

Iceland  
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Active  
citizens fund



# RESEARCH REPORT

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**PRESENTED BY**

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Iceland  
Liechtenstein  
Norway

**Active  
citizens fund**



Active Citizens Lab



# Exploratory Research into the status of civic engagement, democracy and human rights awareness in Malta

Active Citizens Lab  
Research Study  
Qualitative Study  
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Consulting Ltd.  
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Contracted by : SOS Malta  
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*overview*

# ABOUT THE FUNDING PROGRAMME

This project is supported by the Active Citizenship Fund . The Active Citizens Fund (ACF) in Malta is established under the specific Programme Area for Civil Society part of the EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021, financial contribution from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway to 15 EU countries in Central and Southern Europe and the Baltic.

ACF Malta has been awarded a budget of 700.000 Euros, for the period 2019 – 2024, with the aim to foster an enabling environment for the civil society sector, strengthen its capacity and strengthen the support for human rights and social inclusion and increase citizen participation in civic activities. ‘Civil society and active citizenship strengthened, and vulnerable groups empowered’ is the overall programme objective, which will be attained through projects and activities that cover four areas of support:

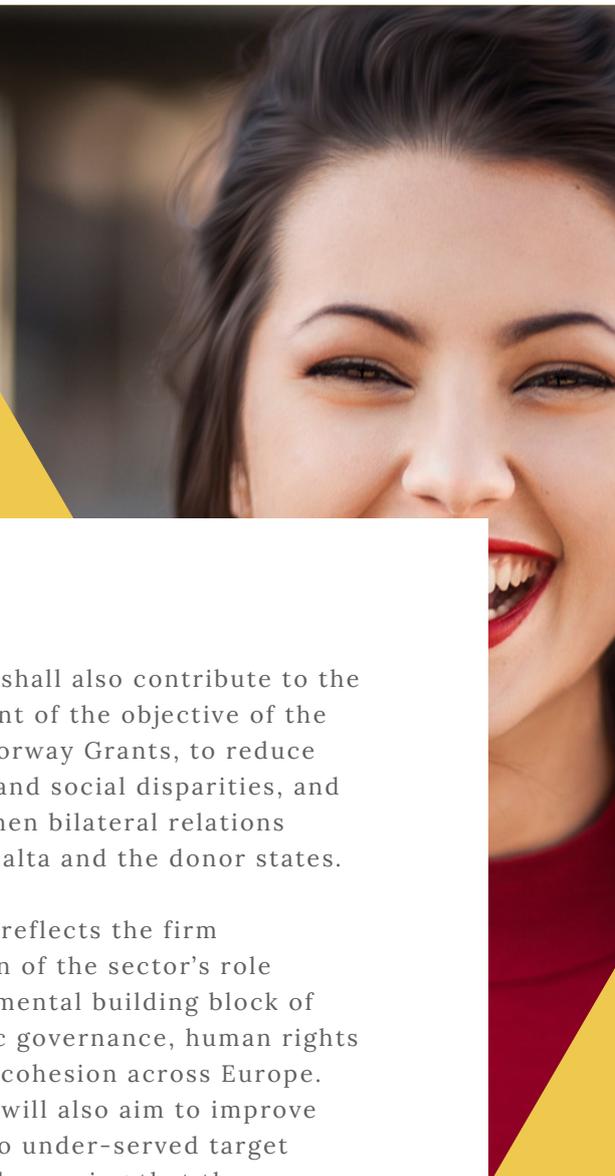
Democracy, active citizenship, good governance, and transparency;  
Human rights and equal treatment through combating any discrimination; Social justice and inclusion of vulnerable groups;  
Environment and climate change.

ACF Malta shall also contribute to the achievement of the objective of the EEA and Norway Grants, to reduce economic and social disparities, and to strengthen bilateral relations between Malta and the donor states.

ACF Malta reflects the firm recognition of the sector’s role as a fundamental building block of democratic governance, human rights and social cohesion across Europe. ACF Malta will also aim to improve outreach to under-served target groups and ensuring that the programme supports hard-to-reach target groups.

This will be ensured through the use of online tools designed to be inclusive for small organisations and informal groups;  
continuous support to project promoters throughout their project implementation, with a special focus on financial management; a focus on advocating for the rights of under-served groups rather than providing services.

<https://activecitizensfund.mt/acf-fund>



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# INTRODUCTION

In December 2017, a stakeholder consultation, to identify specific needs and challenges in Malta was held. This stakeholder meeting was attended by 14 participants; representatives of organisations and associations, the Ministry of European Affairs and Equality, platforms and networks, journalists and activists.

The specific challenges identified during the consultation were:

1. lack of civic participation in policy, governance and advocacy as well as
2. a lack of support for vulnerable groups and
3. vulnerable groups' voices not being heard.

All of this was discussed in the context of good governance, human rights and the rule of law. Lack of good governance started being discussed in Malta most recently in the Malta Human Rights Report 2016, due to the weakening and deterioration of the democratic system and the rule of law, which is undermining public trust in the authorities.

Recent reports such as 'The Rule of Law in Malta' and 'Governance in the EU Member States – Evidence from

Three Global Indicators', make reference to a major decline in Malta's international rankings related to governance, rule of law, democracy and freedom of expression.

This was further accentuated after Daphne Caruana Galizia - an investigative journalist in Malta - was murdered in October 2017 and the response of the authorities was neither satisfactory nor transparent in the eyes of many of the citizens. This incident made evident the recent decline in freedom of speech and journalism. The work of Daphne Caruana Galizia was mainly related to alleged acts of corruption by senior members of the Government and opposition, which reduce the accountability of the authorities and their ability to enforce the rule of law. Due to the small and limited capacity of CSOs in Malta it is difficult for individual organisations to fully take on the role of a watchdog and promote transparency and accountability. What is more, censorship of civil society has also been witnessed, for example through the removal of billboards put up by the activist group, Occupy Justice.



# INTRODUCTION

Stakeholders also stressed that fake news and disinformation is on the rise, which makes it challenging for civil society to disseminate genuine and impartial information, and may cause additional harm to already vulnerable groups.

Hate speech and discrimination based on race, religion, LGBTIQ identification, political opinion and belonging are worrying phenomena that threaten the respect of human rights, especially among these groups.

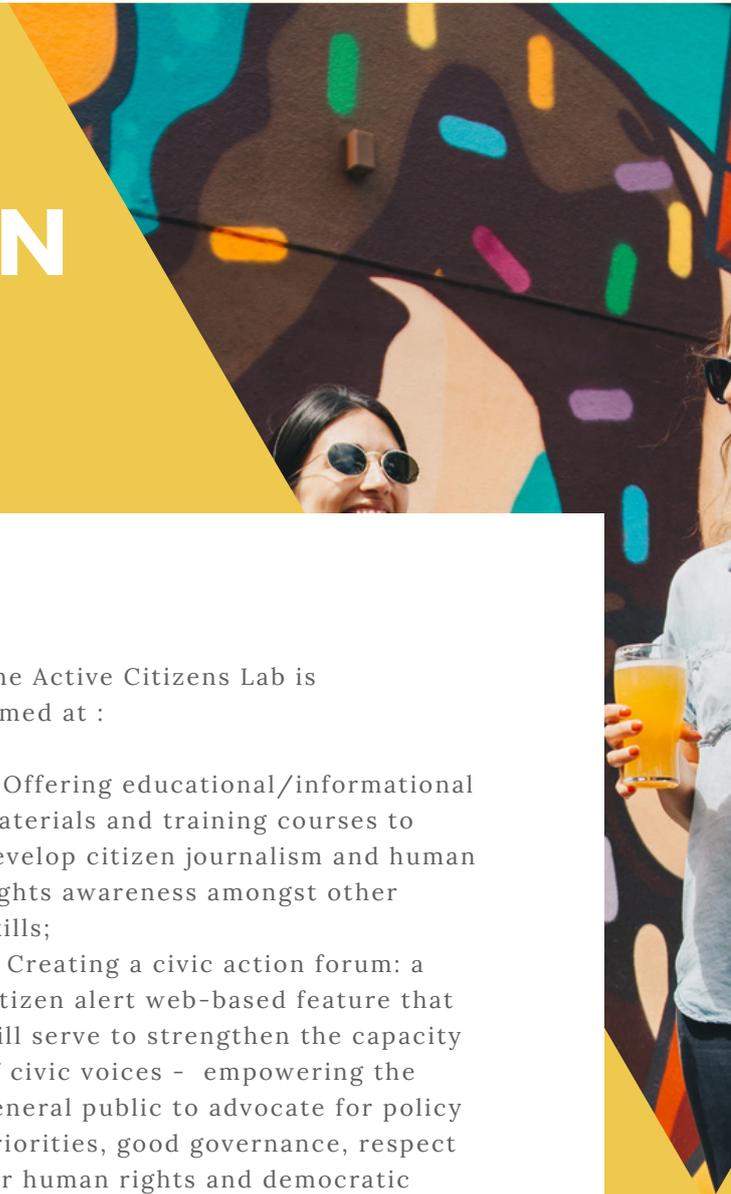
Taking all these factors into consideration, SOS Malta felt it was imperative to create an Active Citizens Lab that would serve as a watchdog as well as empower both civic society and the general public to become more engaged active participants, and thus embarked on the Active Citizens Lab project.

This research project is being carried out within the context of the Active Citizens Lab project. The Active Citizens Lab project includes an online as well as offline component.

