

Exploring Refugees' Survival and Coping Mechanisms within the Framework of Migrant Integration and Malta's Immigration Policy

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ABSTRACT

Refugees in Malta face a variety of challenges, particularly in terms of social and economic integration, including discrimination, language barriers, and difficulties in finding employment. In addition to relying on their own resilience and determination to overcome adversity and succeed in their new community, refugees have devised a variety of practices to deal with these issues. The central question of this study is: How are refugees' living conditions protected by Malta's immigration and integration policy? In light of this, the study explores the opportunities, experiences, and challenges encountered by refugees, as well as the commonly adopted coping mechanisms. Employing a mix of sample surveys, focus groups, informal conversations, key informant interviews, and everyday lived experiences, the study reveals how refugees and asylum seekers navigate the complex legal system to obtain the necessary documentation. It also shows how they can improve their chances of survival and integration with a combination of support from local communities, non-governmental organisations, and the government. It contributes to a better understanding of how rights, opportunities, and protection for refugees and asylum seekers across all spheres of life can engender social cohesion in a multicultural society.

KEYWORDS: refugees, migrants, integration, coping mechanisms, living conditions, discrimination, Malta

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Scholarly attention is being drawn to the diverse ways that immigration and integration policies impact the living conditions of migrants and refugees (Ersanilli and Koopmans, 2011; Neureiter, 2022) and how they can specifically engender a favourable environment for migrants' social, cultural, economic, and political engagement. The current study advances this academic endeavour by exploring the general living conditions of refugees, the strate-

gies employed by asylum seekers to facilitate early release from detention centres, and the coping mechanisms adopted while residing in the Maltese community with subsidiary protection or refugee status. It reveals how the refugees and asylum seekers included in this study resorted to national/ethnic association solidarity, spiritual engagements, income-generating activities, and thrift societies as their coping mechanisms. The study uncovers the economic survival techniques adopted by refugees, many of whom work in low-paying, potentially hazardous occupations, often in the informal sector, to provide for their families. It also becomes evident that in order to adapt and survive in their new environment, refugees have created a variety of measures, such as self-employment, social support networks, and participation in community events. The findings, however, establish that racial and ethnic stereotypes in Malta often undermine sustainable integration, which typically entails mutual adaptation between the local population and marginalised, vulnerable, or excluded communities.

This underscores the necessity for a better understanding of how rights, opportunities, and protection for refugees and asylum seekers across all domains of life may foster social cohesion in a multicultural society. Additionally, it partially explains why cross-border migration, which encompasses both forced migration (refugees and asylum seekers who are compelled to flee their countries) and voluntary migration (migrants seeking employment and economic opportunities), remains a key issue on the global policy agenda. Having grown in scope, complexity, and scale, the challenges and opportunities inherent in international migration are now of paramount importance to states and other stakeholders (European Commission, 2023; IOM, 2022; UNHCR, 2007). Thus, with more international migrants today than ever before, migration policies are dominating the foremost political engagements across national, regional, and international levels.

Specifically, migration from African countries to other regions across the globe has increased dramatically over the past decade, with sub-Saharan African nations accounting “for eight of the ten fastest growing international migrant populations since 2010” (Pew Research Centre, 2018). There is an exhaustive body of literature that focuses on Mediterranean migration and the plight of young Africans living as refugees in Europe, mostly relying on secondary sources. While the attention has often been on big countries like Italy, the United Kingdom, Greece, France, Germany, or Spain, the current study targets the smallest EU member state – Malta. For asylum seekers, displacement, which is a desperate response to destitution, limited

economic opportunities, natural disasters, or conflicts, has been a persistent phenomenon over the last two decades, even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2022). Thousands of migrants have travelled across the Mediterranean and deserts in recent decades in an attempt to reach the shores of Europe (UNHCR, 2015; UNHCR, 2019). Apart from various risks associated with such journeys, including harmful smuggling practices, the inhospitable terrain of the desert, dangerous sea crossings, and the possibility of deportation upon arrival – without fulfilling their migration ambitions – refugees also face different challenges when integrating into their new societies.

Understanding the various and intricate causes of their displacement or forced migration is crucial for developing an accurate conceptualisation of refugees and asylum seekers. Natural disasters, war, conflict, and persecution on the basis of religion, politics, or ethnicity are a few examples of this. There is not a single, internationally recognised definition of what a “migrant” is. However, for the purpose of gathering data on migration, an “international migrant” has been identified as “any person who changes his or her country of usual residence” (UN DESA, 1998: 32). Movements resulting from “recreation, holiday, visits to friends and relatives, business, medical treatment or religious pilgrimages” (ibid) are not included in the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) criteria. A refugee is a person who, often without warning, has been compelled to leave their native country due to war, violence, or persecution (Amnesty International, 2020; IOM, 2022). They cannot return home until their countries of origin are secure for them once more. International protection for refugees is a legal entitlement. Likewise, an individual who has fled their country and desires protection from severe human rights abuses and persecution in another country is referred to as an asylum seeker. They are a person whose claim has not yet been resolved in its entirety by the country where it was filed (IOM, 2022). Notwithstanding the manner and purpose of their entry into a country, the rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are safeguarded by international law (Amnesty International, 2020). Along with additional special or targeted protection, they enjoy the same rights as everyone else. It should be emphasised, however, that not all individuals requesting asylum will be officially recognised as refugees, but all recognised refugees began as asylum seekers.

The asylum application procedure can be tedious and often fraught with red tape. Its possible outcomes include long-term incarceration, uncertainty

about the future, and even deportation to their country of origin, where they may face persecution (Amnesty International, 2020). For example, some applicants renounced their claims or fled Malta, primarily as a result of the protracted asylum process and a shortage of opportunities in the country at the time (UNHCR, 2024; WHO, 2024). There are variations among other European Union member states concerning their policies towards migrants and their approach to receiving asylum seekers. Some host countries have implemented more stringent regulations and have proved less hospitable (Amnesty International, 2020). In Malta, despite issues associated with population expansion, such as strain on its resources and infrastructure, housing shortages, and pressure on public services, the country continues to be a popular destination for migrants (Omilusi, 2024a). With its pleasant weather, moderate job opportunities, and relatively stable economy, Malta has been experiencing a rising influx of labour migrants in search of better lives.

Today, Malta has a population density of 1,649 people per square kilometre, which is higher than the EU average of just 109 people per square kilometre. The country's growing foreign population, with an increase of over 10,000 people each year, was under five per cent in 2012 (23,365 people) and presently stands at 25.3 per cent (137,376 people) of the total population of 542,051 (National Statistics Office, 2024). Malta serves as a gateway to Europe for thousands of individuals migrating from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (Shankar, 2023; WHO, 2024). The country currently hosts over 11,000 refugees and 2,000 asylum applicants, most of whom are from Bangladesh, Libya, Syria, Sudan, and Ukraine (WHO, 2024).

