

## Intersectional Dialogues around Cultural Policy in Malta

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### **Abstract**

This article seeks to understand how social engagement and policy change in the cultural sector in Malta can cater for the needs of various individuals and communities, particularly minorities, based on the island. As it contextualises local cultural policy in the broad theoretical field of intersectionality, the article articulates a general backdrop linking geographical and political dimensions to the cultural scene and specific minorities in Malta. It then presents an outline of the recent National Cultural Policy issued by the Ministry for the National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government in 2021, giving an overview of some of the policy's references to social inclusion and cultural access in the work conducted by various public stakeholders in the cultural and educational sectors. Finally, it describes and analyses data collected from two meetings held with various stakeholders representing different sectors in the country in order to elicit some conclusions about the significance of socially engaged arts, training and other perceived needs in the sector.

**Keywords:** cultural policy; intersectionality; socially engaged arts; cultural stakeholders; policy recommendations

### **Introduction**

Malta is one of the most densely populated countries in the world (Worldometer, 2021) and its cultural life is characterised by a complex, 'cross-roads' mindset combining insular and European value systems that have been formed by its geographical context, political development and other factors, including a hegemonic Catholicism in the past (Vella, 2008). The country's

history, particularly its colonial past, has influenced developments in various fields, from the arts and language, to the legal system and education, but since Malta gained European Union (EU) membership in 2004, it has experienced an influx of a number of different ethnic and cultural communities. Increasing use of the internet in recent years, particularly amongst younger members of the population (NSO, 2020), has helped to improve digital skills and expand social networks and access to information. Further connectedness has also facilitated the development of more global forms of community expression, from those related to gender issues to the assertion of marginalised groups in society.

The booming construction, iGaming and financial services industries, together with tourism, have attracted international investment and tens of thousands of European, African and Asian people seeking work and better economic conditions. This migration trend includes asylum seekers arriving mainly by sea from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, whose numbers fluctuate quite substantially from year to year (UNHCR, 2021a). The visibility of specific groups, especially those who arrive from sub-Saharan Africa, exposes them to the possibility of exploitation, racism and other difficulties associated with being perceived as 'strangers' (Bradford & Clark, 2014). Perceptions about migrants' transient presence on the island (Falzon, 2011) are likely to affect the possibility of a healthy participation in social and cultural life. In fact, perceptions about the suitability of other minority groups also affects their inclusion in various activities; for example, recent research shows that the daily lives, employment and leisure activities of persons with intellectual disabilities in Malta are restricted by overprotection, which bars individuals from living an ordinary life (Callus et al., 2019). A study carried out by the National Statistics Office in 2016 about cultural participation in Malta found that 78.1% of respondents with a health limitation had never attended a live theatre (or similar) performance during the 12 months preceding the survey, compared to 64.2% of respondents not limited by a health problem (NSO, 2017, p. 60). Similar discrepancies were evident in other areas of cultural activity, like visiting art exhibitions, museums or historical sites and attending concerts.

The need to research such challenges related to the participation of specific groups in cultural activities and the influence of intersectional factors on cultural access in Malta led our team at the University of Malta to become involved in a Horizon 2020, EU-funded project called 'Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture' (AMASS). Through its participation in AMASS, the research team at the University of Malta implemented five creative research

projects with different communities on the island. These projects were sustained by a belief in the contemporary relevance of socially engaged arts and life-long learning processes and the need to bring experiences from different individuals and communities affected by discrimination to the fore. In order to gauge others' views on the relevance of socially inclusive approaches to art-making and cultural access, the team also assessed a group of stakeholders' feedback on national and institutional cultural policies. This article describes and analyses this feedback. A theme that emerged in discussions with stakeholders was the complex intersectionality and invisibility of some vulnerable individuals whose very specific realities are often overlooked by strategy and resources. Comparably, perhaps, cultural practitioners were described as creative persons who wear many hats and spread themselves thinly, yet somewhat strategically, across different areas of practice that may hinder specialisation yet may further employment prospects and networks. The inter-connectedness of different, strategic fields of cultural practice in artists' lives (possibly leading to an expansion of creative possibilities for artists and other local practitioners) and the overlapping of different identities in certain individuals and communities (leading to a possible increase in discrimination) were therefore two seemingly opposing currents that occasionally crossed each other's paths in discussions with stakeholders.

