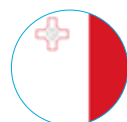




EESC Study Group  
on Immigration and Integration

# **Project on the role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees**



MISSION REPORT – MALTA  
23-24 OCTOBER 2019



European Economic  
and Social Committee

## Mission Report – Malta, 23 and 24 October 2019

*Between October 2019 and March 2020, the IMI Group conducted five fact-finding missions as part of a project on the role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees. The delegation to Malta was composed of Stefano Mallia (Malta, Employers' Group), Philip von Brockdorff (Malta, Workers' Group) and Cristian Pîrvulescu (Romania, Diversity Europe Group), supported by Triin Aasmaa, from the EESC secretariat.*

### 1. Purpose of the mission

Between October 2019 and March 2020, the IMI Group conducted five fact-finding missions as part of a project on the role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees. The country visits provided an in-depth picture of problems and best practices, documented in individual country reports. The five country reports are to feed into a summary report presenting the project's main findings, conclusions and recommendations.

This project is linked to a previous EESC project on migration: eleven EESC fact-finding missions on migration that were conducted in 2015–2016. These latest fact-finding missions took place in Member States that were also visited in 2015-2016, namely Greece, Malta, Sweden, Germany and Bulgaria<sup>1</sup>.

During the missions, the delegation compared the situation in the five countries with the situation as it was three years ago, talking to organisations that we met last time to see if their projects were still ongoing, if they had matured and increased in scale, if problems identified previously had been overcome and how, and what the current needs and challenges were. Where relevant, the delegations also met other organisations, paying special attention to measures addressing particular groups that may be more difficult to integrate into the labour market (e.g. women, migrants from a specific country of origin, migrants with a specific educational background and migrants with disabilities). The project tried to identify good practices to see if they could be replicated elsewhere, including those helping to positively change the narrative on migration.

### 2. Situation in Malta

#### General situation

Migrant and refugee arrivals in Malta from 2015 until the summer of 2018 were mainly regular arrivals. Since June 2018, migrant and refugee arrivals by sea have increased significantly. According to UNHCR data, there were around 25 sea arrivals by boat in 2016 and 2017, reaching 1445 in 2018 and almost doubling in 2019 to 3406. While the majority of people remain and claim asylum in Malta, around 1000 people rescued at sea were transferred to other EU countries following ad hoc agreements between EU Member States.

In recent years, the refugee population has been mainly composed of Libyan, Syrian and Somali refugees. In September 2019, the total number of international migrants in Malta was 84°900, around 19% of the total population.

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<sup>1</sup> A sixth fact-finding visit to Italy was planned, but had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 health crisis.

The visit took place at a difficult time. The conditions in the Maltese reception centres have continuously deteriorated, due to over-crowding and a lack of resources. Issues include a lack of cleaning, difficult access to bathrooms, very limited hot water, and air conditioning and heating not being available. This led to tensions that culminated in riots in October 2019 in the island's main reception centre. It was estimated that 300 residents were involved and 107 people were arrested. Some police officers were slightly injured, several cars burnt and some of the centre's buildings sustained substantial damage. These incidents led to strong reactions from all actors involved in the field.

## **Integration**

Malta adopted its first integration strategy, *Integration = Belonging*, in December 2017. This Migrant Integration Strategy creates a framework for understanding integration through the migrants' own sense of belonging to Maltese society. Malta has only relatively recently become a receiving country in terms of migration flows and is therefore becoming increasingly diverse ethnically, culturally and linguistically. The state wants to run confidence-building awareness campaigns, strengthen the integration role of the migrant Health Liaison Office, issue employment licences equal in duration to the validity of refugee status certificates and develop a local integration fund. The publication of the strategy and action plan was welcomed by civil society and international organisations.

Non-profit organisations and local authorities can apply for financing through several funds. The EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) is the most important one in terms of budget.

In addition, national and private funds are made available for service providers and other stakeholders to carry out projects aiming to improve the integration of the migrant population.

### **3. A description of the meetings**

#### **a. The Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry (Chamber)**

The EESC delegation also met the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry during the previous mission in 2016. Back then, one of the conclusions was that Maltese employers were not very well informed when it came to employing migrants, although there was a clear need for foreign workers in specific sectors of the economy. This time, the members were told that the involvement of employers in the integration of migrants and refugees has remained rather limited.