Contrary to the popular narrative that mostly associates “irregularly arriving migrants” with Africans, Europe has frequently received thousands of “boat migrants” from Asia. In 2022, for instance, more than half (51%) of sea arrivals to Malta came from Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2023). Although many research studies (Hofmann and Segeš Frelak, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2018; Villa and Pavia, 2023) have investigated the plight of refugees and migrants, especially in Europe, most focusing on their traumatic experiences and migration policies concerning them, there is still a general lack of awareness of the working and living conditions of refugees from African countries. Drawing from both qualitative and quantitative data sources, this is the gap that the current article, which is organised into six sections, seeks to fill. Following this introduction, the next section addresses the pattern of migration flows to the Maltese archipelago, which has developed

into a sort of hub, drawing thousands of migrants to address labour shortages as well as a consistent stream of asylum seekers and refugees. This is analysed in the context of the country's integration policies and the apparent gaps in them. The third section, which focuses on methodology, delves into specifics about the various research instruments employed for data gathering and analysis. The fourth section mainly concentrates on study findings, documenting refugees' challenges and coping mechanisms in and out of detention. Policy recommendations to address current immigration and integration challenges are embedded in the fifth section, while the last section concludes the article.

MIGRANT FLOWS AND MALTESE INTEGRATION POLICIES

Scholars and policymakers (de Haas et al. 2019; Teye and Oucho, 2024; Zanker, 2019) have made various attempts at examining and comparing countries' migration policies and governance, owing to the growing interest in the comparative analysis of migration. According to the IOM's Migration Governance Framework (MiGOF), laws and policies affecting the movement of people include policies on "travel and temporary mobility, immigration, emigration, nationality, labour markets, economic and social development, industry, commerce, social cohesion, social services, health, education, law enforcement, foreign policy, trade and humanitarian" issues (IOM, 2017). Various sub-dimensions in each policy category are often considered, including eligibility, conditions, security of status, and associated rights (Migration Data Portal, 2019). Of major concern, however, as observed by Brewer and Yukseker (2007), is that:

"Illegal and transit migration, refugee flows, waves of asylum seekers and temporary contract labour migration are on the rise compared to legal labour migration and legal immigration, which used to be more characteristic of the post-war period... transit migrants spend an indefinite time in transit countries until they gain illegal entry into the West."

Although total migration flows towards Malta are smaller than those towards Greece or Italy (Migration Policy Centre, 2015), the country has one of the highest concentrations of refugees in the world, considering its size. Thus, Malta has one of the highest rates of asylum applications per capita in all of Europe, despite having a population of only 542,051 people (UNHCR, 2020). In 2020, the UNHCR estimated that 1,745 people were held at the three Maltese centres – the Initial Reception Centre Marsa, the Safi Barracks

in Hal Safi, and the Lyster Barracks (Fasanotti, 2021). Paradoxically, while some of them “are caught in a limbo, unable to find jobs or afford housing” (Daley, 2012), thousands of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa continue to navigate through major transit points to North Africa, waiting to cross to Europe despite increased border controls and numerous other policy measures aimed at curbing such flows. Besides individuals from Asian countries and Sub-Saharan Africa who “arrive irregularly” in Malta, some migrants, within and outside the EU, also overstay their visas after entering the country through safe means and regular routes.

As a member of the European Union and the Council of Europe, Malta is part of a regional system on migration and is subject to the jurisdiction of a few legal instruments. In the context of the social changes created by the arrival of new migrants, host countries have the sovereign prerogative to determine the conditions of entry and stay of non-nationals in their territories (Cheong et al., 2007). However, when it comes to managing “irregularly arriving migrants,” there are often certain gaps. In 2015, for instance, the unprecedented flow of migrants was met with a lack of adequate and unitary response from the EU, which exposed the strength of state sovereignty within member states (Petroni, 2020). Malta’s Search and Rescue Area is one of the primary concerns associated with the irregular migration issue. Malta’s search and rescue zone is 250,000 km², or about the same area as the United Kingdom. The Dublin Regulation makes Malta responsible for any migrants rescued in this region (Cachia, 2024). As the primary source of security concerns for the nation, irregular migration has proven to be problematic.

As the EU immigration authorities continue to face rising numbers of applications and existing backlogs, there are reports that EU leaders may focus on “increasing migrant returns rather than seeking a comprehensive solution” (EURACTIV Network, 2023) to the migration crisis. Given Malta’s proximity to Africa, as well as its membership in the EU and the Schengen Area, “desperate people pay smugglers exorbitant sums to be crushed into dangerously overladen ships bound for Maltese waters” (Schumacher, 2020). Today, Malta’s high population density, which remains its greatest vulnerability, and its limited land area, have placed pressure on its social, economic, and environmental resources (Main et al., 2021), and consequently generated xenophobic sentiments towards migrants and refugees. Although the European Commission has relocated approximately 3,000 people from Italy and Malta to other European countries since 2018 under the

Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism (VSM)¹, as a form of solidarity measure, the need for a comprehensive migrant integration policy has never been more urgent (European Commission, 2023). In reality, irregular migration particularly poses many challenges for both states and migrants:

“It can result in migrants being put in danger and exposed to different forms of exploitation, forced labour and trafficking in persons. Those who enter with forged or counterfeit identity documents, who enter without authorization, or who rely on smuggling networks pose a variety of challenges for States, including potentially raising security concerns” (Hofmann and Segeš Frelak, 2017:14).

In 2017, Malta introduced a fully-fledged integration policy aimed at all categories of migrants. Although immigration has long been a source of concern for the Maltese public, there is greater hostility towards irregular arrivals – such as those rescued in the country’s maritime Search and Rescue Area – compared to those who are specifically brought in to fill labour or skill shortages in important economic sectors (Pace, 2021). Migrants in irregular situations in Malta consist of people who either have overstayed their residence permits or arrived without a valid travel document (European Migration Network, 2013). For many years, Morocco was an important crossing point for migrants entering Europe, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, fleeing unfavourable social, economic, and political conditions. In the recent past, many migrants who have entered Europe irregularly were from war-affected countries, including Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia (Düvell, 2011; Frontex, 2015). Russia’s invasion of Ukraine also caused a rise in the number of refugees residing in the EU, which reached over 20% of the world’s refugees by the end of 2022 (European Commission, 2024).

Between 2014 and 2017, approximately 80% of all irregular arrivals along the Central Mediterranean route were individuals from sub-Saharan African countries, primarily from western Africa. In contrast, migratory patterns became “regionalised” between 2020 and the first half of 2022, with a substantial number of Egyptians and Tunisians. Subsequently, it became evident that the “twin crises” of the pandemic and Russia’s invasion of

¹ This is known as relocation, which encourages the transfer of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection from their current host European country – typically their country of entry into the EU—to another European country. It is an example of tangible solidarity amongst EU countries in the area of migration management. The new host nation assumes responsibility for reviewing an asylum applicant’s application in the event of their relocation.