Intersectionality has a long intellectual history, originally expounded by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who wrote that "the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). Crenshaw showed how theories that revolved around identity politics like feminism sometimes legitimised the marginalisation of individuals by restricting the critique of discrimination to specific issues of gender or race rather than the multi-layered vulnerabilities of women of colour. While the term 'intersectionality' is fluid and is not interpreted in the same way by different scholars and theorists, its general parameters are understood as referring to "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape social inequalities" (Collins, 2015, p. 2). The analysis of intersectionality now engages with many different power dynamics and theoretical disciplines, and its incomplete nature means that it remains a work-in-progress (Carbado et al., 2013). Unitary definitions of race, gender, class and so on are challenged by more relational and overlapping intersectional

approaches to people's lived experiences that are impacting the discourses of artistic practices, cultural policy and even art education (Hatton, 2019).

### **National cultural policy and access**

Since cultural policy deals with the ways cultural activities, arts education and heritage sites are regulated, supported and even restricted by official and unofficial structures, it is clear that an analysis of policy that is informed by the intersection of layers of social identities in people's lives can serve to regenerate policy in ways that cater for social justice and more diversity in cultural life.

The last 15 years of cultural policy in Malta coincide with accession to the EU. Supported by the Council of Europe (2002), this work led to legal and institutional steps that enabled governance, including direct funding for specialised entities, such as Public Cultural Organisations (PCOs). These entities fall under the Arts Council Malta (ACM) and can engage with private/commercial, non-governmental/not-for-profit initiatives. The Creative Economy Working Group advocated for cultural rights and inclusivity, along with the implementation of actions for governance, finance, professionalisation, and internationalisation (Creative Economy Working Group, 2012). The aim of these changes was to host a Creative Cultural Industry (CCI) and provide a tangible outcome of the National Cultural Policy 2011 (Parliamentary Secretariat for Tourism, Culture and the Environment, 2011) and the Create 2020 Strategy (Arts Council Malta, 2015). Heritage and film gained economic clout through their connection to tourism, and more specifically, the Foreign Direct Investment scheme for film. The performing arts, visual arts, and community-driven work developed a local and international profile as part of ACM's direction.

While funding for the arts and culture has increased in recent years, the state-driven nature of the cultural sector in Malta also means that priorities in this sector are decided by policy-makers and could be driven by instrumental agendas. The recent process of modernisation undertaken by the Maltese cultural sector ties local efforts with the broader European agenda for the commercialisation of the cultural and creative industries. In practice, the greater diversification in influence and spread in terms of the distribution of geography, nationality and genre has been accompanied by a narrowing of focus on the economic viability of cultural initiatives, as can be witnessed by the national cultural strategy spanning 2016-2020. Indeed, in 2015, the Maltese Parliament approved a new legal structure for ACM. This law, Act 15 of 2015,

shifts the mission of the Council towards one that encourages and promotes the culture and creative sectors within a wide perspective of socio-economic activity. The Council's objectives, as set by law, are now decidedly more tuned to economic and financial activity, than previously. They consist of efforts to advocate for knowledge-based cultural and creative development, education and training and business development, funding and investment, amongst other things (Arts Council Malta, 2015). The same economic shift may be argued of the new National Cultural Policy (NCP 2021) aiming to extend the operational guidelines for ACM and related state cultural organisations, until 2025. The emphasis of many of the discussions about NCP 2021 held during the consultation phase with various sectors of society lay on the economic factors that may contribute to the financial sustainability and development of culture and the arts in Malta. Following public consultation, the NCP 2021 (Government of Malta, 2021) is being reviewed and may undergo significant revisions that may require further assessment in the future.