There is a significant labour shortage in Malta. Employers are interested in hiring migrants but lack of information and red tape are deterring them from doing so. This has created a situation whereby many migrants and refugees are employed through the black market, e.g. in the construction sector. A common but illegal practice is that the refugees wait outside the reception centres very early in the mornings to be picked up by companies that come to look for day workers.

The Chamber has conducted a project where they tried to find jobs for migrants. However, there have been difficulties with matching people and jobs, as the skills of the migrants do not correspond to the jobs offered. Therefore, reskilling and upskilling mechanisms are necessary. There have also been

cases of a person having the right skills but not receiving an employment licence. The Chamber has been in bilateral contact with some NGOs but these exchanges are not organised systematically. There have been attempts to cooperate with some NGOs on migrant integration into the labour market but this has faded.

In order to boost integration of migrants into the labour market, a structure for identifying their skills, providing transparent and comprehensive information accessible to employers and clear administrative procedures, and ensuring that these people have employment licences needs to be established. The Chamber stressed that before it could act as a broker between employers and other stakeholders, a proper structure for migrant integration into the labour market is needed.

#### **b. Migrant Health Liaison Office**

The Migrant Health Liaison Office was set up within the Department of Primary Health in the Ministry for Health in 2008. Migrants from different cultural backgrounds are often unfamiliar with the healthcare system of the host country and do not know how, when and where to seek help. Language barriers may also hinder the use of health services. Cultural diversity in healthcare poses a challenge to service providers who need to manage complex differences in communication styles, attitudes and expectations. For example, explaining the causes of disease and interpreting symptoms can be very problematic.

The Migrant Health Liaison Office provides a cultural mediation (interpreter) service in health centres. There is a 20-hour training programme for cultural mediators in healthcare. Cultural mediators, who have migrant backgrounds themselves, assist health professionals and clients to overcome language and cultural barriers. Around 250 cultural mediators have been trained since 2009. The role of cultural mediators could be more acknowledged by doctors and healthcare professionals, so that they would regularly ask for a cultural mediator to be involved when treating a migrant or refugee patient.

The Transcultural Practice Nurse gives health education sessions for migrants, mostly women in reception centres. Men are mostly out looking for work or working. The topics are mainly sexual and reproductive health, nutrition, child health, etc. Special sessions are provided for unaccompanied minors.

One major problem in Malta is human trafficking. There is labour trafficking, forced labour in factories, domestic servitude and sexual exploitation. The Migrant Health Liaison Office provides training sessions on how to avoid becoming a victim of human trafficking. A booklet in very simple English has been published to raise awareness of human trafficking and how to recognise the danger of becoming a victim. Sessions are also offered for social workers, health professionals and anyone working with migrants on how to identify and protect a human trafficking victim.

Cooperation with different actors is good: there is a functioning network, and for example if the outreach services have a person who has a minor healthcare problem where hospitalisation is not needed, they put this person in contact with the office and a meeting is set up, involving a cultural mediator.

The project is partly funded by the EU, involving cofunding. However, applying for EU funds is deemed very cumbersome and involves a lot of red tape, therefore it becomes a capacity issue.

Generally, migrants and refugees have good access to primary health services.

There is a need for more awareness raising among the Maltese people on migrant and refugee issues.

### **c. UNCHR Malta**

UNHCR Malta works closely with the Maltese government, the social partners, local organisations and NGOs with the aim of finding lasting solutions for refugees and beneficiaries of protection and strengthening the capacities of government and partner agencies. In recent years, the activities of UNHCR Malta have shifted more towards integration, as Malta has been focusing more on integration of migrants and refugees. UNHCR works very closely with the government on integration issues and the first integration strategy, adopted two years ago.

Several integration projects are being implemented. For example, project "Integration Priority Track" has been developed to provide individual support for refugees who are focusing on their integration prospects. This project is being implemented in cooperation with UNHCR's operative partner Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). The project consists of providing more tailor-made support for refugees to facilitate their integration, including access to language courses, tertiary education, skills and employability, and entrepreneurship.