Ukraine were the primary drivers of irregular migration (Villa and Pavia, 2023). Once in the destination country, migrants must undergo a complex and often incongruous integration process (Castelli, 2018), as many live on the street, in makeshift camps, under flyovers, and in car parks with minimal or no support (Buchanan-Smith, 2018). In 2023, for instance, 375,100 persons received protection from EU countries (European Commission, 2024).

Since the integration of refugees into a nation's social fabric is not always a seamless process, social cohesion may be threatened by the segregation, exclusion, discrimination, and marginalisation of refugee and migrant groups (UNHCR, 2019). However, beyond the assumption that integration "is a one-way debt owed by the migrants and refugees" (Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2016:4), there is a growing awareness among policymakers that successful migration management requires a systemic, integrated approach that involves everyone (host communities, non-governmental organisations, governments, private sector, migrants, and their associations) supported by appropriate capacities. In many countries today, one of the major concerns is the integration of migrants, which is considered beneficial to both the individual and society involved. While Malta's integration strategy, adopted in December 2017, seeks to promote a comprehensive approach to integration, more commitment is expected from the authorities to guarantee equal rights, opportunities, and security for migrants.

Although there is a national law specifying the conditions under which different categories of migrants may access family reunification, beneficiaries of protection face several legal and practical obstacles to family unity, such as long-delayed, restrictive, and discretionary policy (Solano and Huddleston, 2020). Malta is one of the few European countries that imposes a blanket ban on family reunification for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection (JRS Malta, aditus Foundation and Integra Foundation, 2018), which violates the right to family life. While Malta's restrictive language and financial requirements, discretionary procedures, and unsecured status pose obstacles to acquiring Long-Term Residence (LTR) status, its "short and simple naturalisation requirements on paper are highly discretionary in practice, without citizenship entitlements for children born or raised in Malta" (Solano and Huddleston, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve its objectives, the study obtains data through a transformative mixed methods approach that engages different demographic segments and draws from both qualitative and quantitative data sources: (i) a review of published works by academics, journalists, international organisations, and non-governmental organisations. This provides a comprehensive literature analysis to gain relevant insights into existing studies related to the complex nuances of the working and living conditions of refugees in Malta; (ii) physically administered questionnaires with 306 respondents among refugees and asylum seekers from Ghana, Somalia, Libya, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Cameroon, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Senegal; nine (9) semi-structured interviews with governmental and non-governmental actors working in the area of migration and refugee integration; and three (3) focus groups; and (iii) a three-year period of participant observation in the study area. The primary investigation was equally undertaken through interviews with eleven (11) respondents in some Maltese communities – Mosta, Ħamrun, Rabat, Marsa, Bugibba, and Paola – where many migrants and refugees from Africa reside. The in-depth interviews were based on guiding questions aimed at eliciting specific narratives tailored to the individual's experience and knowledge. All data collected are kept strictly confidential and anonymised (for refugees included in the study) to protect the identity of the participants. This does not, however, apply to interviews conducted with institutions and authorities connected to refugees and integration policies in the study area.

In order to protect the identity and confidentiality of study participants, particularly with reference to these coping mechanisms, I obtained their informed consent. I then ensured anonymity by omitting any personally identifiable information of respondents, with the exception of key informant interviews conducted with institutions and authorities generally dealing with refugees and integration policies in Malta. It should be noted that the participant-observation method enabled me to engage closely with the realities of refugees' social lives. It almost became the most efficacious method during the research as it naturally embraced a diverse sample of origins, professions, qualifications, ages, nationalities, and motivations for migration. Cogent information, which ordinarily could have been evaded by target respondents through other formal methods, was effortlessly gathered via social interactions. I discovered that many of the refugees considered it discourteous and demeaning to be designated as "boat migrants" for the purpose of the survey. Having lived in Malta for a decade or more, they

no longer accepted categorisation on the basis of a sea route. Consequently, I only requested to meet with African migrants or, more appropriately, Africans residing in Malta. As an African migrant myself, I was conscious of any “conflicts of interest” that could possibly arise in the course of the study, and as such, took precautions to guarantee that the research was not influenced by such perceived conflicts.

CHALLENGES, SURVIVAL, AND COPING STRATEGIES OF REFUGEES: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Migrants employ different methods and techniques to navigate and adapt to the challenges and difficulties they may face in their new environment. These coping strategies can include resilience and determination, as migrants often face discrimination, language barriers, and other forms of adversity (Frontex, 2015; UNHCR, 2019). These coping strategies are essential for migrants to establish their place in the community. They are also crucial for their well-being and adaptability, as they allow individuals to effectively navigate the complexities of living in a new country and culture.

The current study reveals a variety of coping strategies that refugees and asylum seekers commonly employ to navigate challenges and barriers in Malta, including national/ethnic association solidarity, spiritual engagements, income-generating activities, and thrift societies, among others. The study found that many individuals who migrate under irregular circumstances are often driven by economic factors and influenced by family dynamics and social media.

(a) Refugee nationality

Migrants often do not possess identity documents, which are frequently lost or stolen during their journeys. Others abandon their documents, which enables them to declare that they come from a war zone to qualify for refugee status. In an informal group discussion among nine refugees, six of them admitted that they entered the names of other countries instead of their real nationalities in their data forms. The reason for this, according to them, was that too many asylum seekers (from a particular country) found themselves in detention camps, and since their country was not at war, there was no justification for the efflux of its citizens to other countries. This stratagem, no doubt, likely put a dent in the accuracy of data being supplied by international organisations regarding the countries of origin of these refugees.

(b) Detention centre² strategies

Upon arrival, asylum seekers are transferred to a detention facility, where they remain until their asylum case is heard, which can be up to 12 months under EU legislation or 18 months should their appeal be rejected. Migrants are confined to detention centres throughout this time. Following release from detention, they are transferred to an Open Centre, in which they may reside for a limited period. Studies in Malta have indicated that mental health issues were the primary challenge affecting the refugee community, with many individuals suffering from depression, self-harm, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, psychosis, and paranoia (Aditus Foundation, 2013).

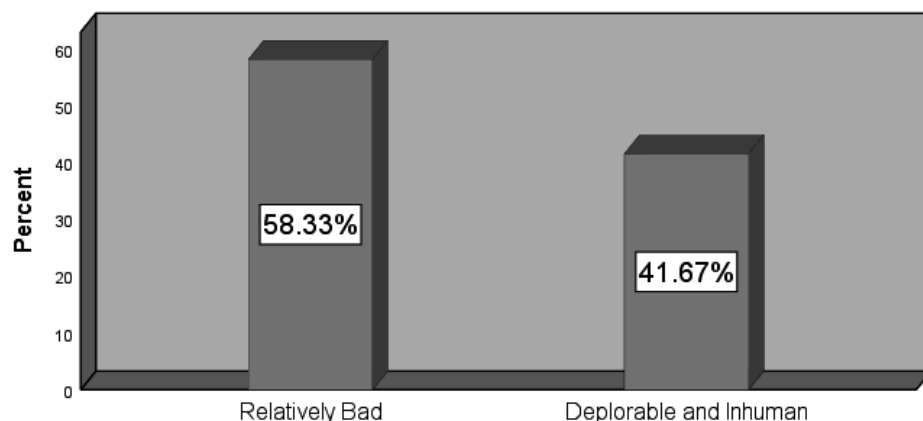
Since the only exception to mandatory detention concerns individuals who are vulnerable due to age, pregnancy, disability or chronic/serious physical or mental health problems (Ministry for Justice and Home Affairs & Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, 2005), I discovered that some refugees feigned mental illness while in detention, which often led to a referral to the hospital. An informant shared her experience with me about a patient who employed this strategy at a medical facility. According to him, he was about to administer medication for the patient's alleged mental illness when the patient confessed that he faked the symptoms to escape the unpleasant conditions of the detention centre (K.L. Johnson, Interview 1, December 9, 2022).