The Active Citizens Lab is aimed at :

1. Offering educational/informational materials and training courses to develop citizen journalism and human rights awareness amongst other skills;
2. Creating a civic action forum: a citizen alert web-based feature that will serve to strengthen the capacity of civic voices - empowering the general public to advocate for policy priorities, good governance, respect for human rights and democratic principles;
3. Providing professional support and practical assistance offered through an Advisory Board of Experts which will be delivered offline, through face-to-face meetings, and online through informative materials and a chat/email-based service.

Topics covered will be research-based advocacy, a gathering of public opinion data, media literacy, monitoring of respect of human rights and democratic principles, equality, development of legislation, etc.



# INTRODUCTION

The objectives of the Active Citizens Lab will be to empower and equip citizens and civil society, with the necessary skills and tools to push for good governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights, and democratic principles. Such a transformative educational tool would generate healthy and informed debates that can challenge and push forward the policy-making process. This will result in increased Citizen Participation in civic activities and enhanced capacity and sustainability of civil society, as well as the creation of a Watchdog lab for Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Back in 2016, the Malta Human Rights Report brought to the fore severe gaps in good governance and the bothersome deterioration of the democratic system and the rule of law.

While subsequent reports have lent further credence to the argument, the real eye-opener was Daphne Caruana Galizia's cold-blooded murder: threats to accountability and transparency ushered many community members to take an active stand in demanding justice and speaking truth to power.

Against this backdrop, the present report aims to shed light on the nature, degree and forms of active citizenship on the island of Malta. In order to achieve this objective, researchers relied upon a survey, a focus group with community members, a focus group and interviews with civil society representatives. The research was conducted entirely online due to COVID-19 restrictions and in light of the high rates of social media engagement in Malta. Data was collected over a period of approximately two months and subsequently analysed. Key findings can be summarised as follows:

- Community members had different understandings of active citizenship, ranging from following the news to participating in protests or helping others, such as family, friends, or strangers
- People were generally familiar with the NGOs supporting causes that are of interest to them
- Few individuals were truly aware of the scale of NGO work in Malta
- NGOs were critiqued for lack of openness and inadequate communication skills, jeopardizing their ability to engage a greater number of supporters
- NGO leaders were critical of the notion of "active citizenship", which they considered exclusionary. This was reflected in comments made by survey respondents on the use of language and the inclusion of migrants as pivotal to greater engagement
- Challenges faced by civil society actors were varied and in part, this is likely the result of the sector's internal diversity

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The technology was mentioned by many organizations as useful to reach out to the general population, yet its exclusionary risks were a concern for many NGOs
- Community outreach remains one of the most effective strategies, yet it was deemed not feasible, nor sustainable for some organizations
- NGOs were extremely negative about knowledge of human rights in Malta
- Much more needs to be done to recognise the role of NGOs in Maltese society.

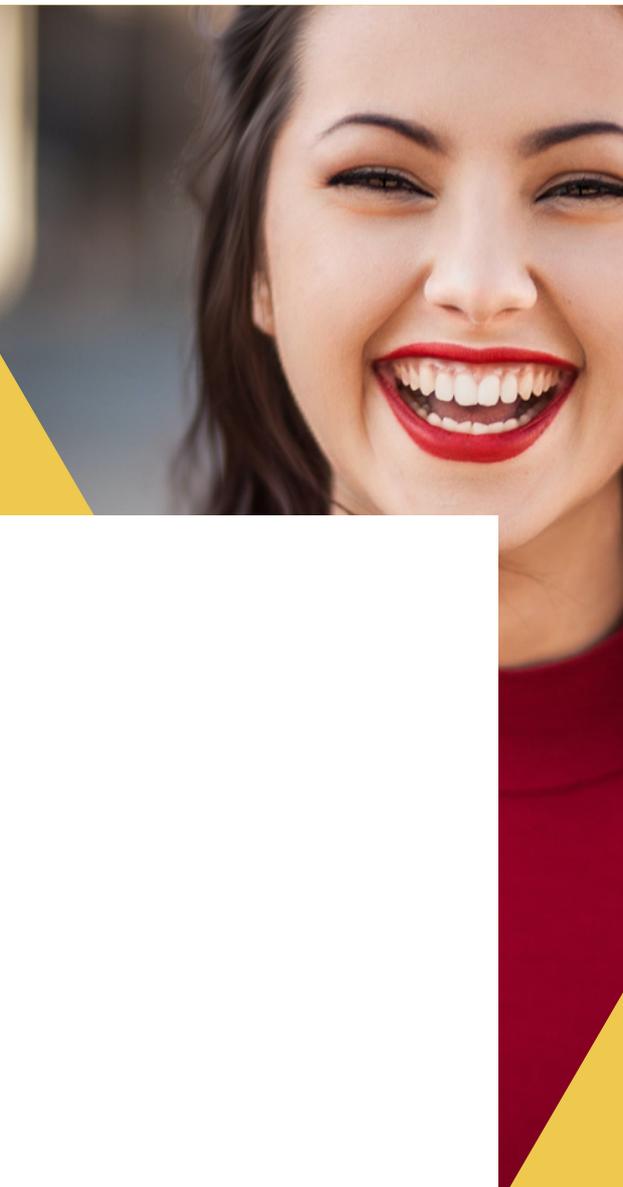
Given the time frame and the small sample size, this research can only be considered exploratory. However, its findings give food for thought for NGOs, citizens and those in government who seek to bolster democratic dialogue and human rights in Malta.



# METHODOLOGY

The Active Citizens Lab (ACL) research project is addressed to two main target groups: citizens and NGOs. Given ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic and the emphasis placed on the digital element in the ACL project, the research relied exclusively on online investigation tools.

The methodology adopted was mixed-methods, with a strong qualitative element.



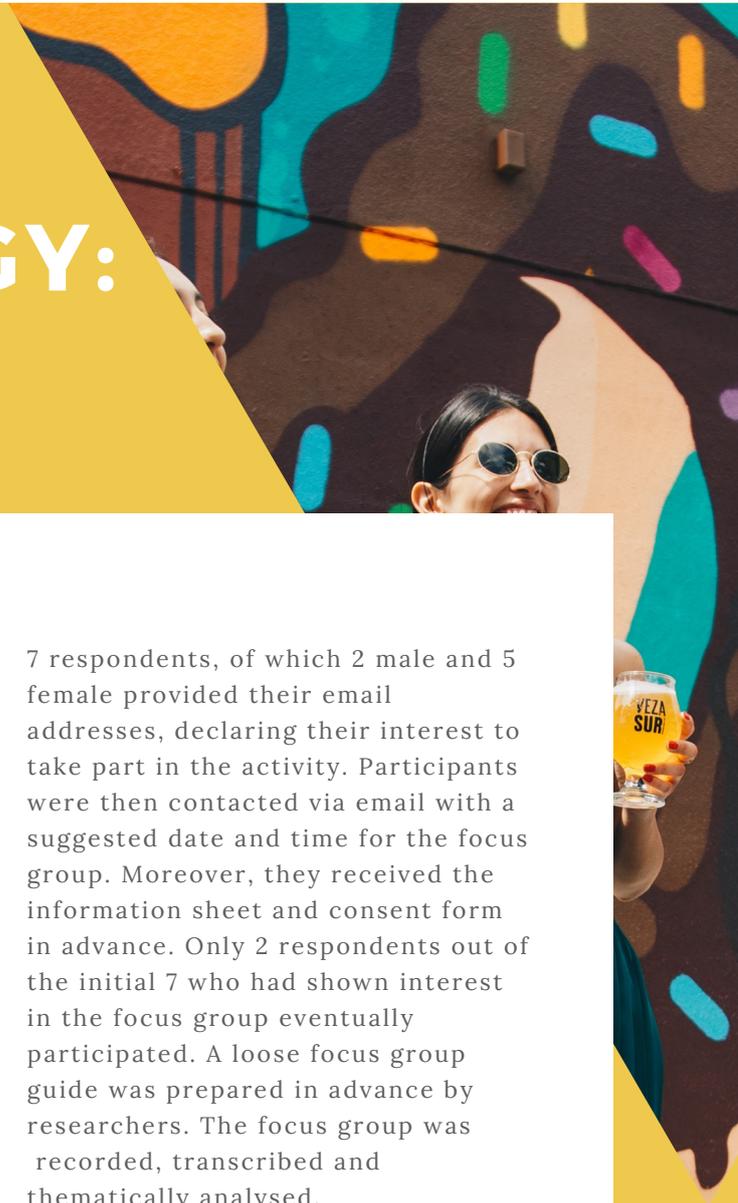
# METHODOLOGY: CITIZENS

Two main tools were employed to investigate citizens' perceptions and interpretations of active citizenship and related issues: a short bilingual survey in English and Maltese and a focus group. The survey consisted of approximately 10 questions and was disseminated via social media. Questions were geared towards gaining insight into respondents' degree of knowledge about NGOs and their views about civil society action, the ways in which they engage, understandings of human rights, and suggestions for greater citizen involvement. Basic demographic information (age, gender, nationality etc.) was also collected.

Participants for the citizens' focus group were recruited through survey administration. More specifically, survey respondents were asked to provide their email address for participation in an online focus group. They were further informed that the focus group would provide an opportunity to delve deeper into the issues addressed via the survey. Researchers decided that the focus group would be conducted if a minimum of 4 survey respondents gave their availability to participate.