In the framework of the integration strategy, language courses and cultural courses started in early 2019 and there is huge demand for them. In general, the courses work well but there are other fields where more time is needed to progress. One problem is lack of information among migrants and refugees about relevant procedures, their rights and possibilities.

There have been several positive initiatives on migrant education. One good example is a one-year induction course for migrant children to help them acquire enough language skills in the Maltese and English languages to effectively integrate them within mainstream schooling.

There are good employment initiatives. The Maltese public employment service Jobplus offers different advisory services for different categories of migrants. It provides a relatively holistic approach, including occupational therapy and psychological support.

However, there are major problems in the area of employment. One issue is that many migrants and refugees work without any formal contract and often even minimum work conditions are not met, creating abuse and exploitation, e.g. in the construction and care sectors. One of the recommendations is to improve monitoring of the implementation of laws. UNHCR is also in contact with trade unions and praises their work. There are many cases where trade unions have interfered in cases of infringements and this has yielded positive results. However, migrants do not usually know what a trade union is and why one should become a member. UNHCR organises information sessions for migrants and refugees to inform them about their labour rights.

One of the core problems for migrants and refugees is housing. Poverty levels among migrants and refugees has been increasing because of unaffordable housing. However, the housing problem also affects the Maltese population, as housing prices have been increasing. One aspect is a negative attitude towards migrants and refugees and property owners not wanting to give rental contracts to migrants.

There are many NGOs in Malta working with migrants and refugees, but many have very few staff and work on a voluntary basis. They have strengthened the cooperation and coordination among themselves to reduce fragmentation. UNHCR Malta has developed contacts with several national NGOs active in the area of migration and asylum. Projects are implemented in cooperation to benefit vulnerable groups such as women and children. UNHCR offers training sessions for refugee-led NGOs to help them improve the internal administration of their organisations and improve their communication skills. UNHCR is developing a one-to-one coaching model for an individual approach where the emphasis is on the individual problems of these NGOs.

Migrant and refugee arrivals were low in Malta in 2015-2017 and the reception system was changed, with the previous detention facilities with poor conditions no longer being used. The reception capacity in general was reduced. Since the summer of 2018, arrivals have increased significantly and the detention centres have been put back into use. The riots in October 2019 were connected to the very poor conditions in overcrowded centres. The detainment conditions need to be changed. Malta should be better prepared to receive migrants and refugees by having more space and staff available.

#### **d. Roundtable meeting with NGOs**

**Participating organisations:** Aditus Foundation, Malta Employers' Association, Migrant Women's Association Malta, Malta Emigrants' Commission, UHM - Voice of the Workers, SOS Malta, African Media Association Malta

The NGOs found it difficult to speak about integration and inclusion of migrants in the background of the recent riots in the reception centres that caused a tense situation in Maltese society with regard to migrants and refugees. The conditions in reception centres are very poor, with a lack of resources and staff. Detaining people in the closed centres is unacceptable. In addition, this makes subsequent integration very difficult. The usual narrative on migration has a strong negative aspect and this results in a general negative attitude towards migrants and refugees in Maltese society.

One of the core problems is housing. There is not enough housing and rents are so high that it has become impossible to rent an apartment as a migrant or refugee. The NGOs are trying to relieve the housing gap by creating lodging possibilities but they cannot do anything like enough. It is a broader problem that needs a structured solution at state level. However, the NGOs feel that there is no political will to solve this issue.

One major problem is that migrants and asylum seekers do not have enough information. They do not know their rights and obligations, e.g. when it comes to employment, and employers do not know how to hire a migrant.

There is a significant labour shortage in Malta but the administrative obstacles make it very difficult to hire migrants and refugees. From employers' perspective, the issue with hiring migrants and refugees is twofold: there are jobs that migrants could take but there are many obstacles to integrating these people, and so many migrants end up in the black economy. It was emphasised that the barrier between a migrant and a job is not the employer, but the administrative procedures.

Human trafficking and exploitation in the labour market is a huge problem, even for regular third-country nationals. Many come with an employment license linked to a certain employer. That means that if there are problems and the person complains, they would be fired without being able to take up another job. In the event of problems, there are no safe, effective methods for complaining and people are afraid of losing their jobs, even with a legal contract.