This confirms the findings of Haerden's (2016:60) earlier research, which revealed that detention and open centres were perceived by migrants as prisons that limited their "freedom to a large extent and which gave them feelings of being treated disrespectfully – sometimes even worse than in their home countries". As clearly shown in Figure 1, the majority of refugees admitted that they had experienced, to some extent, harsh treatment upon arrival and during their stay in detention centres. Specifically, 58.33 per cent of respondents described the official treatment by asylum authorities as relatively poor, while 41.67 per cent characterised the conditions in detention centres as deplorable, rancorous, and inhumane. Further group discussions, however, indicated that, compared to their experiences during the perilous journey across the desert and Mediterranean Sea (and the

² According to Maltese officialdom, before the country revised its legal and policy framework regarding the reception of asylum seekers in 2015, "Malta is the fundamental victim of the migration process – not the thousands of economic and political refugees who are then re-victimised by the Maltese detention system" (Fernandez, 2014).

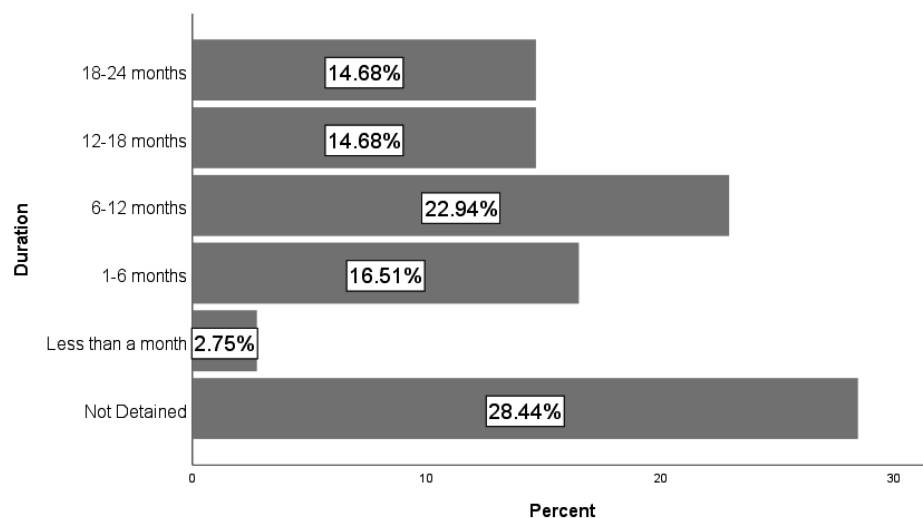
living conditions in Libya and their home countries), it was a relief to have finally reached any country in Europe, regardless of the initial inconveniences. Thus, for many of them, the detention experience was time-bound and more bearable, with the prospect of being granted asylum and a work permit (through an employer), than the situation they were fleeing from.

Figure 1. Conditions in detention centres



Source: Fieldwork, 2022

Figure 2. Months spent in detention centres



Source: Fieldwork, 2022

According to Maltese officials, irregularly arriving migrants are only kept in detention centres until their claims regarding their countries of origin and other submissions are investigated and validated in the interest of public safety and national security. Figure 2 clearly illustrates the typical duration for which asylum seekers are held in detention facilities. For instance, almost 23 per cent of respondents claimed they were kept at the camps for six to twelve months, while 14.7 per cent were kept for more than the mandatory 18 months, perhaps in addition to time spent at an Open Centre. A refugee will probably be in detention camps for a year on average. The last category, which had no detention experience in Malta, largely came from nearby Italy.

(c) “Circumstantial” pregnancy

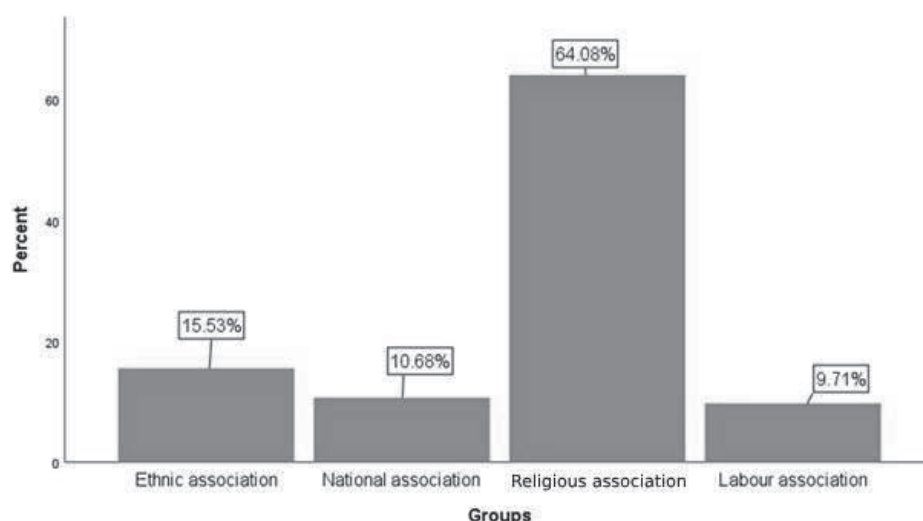
Asylum seekers also employ the strategy of orchestrating pregnancy while in detention. Since children, expectant mothers, and individuals with disabilities are not permitted to be kept in detention facilities, confirmed pregnancy cases receive special consideration from camp administrators. They are accommodated in alternative centres, and “released early, after they go through a vulnerability/age assessment procedure” (UNHCR, 2013). In other words, once their identity has been established and they have undergone a medical examination and clearance, administrative procedures are in place to release these asylum seekers from custody. Based on in-depth interviews, I discovered that refugees belonging to this category did not commence their romantic relationships in detention camps, but rather during their journey across the desert and transit in Libya. A respondent who was pregnant while in a detention camp noted: “The man, who is now my husband, became a close companion throughout our stay in Libya, and we started living together while we made frantic efforts for over two years to find affordable transit to Europe” (E. Usman, Interview 2, 11 December 2021).