7 respondents, of which 2 male and 5 female provided their email addresses, declaring their interest to take part in the activity. Participants were then contacted via email with a suggested date and time for the focus group. Moreover, they received the information sheet and consent form in advance. Only 2 respondents out of the initial 7 who had shown interest in the focus group eventually participated. A loose focus group guide was prepared in advance by researchers. The focus group was recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed.

One potential drawback in focus group discussion is the lack of guarantee that all those recruited will attend the discussion. To avert this risk, some scholars have recommended over-recruiting by 10-25% (Rabiee, 2004). Due to time constraints, it was not tenable to conduct a second round of recruitment. Rather than discarding the focus group altogether in light of its small size, we decided to go ahead and conduct it all the same. While larger focus groups allow for a broader exchange of ideas, there are undeniable benefits to smaller focus groups.



# METHODOLOGY: CITIZENS

Smaller groups allow participants to build on each other's contributions thanks to the focus-group format, while simultaneously giving them more space and time to elaborate on their own ideas. If in larger focus groups, concepts and ideas can only be cursorily touched upon, smaller focus groups permit to achieve more breadth and depth (Morgan, 2012).

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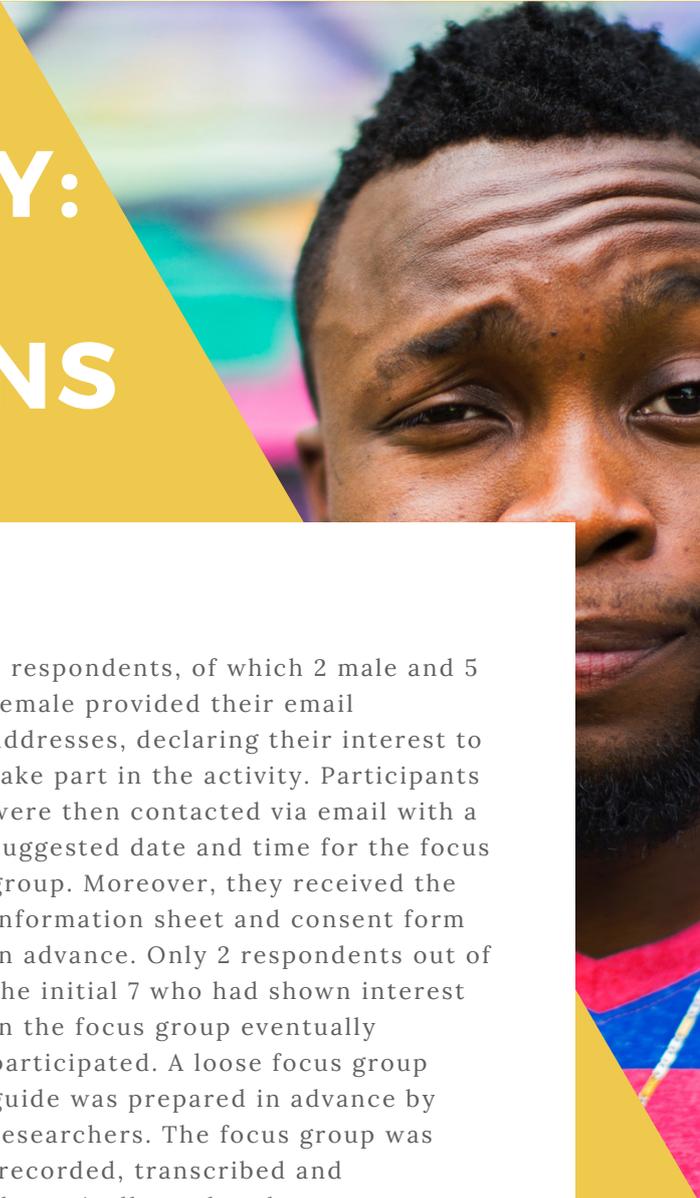
# METHODOLOGY: VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

For this target group, researchers opted for a qualitative methodology, which included one focus group with three participants and six qualitative interviews via Zoom with NGO representatives. Efforts were made to include organisations supporting a range of different causes.

Potential participants were invited to participate in the focus group or interviews via email. Qualitative interviews/focus group explored notions of active citizenship, challenges faced by NGOs in conveying their message to the public and engaging citizens in their cause, use of technology to harness citizen engagement, communication strategies, human rights and funding. Participants received information about the project, research activities, confidentiality and anonymity requirements beforehand and were asked to sign a consent form. Interviews and focus group were transcribed and thematically analysed. All research materials were safely stored.

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# METHODOLOGY: ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP SURVEY

41 respondents answered the survey, out of which only 8 were male (20%) and the remainder were female or did not disclose their gender. Most respondents were aged 30-39 (41.5%) and 40-49 (29.3%), with only a handful representing the 18-29 age group (n=6; 14.6%) and an even smaller share accounting for the 50-59 year-olds (n=2; 4.9%) and 60-69 year-olds (n=2; 4.9%). 2 respondents chose not to reveal their age. The main nationality in the sample was Maltese; 29.2% of EU citizens also took the survey.



FIGURE 1: WORLD CLOUD OF MOST COMMON WORDS UTILISED BY RESPONDENTS TO DESCRIBE ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

# METHODOLOGY: ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP SURVEY

Understandings of “active citizenship” varied within the sample. Four main themes were identified based on the answers provided:

1. Involvement in the political life of the country (most popular)
2. Being informed
3. Community-based action
4. Speaking up

Overlaps between themes were frequent, with several respondents highlighting that being informed may also require speaking up or participating in protests. Political engagement was also coupled with community-based action.

Given the small sample size and the fact that several respondents skipped the question, researchers decided against categorising differing shades of meaning as sub-themes; it is worth noting however, that even within individual themes a host of different nuances emerged. Thus, for some, being involved in the political life of the country meant first and foremost, voting. For others, it entailed participating in political functions or events. When articulating “speaking up” most made reference to voicing concerns in a generic manner, while a handful of respondents interpreted being vocal as holding politicians to account.

A few participants perceived speaking up as combating injustices, thereby emphasizing the role of bystanders in fighting discrimination and exclusion. Community-based action ranged from participating in local events to volunteering, respecting one’s surroundings, or helping others, be it family, friends, or local community members. The notion of involvement geared towards the betterment or improvement of the current status quo was also mentioned by several survey participants.



# METHODOLOGY: ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP SURVEY

## VARYING UNDERSTANDINGS OF IDENTIFIED THEMES

### INVOLVEMENT IN THE POLITICAL LIFE OF THE COUNTRY

VOTING

PARTICIPATING  
IN POLITICAL  
EVENTS

### BEING INFORMED

KEEPING ABREAST OF  
POLITICAL AND SOCIAL  
DEVELOPMENTS

TAKING INTEREST  
IN NATIONAL OR  
LOCAL AFFAIRS

### SPEAKING UP

VOICING  
CONCERNS OR  
GRIEVANCES

DEMANDING  
ACCOUNTABILITY  
FROM POLITICAL  
LEADERSHIP

FIGHTING  
INJUSTICES

### COMMUNITY- BASED ACTION

PARTICIPATING  
IN LOCAL  
EVENTS

VOLUNTEERING

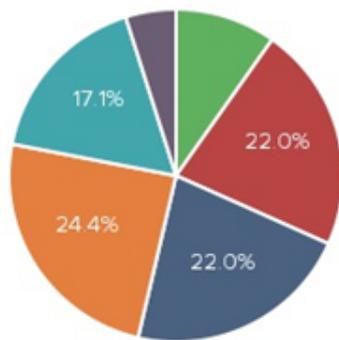
RESPECTING ONE'S  
SURROUNDINGS

HELPING  
OTHERS

**TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF VARYING UNDERSTANDINGS OF IDENTIFIED THEMES**

Respondents were asked to measure their social and political engagement on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all engaged and 5 is extremely engaged. A larger share of respondents displayed high levels of engagement (items 4 and 5 ; n=17; 41.4%), as opposed to those who identified their involvement as low or inexistent (items 2 and 1; n=13; 31.7%). 21.9% of respondents perceived their engagement as moderate (n=9). The highest percentage of responses per single item (n=10; 24.3%) was recorded among those who viewed themselves as very engaged (item 4).

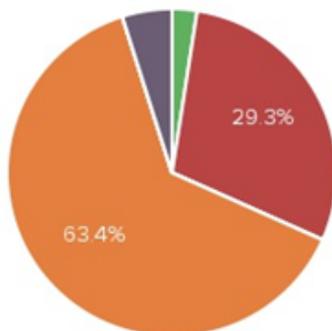
# METHODOLOGY: ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP SURVEY



1 - Not at all engaged/ ifisser li m'intix	4
2	9
3	9
4	10
5 - Extremely engaged/ interessat hafna	7
No answer	2

Survey participants were also asked to choose the various forms that their civic engagement takes, from a pre-defined list, which allowed them to select more than one option. It emerged that the most popular form of engagement is via social media, followed by membership in community-based or voluntary organisations and participation in professional or trade organisations. The least popular forms of engagement comprised political parties, student and trade unions.

Given the sample's reliance on social media for engagement, it should come as no surprise that social media were reported to be the main source of information on current events, followed by newspapers.