Another problem is exclusion of migrants and refugees. It has been deemed very important to communicate to the general public in a fact-based way the issues around migration and what is at stake, e.g. demographic change, ageing and evolving social and economic consequences.

Unaccompanied minors are a very problematic issue in Malta – age determination is not working, it takes a lot of time and during that time the people have to stay in the open centres where the conditions are not appropriate for them. Often they are traumatised and have mental problems but there is no assessment of their mental health.

One very positive development is the special residence authorisation, introduced in 2018. People whose application for international protection has been finally rejected by the relevant asylum authorities may be granted a special residence authorisation: with this authorisation, the person will get a residence permit for two years with the possibility of renewal, access to welfare benefits, an employment licence, access to state education and training, medical care and a travel document.

There are many NGOs dealing with migrant issues but they do not see themselves as fragmented. Cooperation between them is relatively well-established. The NGOs point out that the government agencies are rather fragmented.

Fundraising is a very difficult issue for the NGOs. Often, they apply for funding together. The co-financing requirement for receiving the funds is a big obstacle. Cooperation between migrant-led and Maltese-led NGOs is very good. The Maltese NGOs enable the migrant-led NGOs to have direct access to the host community.

The main obstacle experienced by the NGOs in their work is the complete absence of dialogue with the government. The NGOs have tried to reach out to the government to propose solutions. It was explained to the members that migrants trust the NGOs but not the government authorities or employers. However, the government did not reach out to the NGOs to make use of this in developing relevant strategies and measures.

The NGOs stressed that there is no real migration and asylum management plan in Malta. The NGOs are not involved in developing the national integration strategy and they do not know whether it has been implemented. The NGOs feel that there has been a serious deterioration in the migration management system, as many structures that were established have been dismantled in recent years.

The NGOs stressed that migration management needs a European solution. The European Union must understand that migration is there to stay and migration management needs to be organised in a sustainable and robust way.

#### **e. IOM Malta**

IOM Malta is working on two main fields: integration and protection. In the field of integration, it is implementing various projects. For example, project Tandem (Towards Empowered Migrant Youth in Southern Europe) is a regional project implemented in Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain and targets migrant youth in formal and non-formal learning contexts (such as universities and student associations) to combat prejudice, intolerance and exclusion. This is done through regional and national social media campaigns, empowering young people to define their own narrative on migration, deconstructing inaccurate perceptions and fighting xenophobia and intolerance; and interreligious dialogues to foster inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding among students and young people and fight islamophobia and intolerance.

There are also specific activities such as capacity building for the private sector, such as hotel managers and the construction sector, involving trade unions and academia. The aim is to exchange best practices and create a checklist for the employer to ensure they comply with the rules regarding hiring migrants.

The members were told that the Maltese government is making efforts in the field of migrant integration but it is a work in progress. Implementation of the recent integration strategy is only just starting. The migration management system would benefit from an enhanced information sharing mechanism among the bodies working in the field of migration. Coordination and consistent information sharing could be improved to reduce overlaps. There are many different bodies working in the field and this confuses migrants as well.

The recent riots are not a surprise. The conditions in the detention centres are very poor, frustration is high and the staff is overwhelmed. IOM is trying to help find solutions and improve the situation. The conditions in detention centres need to be improved urgently. The EU could help with more training, staff and resources for improving infrastructure. In the longer term, the concept of these isolated receptions centres should be replaced by a different type of accommodation that would not isolate refugees. Housing in general is a very big problem that needs addressing urgently.

Migrants and refugees are poorly informed about procedures, rights and obligations, and this needs to be improved. Lack of information causes considerable frustration. Good quality information is essential for successful integration and IOM is trying to help close this information gap. Greater use could be made of social media channels to distribute information among communities and migrants.



**f. Integration and Anti-Racism Unit (Human Rights and Integration Directorate of the Ministry for European Affairs and Equality)**

Malta's first Migrant Integration Strategy and Action Plan was adopted in December 2017. The Integration and Anti-Racism Unit (IU)<sup>2</sup> was set up in the beginning of 2018. It takes care of the day-to-day implementation of the strategy and action plan. The IU is the main governmental coordinating body that distributes information, receives integration requests and follows migrants' progress on their integration in Malta. The overarching goal of the integration strategy is to enable migrants and refugees to develop a sense of belonging in Malta. An interministerial integration committee has been set up to mainstream integration issues in all policy areas.