(d) National/ethnic association solidarity

In Malta, organised national or ethnic group activities are common. A significant number of the focus groups where data for this study were gathered took place on meeting days, and in other cases, in-depth interviews were facilitated by notable members of such associations. Apart from fostering deep social interactions, such as community festivals, group dinners or “end-of-year” parties, the associations provide financial assistance to

members in need and often engage in cooperative thrift and credit societies where members can save money for “projects” back home or meet their financial needs in Europe. In reality, however, not all migrants participate in these ethnic associations. When asked which social groups offered succour, many respondents preferred religious affiliations, while about 26 per cent identified with national/ethnic associations.

Figure 3. Other groups that offer migrants the greatest sense of satisfaction/belonging, apart from family



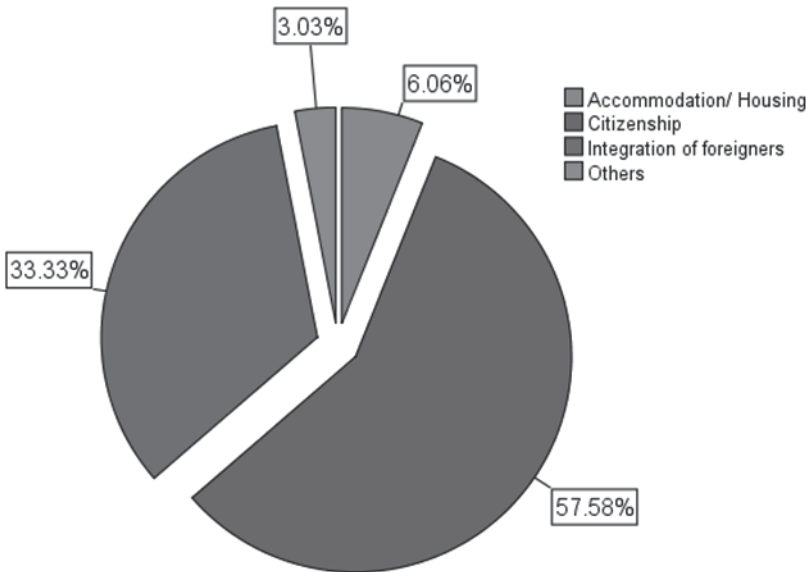
Source: Fieldwork, 2022

(e) The unpredictability of the future

Migrants and refugees, whether they have entered Malta regularly or not, fundamentally remain perceived in the public imagination as a transient group (European Union, 2017). Alongside others who might have arrived legally but overstayed their visas or had their asylum claims rejected, such individuals often have limited or no rights to access services or employment. Hence, migrants harbour a chronic concern about the lack of prospects for obtaining Maltese citizenship or Long-Term Resident status. Many respondents expressed worry about their future in Malta, particularly those whose children were born on the Island but could not claim citizenship at birth. At the same time, these parents still retain their home-country na-

tional identity, despite having lived in Malta for a decade or more. Malta abolished birthright citizenship in August 1989. Some individuals have resorted to giving birth in other European countries where citizenship laws have been slightly liberalised in recent years. When asked what they wanted the Maltese government to prioritise among their demands, 57 per cent of respondents preferred a favourable policy for acquiring citizenship over other existential challenges.

Figure 4. Issues migrants want the government to address



Source: *Fieldwork*, 2022

(f) Spiritual engagement

There is no doubt that the religious factor plays a significant role in ensuring social cohesion among migrants in Malta, as shown in Figure 3. About sixty-four per cent of respondents revealed that, apart from family affection, their respective religions bring about togetherness among them. Involvement in religious activities among the study participants reflected their practices before moving to Malta. Apart from other religious and ethnic groups, I organised focus group discussions and administered questionnaires to migrants in two Pentecostal churches, attended mainly by Africans. The paramount concern of respondents was how to seek celestial in-

tervention to address mundane issues such as good jobs, marital challenges, citizenship, work permits, accommodation, etc. The Sunday service itself, which lasted over three hours (unusual for European church services), consisted of praise/worship, curious prayer points, and tedious prayer sessions that characterise most religious centres in Africa. Some migrants revealed that their challenges could only be surmounted through spiritual means. Indeed, as confirmed in private interviews, they maintained constant communication/prayer sessions with their spiritual guardians in their countries of origin whenever new challenges cropped up.

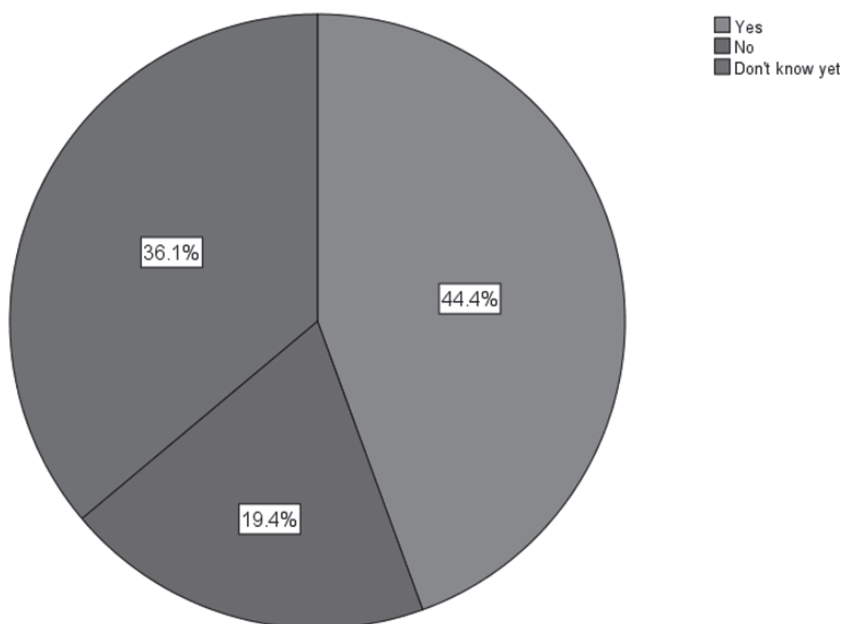
(g) Choice of destination and settlement in Malta

When deciding to leave their countries through irregular routes, some prospective migrants do not have a particular country as their preferred destination. Some researchers (Lemaire, 2014; Haerden, 2016; Schumacher, 2020) have pointed out that most migrants do not have the luxury of planning and choosing the path of their journey to Europe. Indeed, their first aim is to reach a place where they can access the necessary means to provide for their families. In other words, they are searching for a fundamental right that their own country has not been able to guarantee. The implementation of extreme vetting conditions makes it difficult for many migrants to apply for a work visa. This forces many to opt for irregular migration. According to Haerden (2016), the majority of migrants were unaware of Malta before arriving on the Island and arrived there only “accidentally” as they had been headed for Italy or another EU member state before the intervention of patrolling forces in the Mediterranean.