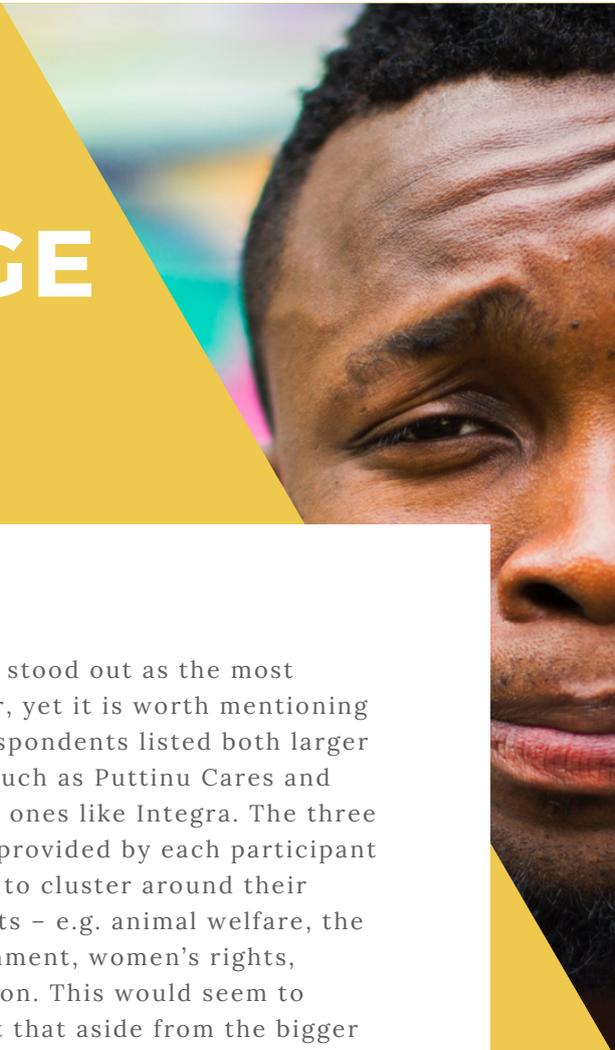
TV - Televizjoni	1	2.4%
Newspapers - Gazzetti	12	29.3%
Radio - Radju	0	0.0%
Social media - Midja Soċjali	26	63.4%
Word of mouth - Bil-Fomm	0	0.0%
No answer	2	4.9%

# VIEWS OF NGOS AND KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

A 2004 report by the European Commission counted 300 organisations as officially enrolled in the Registry of Voluntary Organisations, whilst also conceding the projection to be an under-estimation (GHK, 2004). A 2020 report published in context of Erasmus+ project NGenvironment stated that the total number of NGOs in Malta at the time of writing was 1,479. 46% of these organisations were classified as membership and religious organisations, 43% engaged in social work activities and the remaining 6% and 5% concerned themselves with human health and veterinary activities respectively (Across Limits, 2020). A cursory glance at the data showcased in the two above-mentioned reports, reveals that the number of Malta-based non-governmental organisations has risen exponentially over the past 15 odd years. Yet, while a minority of survey participants (n=7; 17%) correctly estimated the number of NGOs to sit between 1000 and 2000, most guesses ranged between 50 and 300. Survey participants were also asked to list three NGOs that they are familiar with.

Caritas stood out as the most popular, yet it is worth mentioning that respondents listed both larger NGOs such as Puttinu Cares and smaller ones like Integra. The three names provided by each participant tended to cluster around their interests – e.g. animal welfare, the environment, women’s rights, migration. This would seem to suggest that aside from the bigger and more well-known organisations, people are aware of NGOs that advocate causes that are dear to them, regardless of their size.

Views of voluntary organisations and civil society actors were overwhelmingly positive in the sample. The main reasons adduced included their ability to pressure decision-makers, their function of go-betweens the people and the government, their hands-on work at the grassroots level, including in terms of service provision, their role in raising awareness among the general public about relevant issues, and the free nature of the support provided. The very few negative responses flagged that some civil society organisations are too politicized.



# VIEWS OF NGOS AND KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Respondents generally provided adequate, albeit broad, answers concerning human rights. A degree of awareness of the topic was registered, however, more in depth research is required to assess citizens' knowledge in the area.



# PERCEPTIONS OF VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS

## PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

The generally optimistic approach to civil society, especially as regards safeguarding and upholding the needs of community members, stood in stark contrast with respondents' perceptions of government institutions. While 32% of survey participants declared to moderately trust institutions such as the police, local councils, ministries and courts, 51% stated that they trust them very little or not at all. Only 2 % reported to trust institutions rather much. 15 % skipped the question.

## HOW CAN CITIZENS BECOME MORE ENGAGED?

The main suggestions for greater citizen engagement revolved around the enhancement of accountability, transparency, honesty and integrity at decision-making level. Several respondents also highlighted the need for better and more reliable information. From this transpires a general disillusionment with the political system, allegedly disincentivizing many from taking initiative in the public sphere.

## THROUGH CITIZENS' EYES

The citizens' focus group brought together two participants, a Maltese and EU national living in Malta, aged 30-40. One respondent was male and the other was female. Both had garnered substantial experience in the civil society sector over the years. However, their involvement in fields other than the not-for-profit, rendered them simultaneously insiders and outsiders, allowing for a rich and meaningful exchange.



# BEING AN ACTIVE CITIZEN

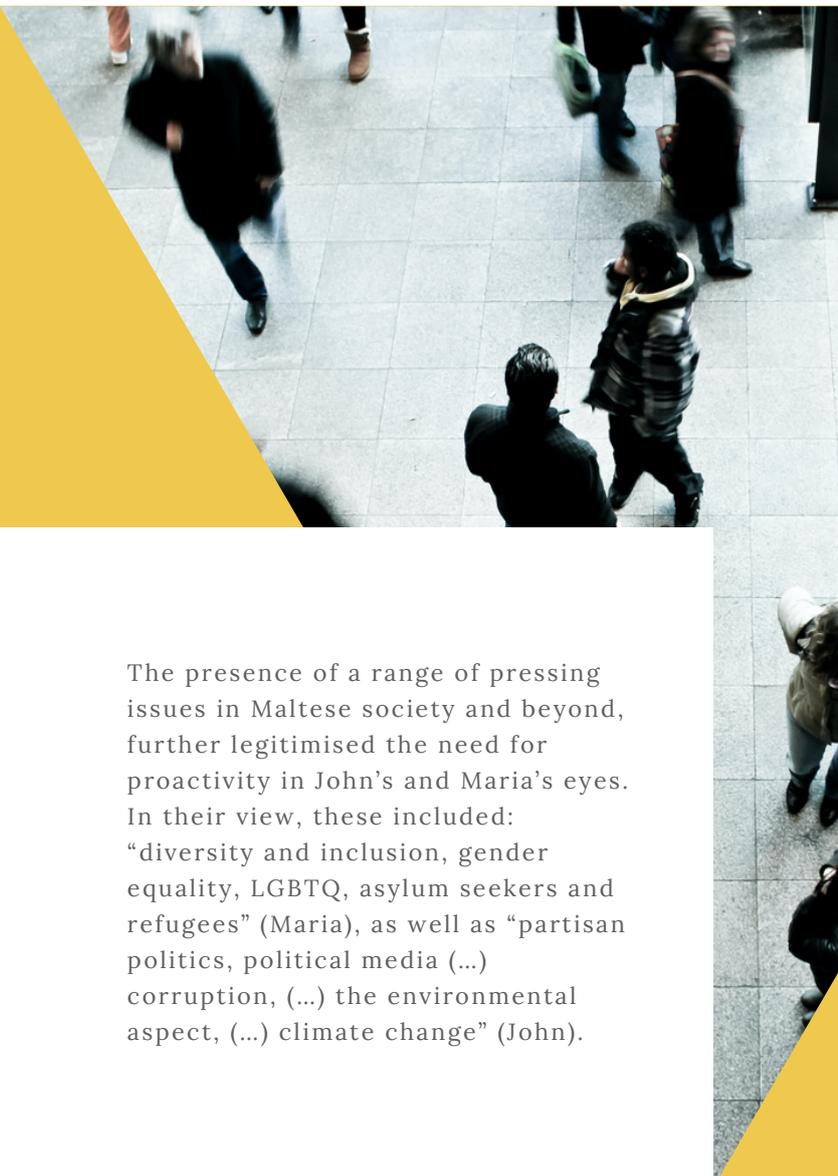
John and Maria<sup>[1]</sup> viewed an active citizen as someone who devotes considerable time and energy to the improvement of society. Maria was quick to point out that citizenship is a “problematic” concept, arguing for a broader and more inclusive interpretation of the term, unencumbered by state borders or legal status:

"You can be active at the local level, and then at the global level, not in your country... or maybe for a global issue at the local level, or at the global level for a local issue" (Maria)

The notion of active citizenship was close to home particularly for John, who credited it with providing him with “purpose and direction” and irreversibly influencing his “career choices”. The desire to “make the world we live in a better place” was regarded as a crucial source of motivation in the lives of both respondents.

The presence of a range of pressing issues in Maltese society and beyond, further legitimised the need for proactivity in John’s and Maria’s eyes. In their view, these included: “diversity and inclusion, gender equality, LGBTQ, asylum seekers and refugees” (Maria), as well as “partisan politics, political media (...) corruption, (...) the environmental aspect, (...) climate change” (John).