The NCP 2021 prioritises participation, development of cultural rights, cultural socialisation and cultural inclusion, taking into consideration various social groups including senior citizens. Importantly, during a year in which provisions for arts education were reduced in the state primary sector in Malta due to the ongoing pandemic, the policy also "reaffirms the principle that access to cultural education is a cultural right" (p. 86) and advocates for stronger partnerships between schools, artists and cultural institutions. Apart from its objective of making access to cultural activities and education in the arts available to all children in schools, the NCP 2021 also states that it strives to increase cultural access by ensuring "that everyone, whoever they are, irrespective of sex, racial or ethnic origin, age, disability, sexual orientation or religious belief, and from whichever walk of life they set out from, has access to culture and the arts, and the benefits and wellbeing they generate" (p. 51).

The previous national cultural policy (Parliamentary Secretariat for Tourism, Culture and the Environment, 2011) can be used to measure development in the field over the past decade. From the point of view of institutions, it is quite centralising in terms of policies, strategies and institutions. Its goal of making creativity a pillar for society has not been implemented yet; Maltese economy and society are still structured on other priorities (construction, mass tourism, finance, gaming, partisan politics, underpinned by nepotism and corruption). The 2011 cultural policy argues that "Government is committed to enabling a society which fosters change, embraces competitiveness and provides tools for

each individual to flourish, while acknowledging the creative potential of its growing multi-cultural diversity” (p. 20). Competitiveness sneaks in snugly in a vision for apparent solidarity, inclusion and accessibility, and turns it inside out, building a roadmap for cultural development on market rules and the development of demand and supply. The social element seems to be there only to justify the commercialisation of culture, or its expediency, as Yúdice had written (2003).

The NCP 2021 acknowledges the shortcomings of its predecessor and states that it supports horizontal and coordinated policy approaches that connect culture and non-sector areas, including human rights, rights of persons with disability, the elderly and migrant integration. An objective like this is potentially critical for local developments in the fields of socially engaged arts and related pedagogical projects, but it still needs to be seen how it can be implemented sustainably and effectively. According to the NCP 2021, an effective way of achieving policy crossovers is by working with different Ministries and establishing “a national platform for arts and wellbeing” to “advocate for arts and heritage in community, health and social practices” (p. 57) and address societal challenges like racism. This process of integrating the arts and creative educational services into communities and different institutional contexts like health care can be facilitated by organisations and NGOs involved in working with and advocating for the rights of different people affected by discrimination. A number of civil society initiatives and organisations, including important ones that have contributed to AMASS research in Malta, take an active part and lead the process of societal integration in a number of ways, many times by focusing on specific communities and also by seeking to support diversity within the same groups. For instance, Teatru Salesjan teamed up with UNHCR and JRS Malta for a series of workshops aimed at helping female asylum-seekers from West Africa ease into Maltese society (UNHCR, 2021b).

Intersectional challenges facing many individuals, particularly those with a migrant background, affect their daily lives, protection status and the possibility of meeting targets they set themselves. Research following an Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) approach conducted in Malta (UNHCR & Integra Foundation, 2014) has sought to understand the multifaceted characteristics of different individuals, rather than recognise them collectively as ‘beneficiaries’. This research recognised the fact that the refugee population is heterogeneous, and includes persons with disabilities, women, children and individuals with



a different sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Employing a ‘bottom up’ approach, the research found that traditional group identifications can be misleading and showed how one’s refugee status (and associated risks) is further complicated by other factors like age, gender, disability and LGBTI status. The research concluded that individual circumstances amongst refugees are varied and that, consequently, service providers “need to exercise caution when targeting interventions based on assumptions about categorization of people of concern” (p. 61). A similar caution clearly needs to be exercised in the cultural sector.