Is Malta metamorphosing from a transit country into a preferred destination for irregularly arriving migrants? This question may be answered in the affirmative, considering the trend of events and the dynamics of migration in the last decade. Indeed, there is evidence from fieldwork that suggests that refugees now perceive Malta less as a country of transit to Europe and more as a destination where they might establish a new life and find job opportunities. For example, nearly all participants in each focus group considered moving to another country when they first arrived in Malta. According to their own accounts, over 30 per cent of those who migrated to the Island in groups ten or fifteen years ago remain residents there. Their rhetorical question was: “Where else can we plan to go now to start life afresh in another country?” Little wonder, about 36 per cent of the respondents in Figure 5 were unsure about when they would return to their home

countries, while 19 per cent had decided to live in Malta permanently. Conversely, 44.4 per cent of the respondents expressed willingness to return “after we may have made enough money to establish themselves” (Focus Group Discussion, FGD 1, January 15, 2022).

Figure 5. Migrants' responses on whether they intend to return to their countries of origin soon



Source: Fieldwork, 2022

Most refugees from African countries are involved in ethnic associations, self-help networks, religious groups, and children's school activities. While women are recruited within the tourism industry for cleaning jobs, the majority of male refugees can be found working on construction sites, in refuse collection, and other low-paid, low-skilled jobs. Most respondents feel safe on the Island, although some think that they are exposed to prejudice and discrimination, particularly regarding employment. Seven out of ten refugees work in low-paid/low-skilled jobs to make ends meet. Others (about 4 per cent) have participated in caregiver training and are working in health-care facilities and private homes.

(h) Low literacy level/capacity building

A common denominator among the refugees interviewed was a low level of literacy/education. Almost 80 per cent had only a primary leaving certificate or a secondary school certificate, while some had dropped out of school. Some could barely understand the demographic questions while attempting to fill out the questionnaires until they received assistance from others. In fact, in trying to assist refugees and asylum seekers who arrive in Malta, one of the main challenges faced by local NGOs³ and job providers that assist with capacity building and job search, is that:

“...asylum seekers from Africa have, in the majority, a very low level of education, which makes any training or capacity-building activity difficult. The second point, still related to education, is that it is difficult to convince them to go back to school, in order to have a better life, and look for a job at a later stage.” (R. Psaila, Interview 3, June 4, 2021).

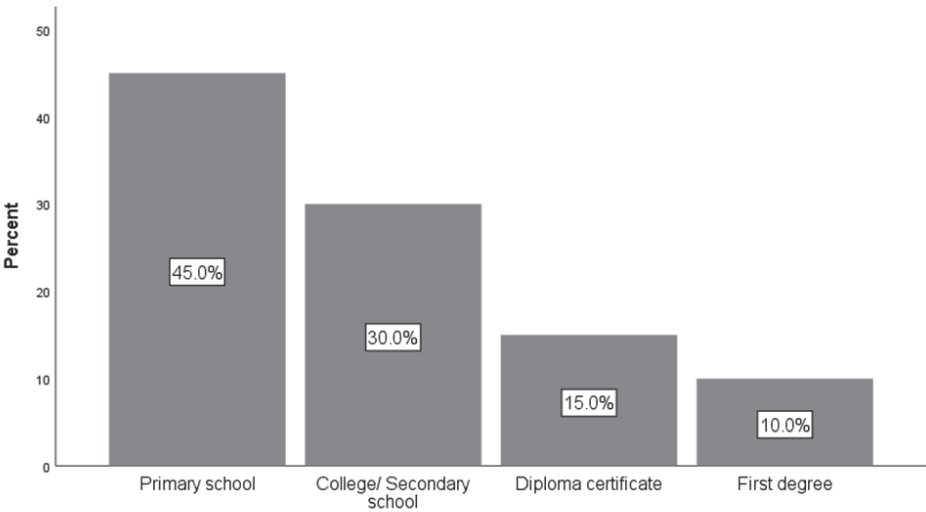
An official communication with JobsPlus – the Employment and Training Corporation in Malta – confirmed that:

“...most are seeking low-skilled jobs either because they did not specialise in their country of origin, or because they have no documents to prove their specialisation. Once they have a job (regular or irregular), they somehow choose not to invest in training even though there are courses readily available to them.” (JobsPlus, Interview 4, June 11, 2021).

Figure 6 shows the educational categories of the refugees. Unlike people with primary, college or secondary education, those with advanced education are less likely to migrate through irregular routes. The figure also reveals that about 45 per cent of the respondents were primary school leavers, followed by college/secondary school certificate holders, who constitute about 30 per cent of the respondents. In addition, about 15 per cent had diploma certificates, while only 10 per cent were first-degree holders.

³ Many of these NGOs focus on social integration and community support by organising social events and cultural activities, as well as providing integration-related information to their communities (employment, education, family reunification, etc.).

Figure 6. Educational qualifications

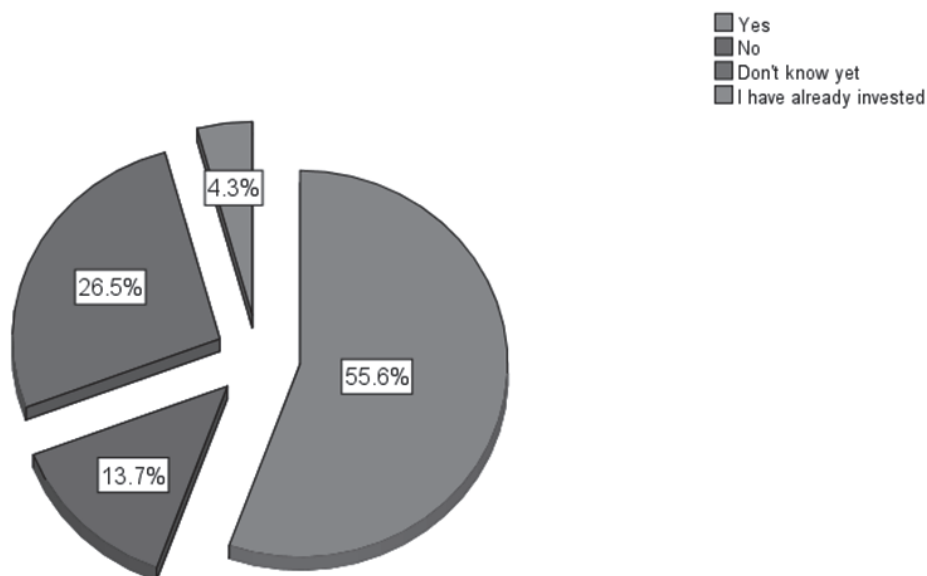


Source: Fieldwork, 2022

(i) Voluntary return and remittances

The attitudes of migrants towards their eventual return to their home countries are one of the least investigated dimensions of the migration cycle (UNDP, 2019). Voluntariness is assumed if the migrant decides to return. Currently, there is a form of advocacy for adopting comprehensive voluntary return approaches that include post-return reintegration assistance, wherever possible, as a more effective, sustainable, and mutually beneficial approach to addressing repeated irregular migration. The knowledge transfer argument in favour of migration depends very much on the number of migrants returning to their countries of origin and on the know-how received and acquired. However, in the case of refugees with low educational qualifications and a penchant for unskilled labour in a host country like Malta, the only benefit could be the remittances they send to their countries of origin – often a crucial source of income for dependent family members. As seen in Figure 7, about 55 per cent of the participants revealed they had intentions to invest their earnings in their home countries, and 4.3 per cent confirmed that they had actually done so. About 13 per cent never subscribed to this idea of investment, and 26.5 per cent were still undecided, possibly because of their financial circumstances.