[1] Pseudonyms

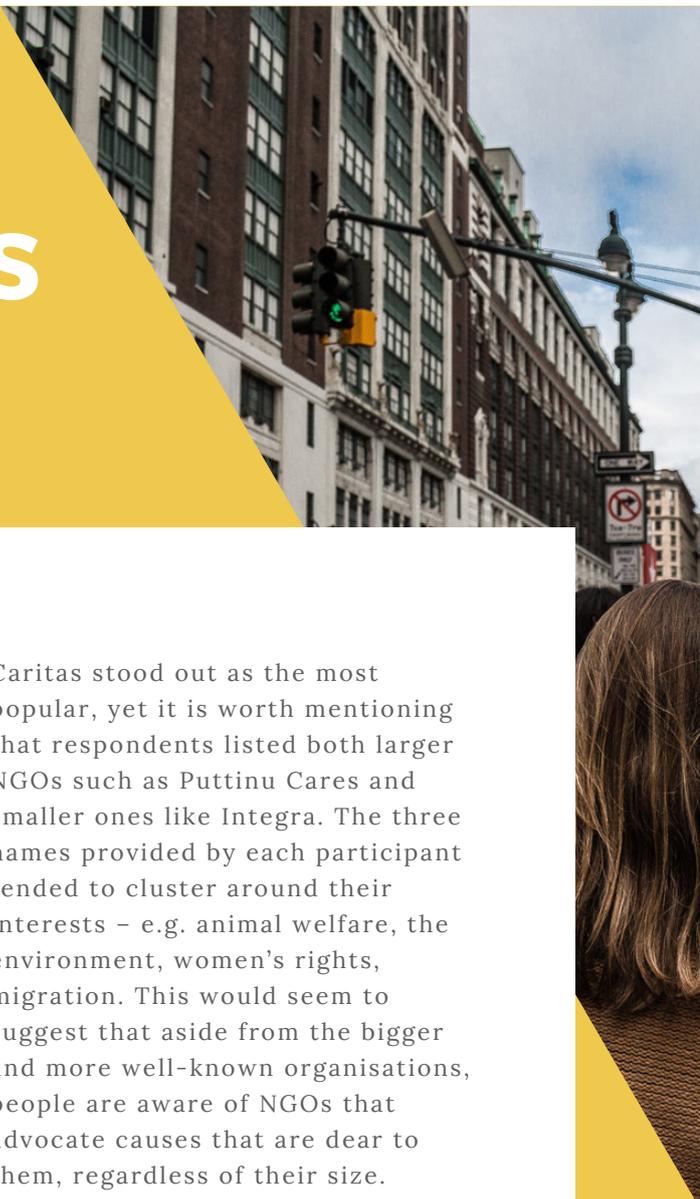


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# WHAT CAN NGOS DO DIFFERENTLY?

While confident of the vital contributions made by NGOs in “holding the leaders accountable”, “bridging the gap between the scientific community and society, or the scientific community and government” and amplifying the “voices that might not have the same channels”, John was also critical of aspects pertaining to their management and strategy. He underlined a frequent “lack of openness”, hindering a more active involvement of people external to the organisations themselves:

A civil society organization is meant to be open, even by structure, like it's stated in the statute, that's why there's an AGM, and that's why it's meant to be an open process where people come can come in and take ownership of that (...)how often do you see AGMs actually advertised on their on their social media channels as like, “Hey, we're having a discussion about where we're going to go in the next year, come along, and have your say, who knows, maybe even join us and join the board”. Because there's this, I don't know what it is... like a fear of being taken over. And, you know, everything you've worked for... especially when you've got these people who have been there from the start, and they tend to get very attached to it. And so I think it definitely holds them back (John).

The rather inward-looking approach described above, in conjunction with limited interest in making the cause more palatable and relatable, were deemed to negatively impact communication with the general public. In addition, the dearth of personnel trained in marketing and communication was brought to the fore as a key stumbling block:

You need well-trained people to communicate these messages. So, and this goes up to, I suppose, lack of resources, but not being open to another understanding,.. I mean, sometimes having the best intentions is probably one of the, you know, the worst things you can do for... for a movement or an organization. You need to think beyond just, unfortunately, the cause, and if you really want to reach the people and make the changes, then you really need you need the team, you need to find focus to a certain extent, like a professional entity (John).



# WHAT CAN NGOS DO DIFFERENTLY?

A further challenge flagged by Maria was the sheer number of NGOs in Malta, potentially leading people to question both their usefulness and their motives. She pointed out that the constant mushrooming of an array of organisations defending seemingly identical causes could breed scepticism. It shouldn't come as a surprise that some might question whether their leaders are truly set on making the world a better place or if on the contrary, "they are working for themselves, because, they want a role, or they just want to be seen in Malta, maybe because Malta is a small country and so it's easy to be seen if you have a role, if you are a president or vice-president of an organization".

Despite these concerns, John acknowledged that the onus of reaching out to the public and promoting their action, shouldn't just be on NGOs. A misguided understanding of the role of the not-for-profit sector is prevalent in Maltese society, including within the ranks of the ruling class. Testament to this is John's recollection of an encounter with a leading politician:

"And he even said at one point: "I'm going, to be honest, I don't like NGOs". Like, it's, it's a society thing, you know, like, we have no idea. I feel like there isn't the faintest idea of what the role of the purpose of civil society is. And that's, that's a big, big issue, I think. (John)"

John's quote reveals that the issue is much broader and complex and may in fact require a real culture change at different levels of society.



# WHAT CAN NGOS DO DIFFERENTLY?

## **MORE CONNECTED = MORE ENGAGED?**

A degree of hesitance was displayed by respondents in relation to technology and its ability to effectively harness citizen engagement. Although they considered the benefits of technology in terms of transparency – e.g. online publication of government budgets and expenditures via dedicated platforms – as patent, they problematised digital tools' potential to bring NGOs closer to the people. Recognising the advantages of technological solutions, they also pointed to education and face-to-face interaction as essential to cultivate citizen engagement. As John put it:

I mean, I think tech, technology definitely offers some level of, you know... some advantages in terms of connectivity in terms of efficiency and speed, or whatever. But it's not going to replace, totally replace, face to face conversation. That's what COVID is for (John).



# THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

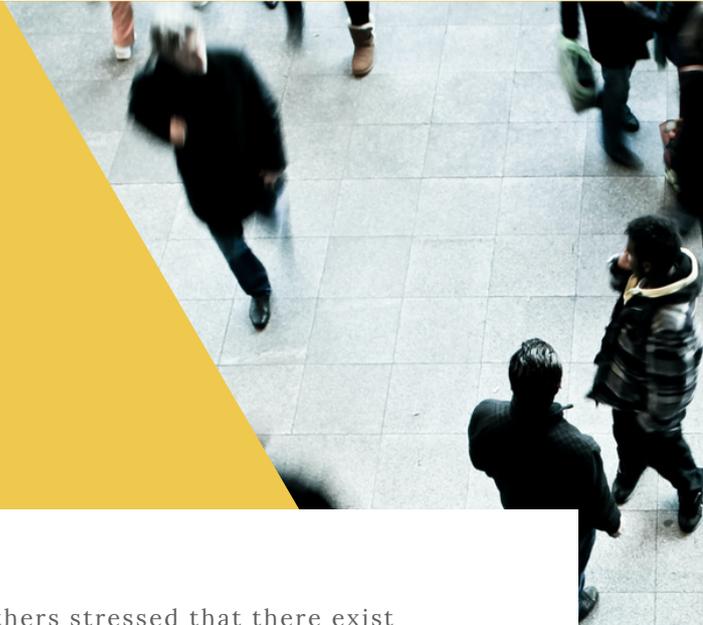
## UNPACKING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

The use of the term “citizenship” in relation to the condition of being active and engaged was contested by several interviewees, who labelled it “outdated” and “exclusionary”. As Paul argued:

"It just doesn't make sense anymore to speak about citizenship in this context, because there's no, there's no requirement to be... (...) you're not even looking at citizenship, you're just looking at members of a community, whoever they are (...) We should be talking about active community members" (Paul)

Different nuances underpinning proactivity, reminiscent of survey responses in this study, came to the fore in the course of the discussion. According to Jane, engagement can be conceptualised as a continuum from the “very basic” to “full-on engaged”. In other words, someone who follows the news and has a grasp of what is happening, whether locally or nationally, although minimally involved, should still be viewed as “active”. From that follow different gradations, which may entail “advocating, hands-on doing, showing your face, signing your name” (Jane).

Others stressed that there exist equally meaningful forms of engagement, such as volunteering in caring facilities or working with the homeless. While largely invisible, these acts of service benefit the community and society as a whole. On this view, Paul contended that at a bare minimum, being an active community member means “engag(ing) in any form of activity for a reason, that's beyond their immediate self-interest, ultimately”. This could be “helping your neighbour” or, “screaming for the environment”, even when such acts are devoid of the “intention to affect policy and to get engaged in the bigger”, yet in practice contribute to the wellbeing of the community.



# THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

## THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

As for active citizenship, interviewees shared a range of readings of the role of civil society in Malta and beyond, undoubtedly informed by their own experiences and work.

