racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance was launched in 2021 (Fenech, 2021). Through its 22 measures, the policy aims to confront and eliminate racism in all its forms, individual, systemic and societal and to stimulate and support intercultural inclusion. The strategy is divided into four objectives: establishing an infrastructure to drive the strategy, a systematic approach to confronting racism, promoting political discourse based on intercultural inclusion, and tackling discrimination experienced by minority groups (Azzopardi, 2021). While it has the potential to make a real difference in people's lives (Pisani, 2021), the Nationalist Party spokesperson on human rights, good governance and the rule of law, Therese Cachia (2021) identifies some gaps: "the strategy does not particularly identify the risks of racism experienced by different migrant groups coming from a varied racial, ethnic, and cultural background. The strategy fails to identify their need to be considered as an integral part of Malta's society, as valid contributors to social, cultural, and political development."

The state has a duty to victims of violent crime to conduct proceedings that aim to identify, convict and punish offenders. Every victim of a crime has a fundamental right to effective access to criminal justice. (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023). Therefore, appropriate support for victims of racial discrimination, racist violence and harassment must be provided through access to safe and effective complaint channels. For effective implementation of the National Strategy in Malta, the 22 measures must be made practically actionable to promote diversity, ensure a discrimination-free and an inclusive workplace for everyone as well as protection against racial attacks such that it does not remain only a political statement. In addition to awareness-raising in minority communities and provision of adequate resources for equality bodies, victim support organisations and interpreters, the policy and strategy actions must be mainstreamed at all levels of government rather than being entrusted mainly to the human rights directorate of the Ministry for Equality, Research, and Innovation.

### *A Holistic Integration*

Addressing integration challenges is a multidimensional process and requires integrated policy actions in a number of policy areas (European Commission, 2017). It is now widely acknowledged that integration is a two-way street which requires a whole-of-society approach— an approach that engages people in the receiving community beyond government, policy, or political circles. Demanding that refugees and asylum-seekers assimilate to their new surroundings without recognising the role played by the receiving community in all its constituent parts does not consider, let alone address, structural barriers, hostility, or discrimination, and therefore does not facilitate full participation in society (International Rescue Committee, 2018). A variety of issues, according to Regine Psaila (Personal communication, January 9, 2021) should be addressed in this regard:

It is important to address first the public discourse displayed by the politically exposed persons. Hate speech on social media is openly racist. Training should be

provided regularly to educators in charge of multicultural classes; and to staff working in public administration. Maltese of African descent should be given voice and visibility to break the circle of the stigma...etc.

In March 2022, the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) expressed concern that Malta had no plans to introduce a form of regularisation for people who had resided there for many years and could not be returned to their countries of origin (Taylor, 2022). While paying contributions to the country's social security system, many migrants who work regularly and pay taxes do not have access to many of the social benefits that are available to Maltese citizens, including family allowances, retirement pension, unemployment benefits, or COVID-19 related state support. Some rejected asylum seekers who have resided in Malta for over a decade do not enjoy adequate legal protection.

Overall, any integration policy, whether at the local, national, or regional level, should therefore, be underpinned by a detailed context analysis that considers, not only the barriers to integration specific to refugees and asylum-seekers, but also the context of the receiving community. The involvement of migrant representatives, including women, in the drawing up and implementing integration policies and programmes should be enhanced. Strong partnerships with stakeholders rooted in local communities are crucial to understanding this context, as well as avoiding the duplication of efforts and ensuring the best use of resources (International Rescue Committee, 2018). Effective integration policies are needed to allow migrants to participate fully in the life of the host country. Strategies for integration must necessarily encompass all areas of society, and include social, political, and cultural aspects of that society.

#### *Respect for Human Rights*

Migrants and refugees are vulnerable in host countries, and national actions are needed to address the new nature of migration and its evolution (UNDP, 2016). International law aims to protect refugees while allowing states to retain control of their borders – but the definition of “refugee” status is political, and subject to a constant struggle over who deserves and who does not (Trilling, 2018). While states actively cooperate in stemming irregular migration, they should also ensure that their efforts do not jeopardize human rights, including the right of refugees to seek asylum. Countries should pass laws that protect refugees, particularly women and children, a big part of the refugee population and the primary victims. The Maltese government, working with the European Union and its agencies, as well as the UNHCR and NGOs should treat refugees and migrants with dignity, respecting human rights and affirming their commitments under international and European Union law.