Figure 7. Plans of investing in their countries of origin



Source: Fieldwork, 2022

MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION CHALLENGES: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a variety of overlapping approaches to managing refugee flows. Among the most discussed in the literature are human rights-based approaches, refugee camp-based models, urban refugee strategies, supporting local communities, and targeted development assistance. The objectives of each approach differ according to the local context and may include repatriation, resettlement, or local integration (Betts, 2009). However, until the root causes and triggers of displacement and migration are addressed in many countries and across nearby regions, people will continue to seek safety and protection in Europe. Similarly, others will try to escape poverty in the hope of finding work or educational opportunities (UNHCR, 2019). In other words, as long as vicious conflicts and crushing poverty continue in the Middle East and Africa, their victims will be drawn to the relative peace and prosperity of Europe.

It is suggested that a sustainable solution for migration is only possible in a world where people have effective rights and natural choices, whether

they stay within their country of birth or decide to move to another country (Minter, 2011). The bottom line, however, is that international migration has become inevitable, and its significance has grown in the contemporary world – given the general driving forces of migration and the contributions of migrants to both receiving and origin countries. This study offers several recommendations to address the reality of migration in Malta.

A holistic approach to integration

The integration of migrants into the host state's economy and society is crucial, as it contributes to better economic performance while mitigating social tensions (OECD, 2013). For instance, the vast majority of migrants (foreigners) living in Malta – which amounts to 25.3 percent of the population – are of working age. This demonstrates the significance of having effective legislation and policy regarding labour and migration. Besides leaving their countries in search of better economic opportunities, a high percentage of migrants who have irregularly arrived in Malta were forced to leave their homes. It is “almost impossible for people in that category to become Maltese nationals and they constantly need to renew their identity and working documents, reinforcing the idea that they will never fully be part of the community” (Falzon, 2019). These people, known as forced migrants, deserve humanitarian protection because migration is necessary for their survival (Moulton, 2013). According to one of the respondents:

“In general, the Maltese government needs to ensure policy coherence and consider sustainable development as a fundamental *sine qua non* with regard to migration policy and implementation. For example, the import of a migrant workforce for the construction industry, where Turkish workers are being paid a pittance and required to live in container housing while engaging in demanding and sometimes dangerous work, is definitely unacceptable. In addition, adequate training and resources must be provided to service providers catering to migrants, e.g. educational professionals in schools. The system as it stands today is not coping with the integration of large numbers of migrants in a sustainable manner, ensuring the safety and dignity of all living in Malta” (D. Kalweit, Interview 5, June 30, 2021).

Once in the country, migrants require substantial assistance with the integration process. This includes familiarisation with their rights and responsibilities, which cannot be taken for granted. Recognising migrants' actual value and building their sense of belonging to host countries is cen-

tral to holistic integration (Omilusi, 2024b). In addition, some refugees and other vulnerable migrants must overcome trauma before entering the labour market. Some arrive with health issues because of exposure to unfavourable environments and lack of access to medical facilities, or due to physical violence or trauma requiring specific attention and adequate medical and psychological support (OECD, 2019). Thus, key issues and events – such as education, employment, skills development, social integration, and security – in the early days of the migration and resettlement process, should be strategically implemented as contained in government policy documents.

Addressing detention policy⁴

Since the 1990s, detention has become the method of choice for managing migrant populations across Europe and beyond. The only reason for such detention is failure to comply with immigration or residency rules. For much of this century, Malta has detained people who arrived on its shores without authorisation. For over a decade, Malta has been the only EU member state to automatically detain all “irregularly arriving migrants” for up to 18 months (Mainwaring, 2018) with varied accounts of suicide attempts, self-harm, bullying, and harassment (Falzon, 2020). Malta has three official detention centres where asylum-seekers are detained upon arrival: Safi Barracks, (in most cases housing detainees with no documentation), Lyster (Hermes) Barracks, and China House (established in March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic). Evidence, however, shows that detention does not deter migration; instead, it results in migrants taking greater risks. In addition, it weakens other migration management outcomes, reduces case resolutions, wastes resources, and clogs the court system (International Detention Coalition, 2015).

There is no doubt that irregular migration and international protection present apparent challenges, primarily due to the immediate reception needs of these migrants. Falzon (2019) however, suggests the effective administration of open reception centres in terms of staff, social workers, food and supplies. Similarly, Kalweit (cited in Ashly, 2019), observes that Malta’s

⁴ The Maltese authorities continue to maintain the narrative that the country no longer operates detention centres, but rather a camp where asylum seekers are kept pending the formalisation of integration/resettlement procedures. This was strongly reiterated at a Citizen Consultation forum that I attended, organised by MEUSAC and the Ministry for European Affairs and Equality on 2 November 2018.

Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers⁵ (AWAS) has not yet managed to increase its capacity or provide adequate human resources and staff training. The open centres, some of which are mere mobile metal containers, are “in dire need of refurbishment and upgrading”.

Engendering policy coherence and awareness creation

Public policies should be channelled towards supporting job creation, economic growth, and social inclusion for people from disadvantaged or under-represented groups in the country. As suggested by Dominik Kalweit (Interview 5, 30 June 2021), integration challenges in the Maltese framework can be addressed through policy coherence and a focus on sustainable development and the protection of vulnerable persons. Persecution, exposure to brutality and violence, displacement and forced separation from family and friends are all factors that can have a severe impact on mental health. They may also affect the capacity to learn and fuel despondency or aggression, including within the family. This reality has to be considered when designing and implementing integration policies (UNHCR, 2007). This must go hand in hand with awareness-raising measures that do away with misconceptions and stereotypes.

Effectively working with new migrants from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds requires sensitivity, openness to learning, and a commitment to practising cross-culturally responsive skills and competencies. The government must implement public education initiatives, create information programmes, and promote best practices to dispel the stereotypes of racism, neglect, and discrimination directed at migrants. Professional training on topics such as asylum and migration legislation, as well as combating racism and xenophobia, should be provided by both authorities and independent organisations. Although Malta has supported the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality in the implementation of anti-racism research and campaigns, as observed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2013), there is still a need for more efforts to engage a broader set of mainstream stakeholders in addressing these challenges.

⁵ The Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS) implements national legislation and policy concerning the welfare of refugees, persons enjoying international protection and asylum seekers. In practice, AWAS manages reception facilities, provides information programmes on employment, housing, health, welfare and education, and promotes government schemes related to resettlement voluntary returns.