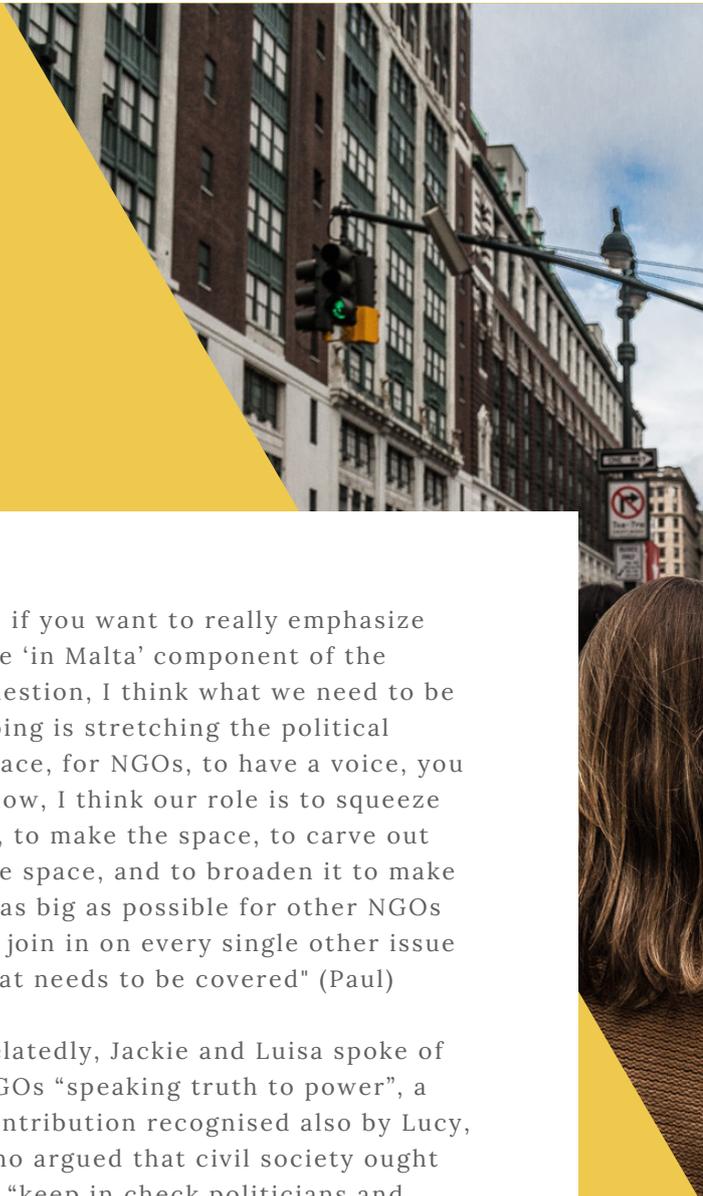
While praising many NGOs for filling the gaps left by the state through service provision, Paul also emphasised their role in engaging in political advocacy. He further acknowledged the novelty of NGO involvement in this area in the Maltese context and underscored its vital importance:

"And then I think there's ...there's a huge role for all of us to be playing in the political advocacy, which I think is still very new in Malta, I think it's a very new feature that NGOs are active in political advocacy. And it's so new that it's not understood, it's not liked by the nation itself, it's not liked by the politicians, and they don't think we should have that role. But I think it's a fundamental role we need to be having.

So if you want to really emphasize the 'in Malta' component of the question, I think what we need to be doing is stretching the political space, for NGOs, to have a voice, you know, I think our role is to squeeze in, to make the space, to carve out the space, and to broaden it to make it as big as possible for other NGOs to join in on every single other issue that needs to be covered" (Paul)

Relatedly, Jackie and Luisa spoke of NGOs "speaking truth to power", a contribution recognised also by Lucy, who argued that civil society ought to "keep in check politicians and public servants ... to make sure that there is no abuse of the system, and if there is... they are punished accordingly". As Jackie illustrated, political power is not absolute; politicians "have to govern not rule (...)", since they "took an oath to govern the people and it's ok to question and challenge".

Serena turned the spotlight on the not-for-profit aspect of civil society organisations. In her eyes, the fact that they are not driven by financial gain, fuels greater trust at community level. She contended that the organisation she represents is trusted by the people and that consequently, its role, alongside that of other civil society actors, is to "protect citizens".



# THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

There were also those who hinted to a shift in their perspective of the role played by NGOs as a result of COVID-19. Kyle argued that while prior to the pandemic his organisation would “do campaigns and encourage active citizenship, participate in charity events and so on”, at present most of these activities are on hold. Civil society, he claimed, has a key role to play in curbing the negative impacts of the pandemic and therefore has a responsibility to adapt and address newly emerging needs:

"Covid has affected people in that they would feel lonely and a lot of mental issues are emerging – so we had to be present in that. People have become isolated. Now even as organisation we need to reorganize to adapt to this new society which has changed overnight" (Kyle).

According to Stephen, one of the hurdles faced by NGOs in Malta is that they are perceived as voluntary organisations, which should be distinguished from “civil society organisations”. This, in his opinion limits the overall power and impact of such organisations in Malta :

"From the government side, since civil society organisations are viewed as voluntary organisations – and looked at as providers of charity rather than playing an important role for the people to represent minorities, this in turn effects the power of civil society in Malta" ( Stephen).



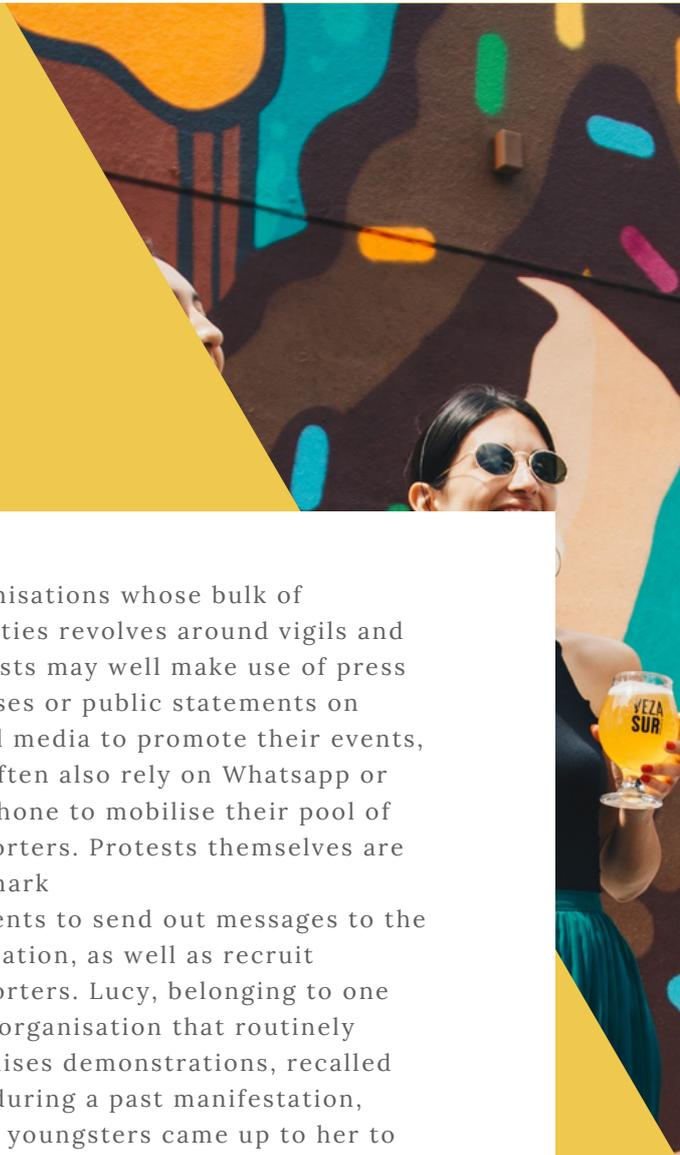
# THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

## REACHING OUT TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC: HOW DO NGOS DO IT?

As highlighted by Lewis (2019), the not-for-profit sector is tremendously diverse. The dimensions of an organisation, its structure, legal status (e.g. NGO, VO or other), legacy, leadership, ethos and goals are all likely to influence its overall strategy in unique ways. It should come as no surprise therefore, that a host of views concerning outreach sprung up during the research process. The styles used by NGOs to share information about their services/action, raise awareness about societal issues, or mobilize individuals varied across the sample. While some stressed the importance of providing “correct and updated information”, others adopted a more provocative or “polemical” approach, and others still privileged a more participatory mode of communication, prompting people to provide input, give feedback and have their say through surveys, workshops and other tools. Although reliance on social media, coupled in instances with traditional media such as TV, radio, press releases is commonplace, several interviewees spoke of alternative means of communication, including direct Whatsapp messaging, Whatsapp marketing, Whatsapp discussion groups and face-to-face community outreach.

Organisations whose bulk of activities revolves around vigils and protests may well make use of press releases or public statements on social media to promote their events, but often also rely on Whatsapp or the phone to mobilise their pool of supporters. Protests themselves are landmark moments to send out messages to the population, as well as recruit supporters. Lucy, belonging to one such organisation that routinely organises demonstrations, recalled how during a past manifestation, three youngsters came up to her to ask questions. As she put it “people come organically”.

Despite differing approaches, the view that it is those who are interested in being involved who get in touch, was shared by many interviewees. This corroborated the idea that community members actively seek out organisations that defend causes which are close to their heart, as was apparent in the ACL survey responses provided by the general population. Yet, organisations for which community outreach activities are few and far between, conceded that they often “miss the direct human component”, which they know to be fundamental.



# THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

As Luisa pointed out, community outreach is: “very, very time-consuming (...)”, yet is also “very effective, combined with other methods”. In a similar vein, Serena contented that having discussions with the public is key to sparking involvement because “sometimes it is not as easy for people to join online (...), there is still the need for certain face-to-face discussions where people of certain ages can feel more engaged and communicate more with us”. Kyle was optimistic about the opportunities to implement novel, digital strategies for community engagement - especially in light of the COVID pandemic - yet also stressed the need for an inclusive use of technology:

"Older members tend to be less tech-savvy (...) especially in certain work sectors, but still there are youths who are not tech-savvy but you can count them... it's not a large amount. But we cannot discriminate people on the basis of their age. So, the online portal, email, mobile messages, social media - we do videos, adverts, surveys, circular emails ... pretty much that .... we use both languages and I always encourage to use both languages and wherever possible, not only Maltese, because if we want to be inclusive language can be a barrier. Language plays an important and integral part" (Kyle)

Echoing John, a citizens' focus group participant, he further highlighted the communication-related challenges faced by civil society organisations, emphasising that in many cases they “have not been taught how to communicate effectively” and “need a lot of education in that field”. In fact, they are often ill-equipped to provide a persuasive alternative narrative to that of mainstream media:

"Some media would try to shift the news, give it a different twist Sometimes VO s just want to communicate a message but there are always stigmas here and there and everyone tries to put them in bad light. Society listens more to the media and other organisations rather than small VO's with less financial package" (Kyle).

As Alex revealed, being able to rely on trained volunteers or staff can go a long way towards bridging the gap:

"(...)we also do Whatsapp direct marketing (...)one of our members is a retired businessman who studied direct marketing and we use it [Whatsapp] for the protests. People sign up and they receive updates etc ... it takes a lot of effort to run" (Alex).



# THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

An interesting approach was that implemented in the organisation managed by Stephen, wherein trained volunteers and staff are attracted and retained because they are provided with opportunities for self and career development.

## **CLUED UP OR OBLIVIOUS? REFLECTING ON CITIZENS' KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS**

Interviewees were to a large extent dubious about citizens' awareness about human rights. Drawing an artful parallel, Janeposited that:

"If you were to ask people, what the commandments are, they know them, what the sacraments are, they know them, and probably all the reasons why we have public holidays. But when it comes to fundamental human rights, I think that my guess would be there isn't much knowledge. And then the lack of knowledge spans across educational levels" (Jane)

Lucy was vocal about the limited recognition of the rights of migrants, an issue which she considered particularly worrisome:

"No, in a country like Malta people do not have enough understanding. They cannot understand why a migrant crosses the sea in a little boat to come to Europe. This is racism because we don't have a problem with white people. We don't understand that this person has the same right to a life as we have. This is about humanity"(Lucy)

For her part, Luisa saw in the Church's gradual retreat a key reason for a rather generalised disinterest in human rights. While critical of the Church as an institution, she acknowledged that "it did provide a space to talk about values" and has therefore "left a void that is essentially just being filled by the markets".

The education system's failing to give prominence to human rights in school curricula was underlined by more than one interviewee. Paul lamented that even at university level, where one would doubtless expect to come across human rights in the list of subjects, "you don't have anything going on (...) I think that there is some mention of rights of the child in schools in a very playful manner. But beyond that, it's[human rights education]... it's absent".



# THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

Furthermore, Stephen pointed out that the overall nationalistic attitude in Malta limits the general understanding of human rights, because "priority is given to the local people". Quoting Alex, the lack of human rights knowledge is definitely "one of the challenges" for civil society actors in Malta.

## ON BEING MISUNDERSTOOD

In articulating their role, many NGO leaders acknowledged the negative perceptions of certain civil society actors - particularly those engaged in more controversial causes - among many community members:

"I don't think you can say, oh, all civil society is this, or is perceived in this way or that way, because many NGOs are celebrated and LOVED (emphasis in original) as sort of national institutions of the people rather than of the State. But I think WE (emphasis in original) are perceived, when I say we, the more politically engaged on controversial issues and migration, LGBTIQ and abortion, and sex work are controversial, Well, it's really interesting. I mean, I've had conversations with students, with family members, this, where we're perceived as troublemakers. From a woman's perspective, you know, I think, that's a bit that becomes gendered as well" (Luisa)

"To that I would also add, a critique we often get, when we try to engage in the political advocacy is that we, we are unelected that we are not representing anyone(...)There is, there's a difficulty to understand that to speak, you don't need to be representing a group of people, and that you are an interest group, that you are a lobby group or whatever. And but that seems to cause problems in people's heads. The fact that, you know, we're not elected to speak for anyone, but nonetheless, we are expecting politicians to do what we are telling them, politicians who have behind them the votes of 16,000 people, for example. So how can our tiny voice there, compete with that represented voice?" (Paul)

An analogous argument concerning people's confusion about civil society's role and contribution was made by Jackie:

"People keep telling us "u ejja ohorgu ghall politika." We don't want to be part of the system, if we become a political party we will be engulfed by the same system we're fighting. People don't understand that to bring about change you don't need to be a politician...true that things are decided in the ballot box, and people only think about elections and winning the government (...)

# THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

People see us as either taking the space of the opposition ( which in their view is rightly theirs) or else “ma nhallux il gvern jahdem” (...)... you can be political without belonging to a political party and people have yet to make this leap” (Jackie).

According to several interviewees, the bemusement shrouding civil society extends to politicians themselves. Paul revealed that it is not unheard of politicians accusing organisations such as the one he represents of scheming to “overthrow the government” and seeking to “destabilize the nation”. This view was also shared by Stephen, who pointed out that politicians are sometimes the ones who create this antagonism, since anyone who raises a concern around a policy or issue, is perceived to be “against the Government”. Regardless, both Paul and Luisa claimed that politicians have their part to play in legitimising NGOs in the eyes of the public. The point they made wasn’t that they should agree on each and every issue at stake, rather that they should at the very least, acknowledge and respect that NGOs exist and they are a “valid contributor”. This could entail for instance, trying “to at least publicly to be seen to be talking to (them)”, or taking greater initiative in involving NGOs in consultation processes.

“We're not called we're not spoken to too often. And the consultation activities that we're engaged in are the ones that we put ourselves forward to, we notice there's something out there and we push forward, we turn up in Parliament, we turn up outside the ministry, we ask for a meeting, we submit a document, but there's no ongoing process. There's no process initiated by government to reach out to us” (Paul).

# THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

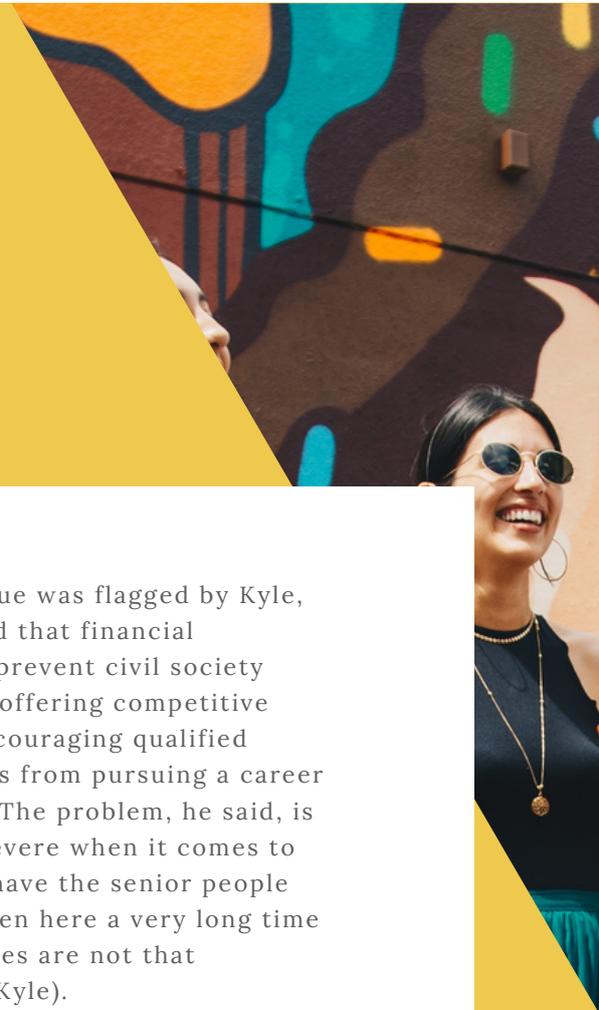
## FUNDING

Funding is notably a chief concern for many civil society actors, limiting the range of activities that they can undertake and the extent of their impact. However, as Paul remarked, it is not that funding opportunities are scarce, rather that the rules and requirements that govern their allocation are not attuned to the needs of NGOs:

"So if you look at the funds managed by the Council, for example, the MCVS, they have some funds, they still work on the assumption that we are composed of only volunteers, and that all NGOs in Malta are run and work with only volunteers. They don't understand that some NGOs have employees (...)And the problem with most funds EU across the board is that they think too much in terms of short-term deliverables, and not long-term programs(...)and the most kind of NGOs don't operate in short windows of projects that last six to eight months or one year. But all of us tend to work with long-term goals" (Paul)

A similar issue was flagged by Kyle, who stressed that financial constraints prevent civil society actors from offering competitive salaries, discouraging qualified professionals from pursuing a career in the field. The problem, he said, is especially severe when it comes to wages: "we have the senior people who have been here a very long time because wages are not that attractive" (Kyle).

According to Luisa, red tape and bureaucracy also act as significant hindrances, weighing down generally understaffed organisations. Yet, there were also those who in an attempt to avoid the shackles of paperwork have sought out alternative strategies to secure funding. This was the case for Jackie, who revealed that in non-pandemic times, her organisation gathers money at vigils. Funds are also raised through donations, crowdfunding and membership fees. Another participant stated that his organisation does not need funding, as it receives in-kind support.



# THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

## CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Interviewees were asked about their interaction with the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector (MCVS). Although one participant acknowledged that whenever approached, staff are “helpful even with funding, location and equipment”; and another commended the organisation for “pushing the government to get support for NGOs through COVID”, there was an overwhelming sense that the MCVS isn’t doing enough to support civil society.