### **Developing policy recommendations with stakeholders**

In view of the University of Malta AMASS team’s goal of understanding how social engagement and changes in cultural policy in Malta can cater for the needs of different individuals and communities, two online focus group meetings were organised with a broad range of cultural stakeholders in 2021. The central aim of these meetings was to engage stakeholders in co-creative design thinking and problem-solving techniques to develop cultural strategies and policy recommendations related to cultural access, capacity building, alternative methods for tackling dominant power in institutions and related areas. Following the drawing up of a short list by several members of the University of Malta AMASS team, a smaller group of adult participants were recruited on the basis of their expertise in various fields, like music, visual arts, cultural management and social work conducted with different NGOs and communities. The first focus group was a pilot meeting with only three participants, a Master’s student (as observer) and the research team, while the second focus group brought together twelve participants in a meeting with four members of the research team. Each meeting lasted between three and four hours and made use of the Zoom video platform and the Miro platform, which facilitated the collaborative process of adding ideas directly to an online ‘board’. The participants in both meetings came from varied backgrounds, including a migrant NGO, representatives of the management in cultural entities and museums, gay rights activists, theatre practitioners and visual artists. The structure of the Miro platform was updated slightly following the pilot meeting, but both meetings involved the participants in a discussion of the following topics: cultural policy, local strategy, needs and opportunities related to local and national strategy, good practices and final reflections. Recommendations were also sought in relation to the financing of culture, cultural governance and the participation of minorities in culture and the arts. Data was collected by screenshot and voice recording, through the online

collaborative whiteboard, and through written notes taken by different members of the research team. Prior to the focus group meeting, data collection tools were approved by the university's research ethics committee.

The research team acknowledges the challenge of structuring a set of objectives on the basis of the workshops held in Malta and supporting research material. This study reflects the contributions and comments made by the participants with an aim to achieve an understanding of these participants' views on social inclusion in the arts. Even though the research team strove to include freelance as well as institutional stakeholders that were representative of a range of groups and positions, it is possible that the inclusion of other participants in the stakeholder meetings might have led to some different conclusions. The sub-sections below are based on a thematic analysis conducted following the two focus group meetings.

### **Experience of national and institutional strategies**

Following a cultural policy overview that included references to historical perspectives, the financing of culture, an overall description of the system and international cooperation, the stakeholders in each meeting were invited to jot down their views on virtual sticky notes and expand by elaborating verbally in a follow-up discussion. Participants had different experiences of policy-making in the arts, but not all had direct previous experience of being involved in committees or management teams developing cultural policies. As expected, participants tended to link personal and professional training and practice experience to reflections on general policy and strategy. One participant referred to the development of a diversity and inclusivity policy in a creative arts academic department, including language use as well as curriculum review and access. The same participant also stated that her department conceives of education in a broad community dimension, giving students different opportunities to engage with a variety of types of work and communities. Another participant referred to the use of an AGD approach in policy-making to make sure that all persons fully participate in decisions that affect them. This includes the use of cultural mediators if there is a language barrier. A representative of an important cultural entity referred to policies developed in collaboration with other institutions, such as the University of Malta, as well as training that staff at the cultural centre she represented was undergoing in relation to the development of autism-friendly spaces.



Interestingly, while some participants recognised the tension between the instrumentalisation of culture on the one hand, and a prioritisation of communities for their own benefit on the other, most participants accepted the use of the arts for ulterior, not strictly artistic purposes, such as societal wellbeing and health. Therefore, a balanced approach to cultural policy was advocated, in order to support the needs of those who are traditionally excluded from cultural work, while avoiding the pitfalls associated with excessive instrumentalisation.