Education and skill development

In Malta, many adult refugees struggle to learn Maltese or English⁶, especially women who do not work and have minimal contact with Maltese society⁷ (The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 2004). Ironically, although many reasonably understand English and hold secondary school certificates from their countries of origin, over 90 per cent of respondents in focus group discussions did not bother to pursue further education even when there was a policy on exemption fees⁸. “My purpose here is to make money for my family and I have to work all day; so, how do I sit in a classroom when responsibilities are piling up daily?” one of the respondents said as a matter of finality (O. Adigun, FDG 2, 5 August 2022).

The government’s public employment service (JobsPlus) also attests to this mindset: “When it comes to development, experience indicates that they seem to prefer having a job and money in hand instead of committing to undergo training” (Interview 4, 11 June 2021). Once they have a job (regular or irregular), they somehow choose not to invest in training even though there are courses readily available to them. The main factor behind this, according to a JobsPlus official (Interview 6, 4 February 2022), seems to be a language barrier both in employment and in the uptake of courses designed for skill development. This is because most courses in Malta are offered in either English or Maltese. According to a JobsPlus representative, the typical reaction of refugees and asylum seekers to skill development and employment prospects in Malta is not promising since they mostly express interest in low-skilled jobs (Interview 6, 4 February 2022). However, a positive aspect is that virtually all respondents confirmed that their children benefit from tuition-free schooling policies, in addition to receiving child benefits (FGD 3, 5 August 2021).

Education can be an asset for migrants and refugees, and it is imperative that migrants, many of them in their thirties and forties, tap into the opportunities available in Malta given that economic growth is intrinsically linked to human resources. Vocational education and training (VET), in particu-

⁶ Apart from local NGOs offering assistance in this regard, the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC), a government agency responsible for employment-related issues, offers cultural awareness courses and basic Maltese and English language courses.

⁷ Immigrant women tend to have particularly low employment and activity rates in EU member states (OECD/European Union, 2015).

⁸ The Ministry of Education issued the Policy on Exemption Fees, (Ministry of Education and Employment, Malta, 2010), which allows certain categories of migrants to apply for exemption from tuition fees in state educational institutions.

lar work-based learning, is seen as a vehicle for improving labour market outcomes for disadvantaged young people and adults (OECD, 2018), while also enabling asylum-seekers to meet the host population on equal terms rather than as recipients of services. To ensure the inclusion of migrants and refugees, their qualifications and prior learning must be recognised so that they can continue their education and find employment that corresponds to their skills.

Addressing the root causes of irregular migration

Increased cooperation is critically needed to address the root causes of refugee and migrant movements, such as conflict, insecurity, and lack of access to education and livelihoods. Addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement will, therefore, focus on reducing poverty, promoting peace, good governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights, supporting inclusive economic growth through investment opportunities and the creation of decent jobs, and improving the delivery of essential services such as education, health and security (UNHCR, 2015). Greater efforts should be made to create jobs and sustainable livelihoods in developing countries, ensuring that citizens do not feel compelled to migrate.

In addition, the number of refugees arriving in Europe may likely decrease if efforts focus on creating socioeconomic anchors rather than deterrence and building walls (Betts, 2018). African governments should develop effective mechanisms and concrete initiatives for preventing and combating irregular migration and human trafficking, including through public awareness-raising activities (European Commission, 2015) and the creation of job opportunities to significantly reduce widespread poverty and income inequality. In other words, responding to irregular migration requires African governments to demonstrably build societies that inspire young Africans to channel their energies and aspirations into national development.

CONCLUSION

The factors pushing people to leave sub-Saharan Africa, such as extreme violence, poor governance, climate change, lack of prospects or economic opportunity, and the paths migrants take to arrive at their destinations (Omilusi, 2023) or “the profit incentives of illicit actors that facilitate and exploit flows” (Yayboke and Aboneaaj, 2020), remain unchanged. The growing migration movements to Europe are already causing unease, mainly

arising from forced migration which reflects a shared need to flee from crisis situations. As it is improbable that migration flows will decrease and Malta remains one of the closest “gateways” to Europe, many migrants in search of better economic opportunities and the fulfilment of their aspirations in Europe may continue to find themselves in Malta. This study has contributed to the extant literature by providing an empirical overview of the various challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers in Malta and the coping mechanisms employed at different phases of arrival and settlement, particularly in terms of economic survival through low-paying and precarious jobs undertaken to sustain themselves and their families. The study establishes that effective integration is often obstructed by stereotypes, and racial and ethnic inequalities in Malta.

There is no all-encompassing approach or theory explaining how refugees cope with the challenges of resettlement and adjustment to life in host countries. The use of any approach can be conditioned by the contexts within which migrant integration is taking place, whether within a nation-state or amid the rise of ethnic nationalism. However, a variety of approaches (contingent upon the category, purpose, or span of migration) have been developed to strengthen the capacities of both new and long-standing migrants, reducing their vulnerability to various risks. Social cohesion, an essential element of economic success, provides both native and migrant communities with a sense of security and shared purpose, enabling them to reach their full potential in society. Given that they represent a particularly vulnerable group, preventing the marginalisation of refugees and migrants in Malta might be supported by granting them free access to basic social rights. After all, the ultimate goal of refugee protection is to find durable solutions that will enable them to live in safety and rebuild their lives. Many of the country's current policy frameworks are capable of removing these obstacles, but only if the government demonstrates the desire to bring people of different cultures together and provides the required support to help migrants and refugees meet their basic needs.

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Analiza strategija preživljavanja i prilagodbe izbjeglica u okviru politike integracije migranata i imigracijske politike Malte

Mike Omilusi

SAŽETAK

Izbjeglice na Malti suočavaju se s različitim izazovima, osobito u pogledu socijalne i ekonomske integracije, uključujući diskriminaciju, jezične barijere i poteškoće pri pronalasku zaposlenja. Osim što se oslanjaju na vlastitu otpornost i odlučnost kako bi prevladali prepreke i uspjeli u novoj zajednici, izbjeglice su osmislili različite strategije za suočavanje s tim problemima. Središnje istraživačko pitanje ovog rada glasi: Kako imigracijska i integracijska politika Malte štiti životne uvjete izbjeglica? U tom kontekstu, studija istražuje prilike, iskustva i izazove s kojima se izbjeglice suočavaju, kao i mehanizme suočavanja koje najčešće primjenjuju. Korištenjem kombinacije anketnog istraživanja, fokus grupa, neformalnih razgovora, intervjua s ključnim informantima i svakodnevnih životnih iskustava, studija otkriva na koji način izbjeglice i tražitelji azila navigiraju složenim pravnim sustavom u svrhu ishođenja potrebne dokumentacije te kako mogu povećati izgleda za preživljavanje i

integraciju uz potporu lokalnih zajednica, nevladinih organizacija i državnih institucija. Ova studija pridonosi boljem razumijevanju načina na koje prava, prilike i zaštita za izbjeglice i tražitelje azila u svim aspektima života mogu potaknuti društvenu koheziju u multikulturnom društvu.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: izbjeglice, migranti, integracija, mehanizmi suočavanja, životni uvjeti, diskriminacija, Malta