"I think they should be out there promoting the value of civil society for sure. And, but they have no idea. I personally, I don't even know who the members are, I don't take an interest. I don't really bother much with their communications. And as far as... I don't know if the amendments to the law recently changed the manner of composition, but until recently, the manner of competition wasn't very NGO friendly" (Paul)

"I think they have a really important role in speaking about the importance of a healthy civil society. And they could be doing a lot more work there!" (Luisa)

Even though Kyle underscored the contribution of the MCSV in monitoring VO compliance and ensuring that certain standards are upheld, Serena highlighted that the MCVS is “slow” and often unclear in issuing its guidance to NGOs, including with regard to documentation:

The Council itself ...it's not as effective and from recent discussion also there were certain introductions that were made from a legal point of view on registration, annual returns and my understanding is that it is not as clear-cut as one would expect, in the sense that we only found out recently that certain returns would need to be done. There needs to be more communication! My understanding is that it's a bit messy. There were a lot of VOs set up at the same time and there was a bit of confusion (Serena)

Stephen emphasised the need for the MCVS to become more independent from the ministry under which it is set up, in order to be able to articulate its own voice and become more proactive : “the council needs to have more power...more voice...and the council is not just an extension of the MP or Parliamentary Secretary, but rather a more independent organisation”.



# THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

## THE NEED FOR A CULTURE CHANGE

A culture that embraces strong civil society would make involvement, especially of young people, easier (Luisa)

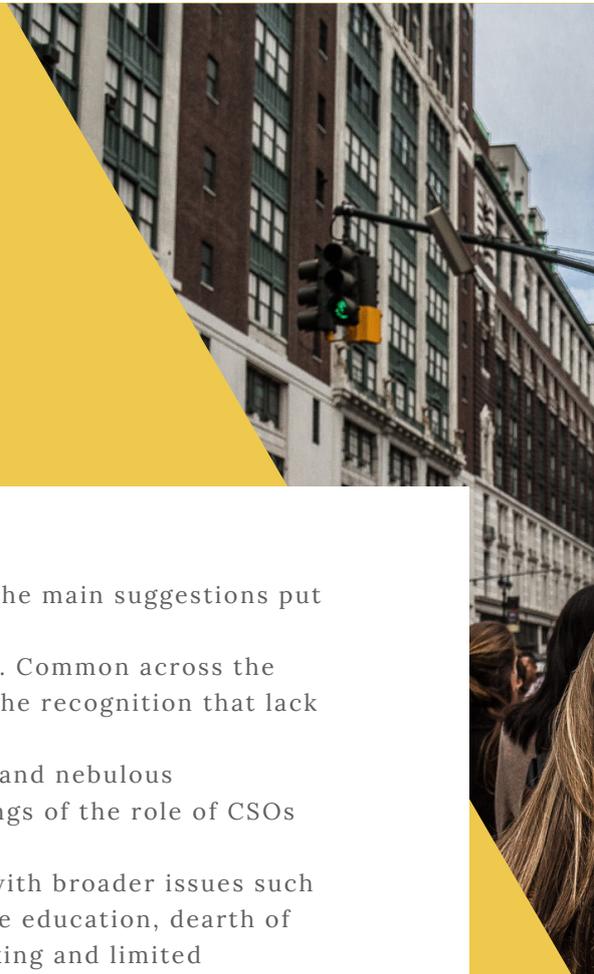
Education. Bhal ma nibghatu t-tfal il-muzew ...the knowledge of what their (people's) rights are and what they can do (...) Critical thinking. Allowing to criticize without being punished(Lucy)

Education for VOs themselves, how to communicate better, how to be ongoing (...), more cooperation between VOs (...) listen(ing) to what the people want, not what the VO wants" (Kyle)

We need to normalize discourse, making it ok to criticize a minister (...)I can't remember a time when people were afraid to speak but there is a hesitation. We need to talk more - free speech helps. You can't make Malta bigger - it is what it is (Alex)

Even our education system. We teach them everything by heart but we don't teach them analytical skills and debating. We need to tell them that it's ok not to agree with authority....to questions and to doubt (Jackie)

These were the main suggestions put forward by interviewees. Common across the sample was the recognition that lack of engagement and nebulous understandings of the role of CSOs are tightly interlinked with broader issues such as inadequate education, dearth of critical thinking and limited willingness on the part of politicians to acknowledge that there cannot be a healthy democracy without civil society.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

- The most prominent theme that emerged from the research, both from the survey conducted with citizens as well as the in-depth interviews carried out with activists, is the dire need to educate the population. It was pointed out by many of the respondents that it is direly felt that the public lacks the critical thinking skills required to analyse issues objectively. This leads to a situation where the person consuming information is not able to distinguish between the argument being made and the person it concerns. The very highly charged political climate in the country further accentuates this problem. To this end, it is being recommended that any action to educate the public on basic issues of good governance, democracy and human rights can only succeed if the public is first and foremost provided with the tools and resources required to analyse issues critically and objectively. Some strategies that can be adopted in order to encourage critical thinking include using analogies, asking open-ended questions, and promoting interaction among students.
- Following up on the above recommendation, in order to ensure systemic change, it is important that children are provided with civic education from a young age. Critical thinking and debating skills should be encouraged. Children should be able to question authority and to doubt issues. They can only do this if they feel they are within a safe environment where they will not suffer repercussions for their questioning. The recommendation is therefore twofold : children should be provided with tools and strategies for critical thinking and debating, through a fun and motivational approach such as drama education; whilst on the other hand, educators also need to be sensitized to the need to allow pupils to question their authority and to raise their objections in an articulate and respectful manner.
- With regards to the use of the term 'Active citizenship', the research has found that the term can be conflicting in itself. The use of the term 'citizenship' could potentially nurture exclusion against those who do not qualify to achieve that status, but who are individuals within our society whose voice should also be recognised. In this regard it is recommended that, in encouraging participation, including via online tools, inclusion should be ensured, inter alia, through the use of different languages and a variety of materials, suited to different target groups.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- It has emerged that social media is an invaluable tool, both for engaged citizens to raise their concerns about specific issues; as well as for activists to be able to communicate their message and to engage more citizens. Whilst training or other kinds of support could be provided to non-profit organisations and activist groups in order to strengthen their capacity in this field, it is also important to look into the possibility of using different channels rather than rely primarily on Facebook; for instance, the use of WhatsApp seems to yield very good results when it comes to engaging and mobilizing people.
- Given the popularity and level of engagement on some specific social media groups and pages, it is recommended that the ACL tool should be hosted on one or more of the popular social media pages. This will ensure that the public has quick and easy access to it, and in that manner, it would be brought to the attention of individuals who may otherwise not become aware of its existence and thus not make use of it.
- Another issue that arose is the effectiveness of using different communication styles, and perhaps also different languages, when reaching out to different target audiences. Once again, non-profit organisations and activist groups could be supported and guided to sharpen their message by adopting such different styles and communicating in different languages. Capacity building in communication strategies could help in this regard.
- Whilst the use of technology and social media platforms has proven to have been a lifeline for most participating organisations, particularly during the pandemic; also allowing the said organisation to reach out to a much larger target audience, the value of in person activities is not to be underestimated and for some, it was said that it can never be replaced by virtual means. It is of utmost importance to ensure that when it comes to engaging and mobilising citizens, organisations ensure a hybrid approach through which at least a minimum number of in-person 'seats' are made available to ensure participation of the less 'tech-savvy' individuals within the population, which could then be complemented by virtual means to reach out to a wider audience.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- The implementation of social media campaigns should be supported by data analysis and data science. Data Analytics refers to "the set of quantitative and qualitative approaches for deriving valuable insights from data. It involves many processes that include extracting data and categorizing it in order to derive various patterns, relations, connections, and other such valuable insights from it." This approach would help organisations become 'more sophisticated' in the delivery of their message and in turn ensure better results. In the words of Peter Drucker, 'What gets measured, gets managed'!
- When it comes to funding and financing, near all of the organisations that we spoke to indicated the fact that they were under-funded and that more support is needed for them to be able to fulfil their mission. It was recommended that processes for tapping into funding could be less burdensome. Consultations with organisations could be carried out to better understand their needs and challenges, and in turn streamline the applications and ancillary processes to make them more effective and ultimately more impactful.
- A more innovative approach that could be further explored, is for organisations who traditionally fundraise, to request in kind support and/or donations instead. One of the participating organisations, which relies on this approach, has stated that it is never under-resourced because its members and participants are always willing to provide such in-kind resources and support.
- The research, in particular the interviews and focus group, showed that the role of the MCVS needs to be re-assessed. Whilst respondents were for the most part, either positive or at worst neutral in regard to the MCVS, the research has shown that there is a lot of untapped potential that could be fulfilled. Perhaps the MCVS could embark on an exercise to re-determine its mission and objectives, and to come up with a plan on how this can be fulfilled. Moreover, it could consider working with other players, including service providers in the private sector in order to be more efficient and effective.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- From the insights obtained from the participating organisations, it has clearly emerged that the most effective results are achieved when organisations work together, and complement each other. It is therefore recommended that NGOs and activist groups are encouraged and supported to develop collaborations and create coalitions. These could be made up either of a number of NGO's and civil society organisations, but also with for-profit organisations or public entities. Within the context of a country where the list of non-profit organisations keeps growing, and funding and other resources are limited, this is perhaps the one recommendation which could prove to be most impactful.

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