The integration itinerary consists of two stages. Stage 1 is the Pre-Integration stage and entails Maltese and English language classes, basic cultural and societal orientation and a record and assessment of qualifications, trade, work experience and skills. The aim is to provide basic knowledge of Maltese and English as well as knowledge about Malta's Constitution and laws, institutional set-up, equality and non-discrimination, and customs. Successful participants receive a Pre-Integration Certificate.

The Pre-Integration Certificate is required to register for Stage 2. Stage 2 is open to people who intend to lodge an application for permanent residence status. This stage consists of a course on the social, economic, cultural and democratic history and environment of Malta, with specific focus on the Constitution, law, democratic values and practical sessions and an advanced Maltese course. Stage 2 is organised in cooperation with the University of Malta, which works with NGOs. Completing Stage 2 is the gateway to long-term residence.

The special residence authorisation system was introduced in 2018. Those whose applications for international protection have been finally rejected by the relevant asylum authorities may be granted a special residence authorisation: this gives the person a residence permit for two years with the possibility of renewal, access to welfare benefits, an employment licence, access to state education and training, medical care and a travel document.

Awareness campaigns are being developed that will be rolled out in 2020. Access to bank accounts is one important issue that has been dealt with. In cooperation with the University of Malta, the IU is preparing a cultural mediator's diploma.

Housing is a major problem, and the IU is cooperating with the Housing Authority to find solutions. There is a subsidies scheme and ways to apply for support but more needs to be done. Housing is becoming increasingly problematic even for Maltese people who have jobs. The Housing Authority recently proposed a rent reform to solve this issue.

The IU recognises that human trafficking is a major issue. It has very specific procedures in place, for instance officials speak with their clients in private and where there is doubt, the competent authorities are informed.

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The name of the unit at the time of the EESC visit. Since then, the name has been changed into "Intercultural and Anti-Racism Unit".

The IU deemed its relationship with the NGOs to be good and there is a mutual understanding. Where possible, the unit cooperates with the NGOs and there are projects in the pipeline that have been developed together. The unit has constraints in terms of staff and resources, and so not all proposals can be implemented. Government structures are broad and cooperation and contacts may not be so well established across all government entities.

Cooperation on migrant and refugee issues in the EU and between its Member States must be improved. Malta needs more support from the EU in terms of relocation, as it is not able to manage the situation alone. The number of arrivals has become unmanageable for Malta, resulting in the events at the reception centres.

#### **g. Maltese Public Employment Service "Jobsplus" and Migrant Learners' Unit**

The Maltese Public Employment Service "Jobsplus" comes into contact with migrants in three areas:

- The Guidance unit that works only with migrants encourages migrants to come for an individual meeting with employment advisers with the aim of identifying what is missing from their employability status and helping them find a permanent job. Jobsplus can offer courses and training.
- The Job Brokerage Office for temporary jobs that was set up to tackle the problem of irregular work and exploitation of workers. This office is in contact with employers who turn to the office when they wish to find workers for a short period, mostly a couple of days. The aim is also to give migrants an opportunity to acquire work experience.
- With regard to employment licences. All third-country nationals need an employment licence to work in Malta. Jobsplus helps migrants with the procedures for acquiring the employment licence, trying to make things as easy as possible. Normally, the employment licence is issued for a specific job for a specific employer. For migrants, the licence is issued in the name of the migrant and they can work for any employer.

When Jobsplus started planning measures for migrants, it contacted a number of NGOs working in the field of migration, as it did not have experience with migrants. A working group was set up that meets once a month. A number of migrants are reluctant to trust public offices, but they have greater faith in NGOs. Employment advisers go to the premises of NGOs, as many migrants do not like to go to government buildings.