### **Marginalised individuals and communities**

The inclusion of marginalised individuals and communities in policy was one of the central themes in the focus group, especially in the second meeting with a larger group. Participants in the workshops were in agreement that a people-centred approach to social inclusion in the arts would be more beneficial than one that focused on addressing minorities in silos, so that the potential contribution of culture in addressing social inclusion across different sectors would be maximised. Participants referred to the need of a better awareness of intersectionality in this sector, which tends to amplify the vulnerability and invisibility of certain individuals. While agencies like UNHCR work to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers are included in national strategies, some vulnerable individuals like children and victims of gender-based violence are hard to reach. One participant noted the relatively poor data that exist on issues of representation and diversity in the arts in Malta. Participants also brought up examples of projects they have been involved in, like theatre projects with visually impaired persons and a project on cultural rights with persons from different social groups and backgrounds. Accessibility practices were discussed by many participants. They spoke about raising awareness about the contribution that persons with disabilities can make to the creative sector, the addition of inclusion officers within institutions, programmes that look at different groups and communities as creatives instead of programming that focuses on art for these specific groups, language policies that are not exclusive, and educational programmes that are more peripatetic in nature to ensure wider access. Funds could be channelled into artistic research and creative projects focusing on intersectional challenges.

The peripherality of community members sometimes is doubled when policy is oblivious to degrees of personal or small community discrimination and exclusion, within communities. Members of specific groups are sometimes asked to participate in creative projects that exploit these persons simply to

obtain funds. An imbalance between those who apply for funds and participating members of marginalised groups like migrants becomes evident when one realises that migrants may not have an easy route to access arts funds or even manage them, in light of the fact that their residency status may not be regularised or because they are not yet compliant with the regulatory processes associated with work and taxation. Similar to funding, research also needs to be inclusive. For instance, research based on the electoral register excludes many of the intended participants.

### **Needs and opportunities related to local and national strategies**

A number of needs were identified in terms of cultural policy issues. These consisted of inclusion, accessibility, the need of a horizontal approach to arts policy-making with community arts practice at its core, greater attention paid to local-regional-national dimensions, sustained funding, encouragement of social enterprise in the arts and greater relevance to non-arts policy areas. Broader needs included better international connectivity, a more nuanced instrumentalisation of the arts, the adoption of short-term/ medium-term/ long-term perspectives, improved financing of culture, a stronger relationship between programmes for collaboration and funding supported by cultural institutions, and more effective internal and external communication. Training and practice in policy skills, strategising skills and a better use of technology aimed at addressing the digital divide are also important needs in the sector.

The use of technology to improve communication strategies, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the provision of access to marginalised individuals, was also highlighted. Accessibility needs to be considered as a need and basic priority, not as a bonus. This need requires a sensitivity towards the specific needs of individuals within different communities in order to inform policy and programmes that are effective, strengthening contact and collaboration between policy-makers, institutions, funders and beneficiaries (and potential beneficiaries). In order to avoid situations in which marginalised persons are merely added to projects as 'props', an emphasis on follow-up projects and longer-term approaches is required, paying attention also to language, communication, cultural mediation and translation through specific funding schemes and budgets.

While artists' exposure to internal cultural and other differences played a central role in discussions, the significance of international connectivity was also stressed. It is likely that Malta's insular context makes this need a priority

for local artists. Besides, in and of itself, the need to share practice on a cross-border platform has gained in significance in local artistic practice and funding structures, building on past traditions, and the importance of engaging with marginalised groups while practising international collaboration is seen as a necessary good practice in sustaining the integration and promoting the accessibility of communities within a wider, international context.

### **Best practices**

The best practices identified consisted of a mix of examples that illustrated activity at various levels of society, including state, private, civil society, the Church, local organisations with strong community links, national ones as well as international collaborations. Urban overdevelopment, minority rights and the diversity of cultural belonging and expression are some of the more common topics referenced. Good practices invest time, human and financial resources in generating access on the basis of participation and trust, in spite of various logistical difficulties and competing priorities, in order to work with and for migrant communities. There is a growing awareness of the centrality of the human being in the development of arts projects involving migrant communities and the delivery of life-changing experiences to specific groups, like persons with disabilities. The organic development of projects from observation of and participation in community life to the generation of arts projects is also a clear indicator of good practice. At an institutional level, a better grasp of the importance of the participation of communities at different stages of development leads to more inclusive cultural programming.