Malta must continue to establish a more human rights-based approach to migrants and asylum seekers arriving and develop a coherent and effective migration policy. Malta, according to François Crépeau (2014), “has the power to admit, deny entry or return migrants, but it equally has an obligation to respect the human rights of all migrants in the process. In complying with international obligations, Malta must also respect certain limitations, such as the principles of non-refoulement, of the best interest of the child and family unity”. Malta should refrain from using any form of physical force against migrants who have not committed any crime, when





implementing identification mechanisms, such as fingerprinting<sup>7</sup>. Also, access to certain rights such as education, employment and social security and assistance is a vital element in promoting economic and social cohesion in host countries (UNHCR, 2017). Indeed, all members of the community will benefit from access to rights, information, and support to make equal opportunities for everyone.

#### *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration*

For migrants who may consider assisted voluntary return, which is one of the policies in Europe's management of migration as alternative to deportation for migrants in deportable circumstances, humanitarian actors should ensure that implementation of AVRR are carried out through informed, dignified, humane and non-coercive processes. There should be support for voluntary return and sustainable reintegration of returning migrants, including through circular migration schemes, informing migrants abroad of the labour market situation in their home countries and their return possibilities, training of returning migrant workers and promotion of transfer of social security benefits, and stimulating entrepreneurship.

While highlighting the success recorded under the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme, the International Organization for Migration (Personal communication, October 2021), being the only organization in Malta that provides *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration*, affirms that over 340 persons were assisted to voluntarily return from Malta, primarily to sub-Saharan African and Asian countries between 2009 and 2020. Until July 2014, under RESTART IV, AVRR returnees were entitled to EUR 200 as a pre-departure cash allowance and EUR 2800 as an in-kind reintegration grant.

The AVRR projects, according to an IOM official, have contributed to strengthening cooperation between relevant Maltese authorities and their counterparts in sub-Saharan African countries. Over the years, the AVRR programme in Malta has included not only AVRR projects but also parallel initiatives aimed at supporting integrated return management, namely, projects 'Enhancement of Cooperation Avenues with African Countries' (ERF 2007), 'Cooperation between Malta and African Countries to Enhance Migration Dialogue and Development – CoMAM' (phases I and II, funded under RF AP 2010 and RF AP 2012, respectively) and 'Enhanced Cooperation between Malta and Migrants' Countries of Origin (Personal communication, October 2021).

In the long term, any return to one's country of origin, regardless of status, should take place in safety and with dignity, in line with global human rights standards. Thus, the Maltese government should continue to ensure that the rights and dignity of the migrants involved are respected. Experience indicates that returns are more sustainable if a migrant's decision to return is an informed and voluntary and supported by appropriate reintegration measures initiated in both the host and origin countries. In this context, reintegration measures offered at the pre-departure stage in the host country (e.g. vocational training), along with return counselling and information services, play a crucial role and have a direct impact on sustainable reintegration (IOM, 2011). It must be noted however, that assisted voluntary

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<sup>7</sup> Migrants are reluctant to comply with the identification mechanisms because of the consequences attached to such identification, in particular the inability to move beyond the European country responsible for their entry and the prohibition on claiming asylum in the country of their choice.

return programmes, though very useful, should not automatically be termed “voluntary” when offered to migrants in detention.

## Conclusion

As established in this study, there is evidence of a growing negative public perception against migrants in Malta, including those seeking asylum. These do not promote a community of adaptability, resilience, vibrancy, and sustainable economic prosperity that cultural diversity guarantees. Hence, the economic and socio-cultural benefits inherent in a multicultural society should be recognised while addressing entrenched harmful narratives and practices in the country. However, genuine commitment is expected of the Maltese authorities to tackle racism in all its complexity in collaboration with various stakeholders. In this circumstance, the government can embrace the common guiding principles for developing and implementing a national action plan against racism as provided by the European Commission (2022) which include the collection and use of equality data, applying a participatory approach and ensuring structured cooperation and coordination.

Equally important is the need for social integration to be acknowledged as a duty and a right, in the context of the European Union’s ‘Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion: 2021-2027’. In recognition of their contributions to better economic performance and as invaluable collaborative partners, migrants should have unrestricted access to some fundamental elements that are central to promoting economic and social cohesion including access to employment, education, social security and ‘long-term residency’ status for the integration of Third Country Nationals (TCNs).

Though a long-term and open-ended process of social and community change, migrant integration in a multicultural society like Malta, should embrace basic elements such as equality, cohesion, and diversity with particular emphasis on anti-discrimination legislation, citizenship/naturalisation, and family reunification. Given the complex structural and systemic inequalities in Maltese society, combating discrimination and racism through the national action plan strategy can be a starting point if implemented to address the vulnerabilities of minority groups and consideration for human dignity, equal concern, and respect.

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