**The Migrants Learners' Unit** was set up within the Ministry for Education and Employment in 2014. Its aim is to develop and implement an organisational structure for the provision of education for learners from a migrant background. It works in the following areas:

- Registration of third-country nationals (TCN). EU children apply directly within schools. TCN apply at the Migrants Learners' Unit.
- Induction course offered to children who cannot yet communicate in basic Maltese or English. Experience shows that without basic language knowledge, children will quickly drop out of school. The induction course is a one-year course given in different schools and hubs. Hubs are schools that receive children from other schools because their own schools do not have enough space. Once migrant children have the resident permit, they can be registered by the

Unit and go on the induction course. The Unit organises transport from their home areas to the place of the induction course. After one year, these children will be included in mainstream schooling.

- Programme LLAPSI+ with AMIF funding. The aim is to develop a holistic approach to integration and language acquisition by migrant learners. One component of the programme is recruiting community liaison workers, who are third-country nationals themselves. They form a bridge between home and school. They provide considerable useful insight into how to communicate with the community, how to reach out to parents and how to strengthen the contacts between parents and schools. This has been highlighted as a very good practice. Community liaison workers are in contact with parents and this is very important. They explain how the school system functions and cultural differences, looking for ways in which the school, parents and communities can work better for the benefit of the child.

There are courses organised in cooperation with the University of Malta, offered to teachers to help them deal with children of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. A number of initiatives for summer, an after-school programme for migrants and Maltese in different schools all over Malta are also implemented. A summer intensive language course for children who are struggling with language is provided to boost their knowledge and ensure that they do not forget English and Maltese over the summer. This is a very successful practice. Awareness campaigns for both teachers and children are organised.

#### **h. EASO**

The role of EASO has been growing very quickly over the last year, and its mandate will be transformed into an asylum agency. EASO staff assist the Member States with implementing the common asylum system. They provide training, help with the registration process, provide information to newly arrived migrants and are responsible for matching refugees with countries where they can be relocated. EASO provides operational support to Member States with specific needs and to Member States whose asylum and reception systems are under particular pressure. It gives evidence-based input for EU policymaking and legislation in areas with a direct or indirect impact on asylum.

Malta Operating Plan is the youngest EASO operation and started in September 2019. Arrival numbers have been growing significantly and Malta is not able to manage the situation alone. EASO aims to help alleviate the pressure on the Maltese asylum system. At the request of the Maltese authorities, EASO gives tailor-made assistance, including providing capacity building and backlog management support, technical expertise and quality control tools. The aim is to ensure that people in need of international protection in Malta have access to the international protection determination procedure and that the procedure at first instance is concluded as swiftly as possible. EASO assists in Malta with information provision and speeding up registration.

#### **4. Conclusions and recommendations**

Malta is a young migration country and still adapting to the arrival and integration of newcomers. Consequently, migrant integration management has a short history in Malta. At the time of the previous EESC visit, Malta had no functioning integration policy in place and integration was not structurally organised.

Since then, Malta has taken steps to create an integration governance structure. It adopted its first Migrant Integration Strategy and Action Plan in 2017 and set up an Integration and Anti-Racism Unit as the main governmental coordinating body that takes care of the day-to-day implementation of the strategy. However, integration governance in Malta is a work in progress and requires time and effort to become fully functional.

An integration itinerary has been introduced, consisting of two stages: a Pre-Integration stage that entails Maltese and English language classes, basic cultural and societal orientation and a record and assessment of qualifications, trade, work experience and skills. Successful participants receive a Pre-Integration Certificate that is required to register for Stage 2, open to those who intend to lodge an application for permanent residence status. It consists of a course on the social, economic, cultural and democratic history and environment of Malta, with specific focus on the Constitution, law, democratic values and practical sessions, as well as an advanced Maltese course. Completing Stage 2 is the gateway to long-term residence.

One good practice is an induction course offered to migrant children of primary school age who cannot communicate in basic Maltese or English. This one-year course aims to prepare migrant children for mainstream schooling. In 2019, the induction course was started for children of secondary school age as their numbers are growing.

The Migrant Health Liaison Office within the Ministry of Health provides health education sessions for migrants, mainly on topics such as sexual and reproductive health, nutrition and child health. Special sessions are provided for unaccompanied minors. One of the aims is to raise awareness of how to avoid becoming a victim of human trafficking. There is a training programme for cultural mediators in healthcare to provide a cultural mediation service in health centres. Access to healthcare services for migrants and refugees is generally good in Malta.