### **Policy interventions**

In order to implement policy recommendations, a call for needs-based interventions is required, including a more diverse and broader base for intervention. Other measures required for policy intervention include an approach that looks at short/ medium/ long-term perspectives, better financing, more effective public relations and media to allow efficient communication, adequate and inclusive technology, and encouraging a healthy mix of internal (community) and external (including international) participation. Policy changes are possible if close working relations with state partners, private sector and civil society are developed and if the diversity of community arts practices (including work with the elderly) and community spaces are acknowledged.

Apart from material and financial resources, it is necessary to acknowledge the fundamental work of those who selflessly dedicate significant parts of their lives to nurturing the involvement of different participants in creative projects. Individuals who are perceived as vulnerable should not suffer from a double level of discrimination, by being a kind of after thought of project activities. Real policy change can happen if these individuals' co-creative role is always prioritised. Change in perceptions about gender, sexual orientation and ability also relies on further explorations of innovative practices towards greater mutual understanding and collaboration in society. Easy labels and compartmentalisation, created for the sake of manageability, need to be replaced by an understanding of persons' complex realities and creative solutions that are sustainable in the long-term.

## **Conclusions**

While participating stakeholders indicated that it was hard to envision the sustainability of policy change in the long term, there is a clear need to build structures that ensure long-term change, sustainability in practice and a frequent exchange of best practice. One way of working towards greater sustainability is to promote participatory policy-making and legislation. Countries which have a legislative commitment to community empowerment, participatory governance and budgeting provide a much stronger platform for the development of work with social inclusion and cohesion (Council of Europe, 2013).

Innovative qualitative and quantitative research exercises are needed to identify and evaluate cultural projects and processes that could lead to a greater inclusivity. A concise best practice guide to research and evaluation at national, regional and local level may be assembled. This may include a clear statement of principles to underpin practice and case studies. Reliable and replicable methodologies for monitoring and evaluation may be developed and piloted through collaborative means while more practical toolkits for cultural operators (for example, Vella and Pulè, 2021) may be assembled to illustrate positive approaches and methods, identifying their strengths and weaknesses in relation to different types of socially inclusive arts community practice. The dissemination of good practice in research and evaluation may be introduced across programmes that address socially inclusion community arts practice and mainstreamed into project design processes (Voices of Culture, 2018).

It is important to challenge exclusionary and discriminatory attitudes and to make the values of inclusiveness and solidarity a priority in cultural policy. The cultural, social and educational sectors can contribute significantly to this task. Inclusive policy making does not simply draw attention to unitary categories like race discrimination, class or gender but takes into account a wide range of power dynamics that make for a more intersectional analysis of social, political and even historical contexts. This inclusivity will only be possible if strategies adopted by cultural institutions promote a transversal and intersectional approach. There is a need to support cultural inclusion actions that are transdisciplinary, transgenerational, transcultural and transnational. A significant degree of cultural activity that has had social impact has not always been supported through funding sources that are dedicated specifically to arts and culture. A review of the impact of the cultural contribution to social inclusion across different sectors may inform improved programme / project funding design in the future. Cross-sectoral collaboration is a major challenge when trying to adopt a reciprocal approach wherein each sector actively participates in the various steps of the working process. Addressing this challenge calls for training, capacity building and professional development. It needs to involve different NGOs in the field of culture and social work, including ethnic minority groups, religious minority groups, migrants, people with reduced mobility and children, amongst other groups. Providing access to a broad cultural education reflecting the full diversity of actual lived cultures contributes to raising awareness and learning about differences and commonalities between cultures. It is especially important to reach persons whose circumstances make them a target for those who adopt exclusionary attitudes through various interconnecting discriminatory modes. The recognition that persons belong to various social groups helps policy-makers to avoid generalisations about power relations when developing strategies. It is not a matter of creating new hierarchies in which dominant and oppressed identities are merely reversed. Only by promoting more nuanced understandings of identities can policy begin to reflect a truly participatory attitude towards cultural access.

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