There is a labour shortage in Malta. Employers are interested in hiring migrants and refugees but lack information and administrative obstacles make it difficult. In order to boost integration of migrants and refugees into the labour market, a structure for identifying their skills, providing transparent and comprehensive information accessible to employers and clear administrative procedures should be established.

Human trafficking and exploitation in the labour market are a severe problem in Malta. The state has recognised the severity of the problem, but the EESC urges it to take immediate action to eliminate this phenomenon.

Many migrants and refugees come with an employment license linked to a certain employer. This means that if the person complains in the event of problems, they could be fired without being able to take up another job. There are no safe, effective methods for complaining and people are afraid of losing their jobs, even with a legal contract. The EESC stresses that employers and trade unions have to be involved in social dialogue to address the issue of integrating migrant workers into the labour market and ensuring that all their rights are upheld, including a healthy and safe working environment.

The Maltese public employment service Jobsplus has launched initiatives to improve the integration of migrants and refugees into the labour market. Through its employment advisers, it provides individual counselling for migrants. It has set up a Job Brokerage Office for temporary jobs to tackle the problem of irregular work and exploitation of workers and it is helping migrants with the procedures for acquiring an employment license. The aim is to make employment licenses for migrants cheaper, easier to obtain and more open. Normally, the employment license is issued for a specific job with a specific employer. As a new practice, the license for migrants is issued in the name of the migrant and they can work for any employer.

One of the core problems for migrants and refugees in Malta is housing. Poverty levels among migrants and refugees have been increasing because of unaffordable housing. However, housing is becoming more and more problematic even for Maltese people who have jobs, as prices have been increasing. NGOs are trying to relieve the housing problem by creating lodging possibilities but they do not have the capacity to fill the gap. The EESC strongly recommends taking urgent action to find a structured solution to the housing problem and mitigate the situation for migrants and refugees as well as Maltese people.

One very problematic issue for migrants and refugees is the lack of information about relevant procedures, their rights and possibilities, access to the labour market, etc. Access to good quality information is key to successful integration and needs to be improved. For example, greater use could be made of social media channels to distribute information among communities and migrants.

Another major problem in Malta is the exclusion of migrants and refugees. Migrants and the local population live in parallel worlds without real contact. The EESC recommends increasing efforts to raise awareness among Maltese people of migrant and refugee issues to inform them in a fact-based way about the issues surrounding migration and what is at stake, e.g. demographic change, ageing, evolving social and economic consequences. The EESC recommends designing integration measures in a way that benefits the local population as well in order to avoid tensions between the host population and the newcomers. In addition, this would facilitate encounters, which reduce the level of distrust and animosity that are often seen in societies welcoming newcomers in their midst.

There are many NGOs working on migrant issues in Malta. They have made efforts to reduce fragmentation and feel that they work well together. The main obstacle experienced by NGOs in their work is the lack of dialogue with the government. The NGOs are critical of the fact that while the government engages with migrants directly, the involvement of NGOs is important as migrants may not always be in a position to be honest with and critical of the government. Migrants tend to trust NGOs more than government authorities or employers. The EESC recommends that the government reach out to the NGOs to make use of this when developing relevant strategies and measures. One positive example here is Jobsplus, which contacted a number of NGOs working in the field of migration when it started planning measures for migrants, as it recognised that it did not have the necessary experience and contacts itself.

The government bodies met during the visit claimed that they do cooperate with some NGOs but referred to the fragmented landscape of the NGOs as a complicating factor. International organisations have well established cooperation with both NGOs and government bodies.

The EESC recommends stepping up efforts to achieve more structured cooperation between NGOs and government authorities to create synergies and make better use of the knowledge and resources available on both sides. This would help ensure that integration activities are efficient and benefit migrants and refugees in an optimal way.

The EESC stresses that Malta urgently needs to improve its reception capacity and poor conditions in overcrowded reception centres to ensure that human rights are upheld. The EESC urges the EU to provide more help with training, staff and resources in order to improve the reception infrastructures.

The EU urgently needs to advance its migration management systems and a sound and functional EU relocation system must be put in place to reduce the pressure on Malta and other frontline Member States.

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