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Introduction

Being a small country, Malta has always developed its social services on a national level. This meant that a service was developed and provided without taking into account the various realities of the targeted population. Therefore, a service was meant to address a wide range of situations – from rural to urban communities, persons in depressed areas where there is high social risk, as well as those living in more affluent and resourceful areas. The only previous existing “services” given on a local or community level were provided by the Catholic Church, through the Parish Priest. These services varied according to the community and also according to the social awareness of the parish priest and his assistants. Over 10 years ago, AGENZIJA APPOGG, which is a leading social welfare service in Malta, set up a community development team, made up of three community development workers who were based in one of the most deprived localities on the Island; an inner harbour area which suffered an influx of low income families due to the post war drop in property value (having been bombarded and nearly totally destroyed during the Second World War). The influx continues till today and as a result, a vast number of the families living in this area are unemployed, unskilled, semi literate or illiterate, have large families and are at risk of social exclusion.

The number of social problems encountered by the community development workers led them to modify the service and introduce social workers to the team. The community social workers would focus on helping families and individuals address the pressing problems they encounter each day. The service developed into one that provides

- i) a social work service, taking into consideration the context of the community - common problems, local resources etc, which approach is mostly absent in other social welfare services in Malta;
- ii) a community service, running a number of projects relevant to the reality of the community;
- iii) a psychological service (restricted hours) especially for children with challenging behaviour, and support to the parents;
- iv) a medical service for children (also restricted hours);

The service moved out to cater for a wider area than before, working with a total of 4 communities, all in the inner harbour area, having a total population of around 16,000. Over two years ago, the service was moved, along with a number of other agencies, to a newly opened Community Resource Centre



(Access), within the same locality. This move strengthened the partnerships that were being set up with other service providers and increased the accessibility of service users previously unaware of the community based service. Along with this, Appogg developed a day care and family support centre, also within the Community Resource Centre, the first of its kind on the Island.

The main aim of this service and of the Community Resource Centre is to improve the quality of life of the local residents through local empowerment and supported action.

What is the relevance of policy/measure to the peer country?

The Draft Discussion Paper from Portugal shows clearly a commitment towards building a more inclusive society through work in the grassroots, mainly with people living in disadvantaged situations that render them at high risk of social exclusion, leading to poverty. The advantages of addressing the needs of the poorer communities through community development are clear. By being closer to the real situations, by building trust and credibility with the local residents, the service providers are in a better position to design projects or other services that are relevant to the local perspective. It is a more favourable measure as opposed to a national strategy because a national strategy may fail to have a sensitive understanding to the history and culture of a particular community, which are present even in a small country such as Malta. The development of community based services in Malta is slow but is gradually becoming a more acceptable form of intervention because of the advantages in building community strengths and working in the grassroots.

The discussion paper from Portugal points out a number of relevant actions:

- Sub-measure 5.1.1 (action type 1) (Social network for development) is seen in the community as a fundamental form of action, in the sense that it aims to bring service providers together to share resources and ideas of intervention from different points of action (health, housing, education, employment, psycho-social), resulting in a more holistic contribution to the people it services. It minimises duplication of resources and makes maximum benefit of existing services. Although community workers have been networking for a number of years, the process has been formalised through the Community Resource Centre and is gaining momentum, affecting positively the service provision within the community;



- As regards the Sub-measure 5.1.2 (action type 1 - Promotion of participation and community action), the community services in Malta have attempted constantly to involve residents in each level of action. This has often been successful, however, at times, it has not. Success depends mainly on the workers' ability to understand the community and bring together its ideas and potential.
- Sub-measure 5.1.2, (action type 2 - Improving personal and social skills and capacities) again is a clear indication of the commitment towards inclusion by preparing residents to be more skilled to cope better with their daily life and to be in a better position to involve themselves in the process of development of their community. This reflects the *recognition of the need for personal and social development of people to participate in the process* and well as increasing employability of the local population (esp., women, young people, school drop outs), giving them better access to information, thus encouraging inclusion.

What is the potential transferability of the policy/measure to the peer country and of the likely conditions for its application?

The process of community development depends very much on a) the life situations of the community, where the residents may need to be helped on a more individual basis (through social work intervention) b) the motivation of the residents to work on their situations and c) on the ability of the workers to connect with the residents and facilitate the process of empowerment. Unfortunately, the workers in Malta do not receive particular training in community development and their ability is developed through their own understanding of their role, through guidance from the supervisors and through literature that is available. Training for these workers is essential for the benefit of community development and it is encouraging to see this given a priority in Portugal (Action 5.1.1.2). Training would also be a measure to keep the workers motivated, thus decreasing the risk of staff turnover.

The support from the Institute for Solidarity and Social Security (ISSS) in Portugal offers support by means of selection of applications, provision of technical assistance, monitoring and financial management. A form of assistance would be necessary for a national strategy to be developed since so far, most of the community work depends on the locally based teams, which is on the most part fragmented and does not share a common strategy. A central form



of support would be beneficial as long as it does not take away the autonomy of the community based services. It would be valuable; however, care needs to be taken about heavy bureaucratic measures or irrelevant actions, which is likely to happen when the central service does not fully understand the community it is meant to service.

Important questions about the policy/measure that are being raised and debated in the peer country

Participation of the local community is the most fundamental principle in community development. It is the responsibility of the service providers to make opportunities more accessible even to the most excluded of the community. However, what form of action may be taken when residents fail to participate? Designing a service needs sensitivity to the issues and flexibility to change the form of provision according to the needs of the targeted group. However, with temporary funding, having an average of two years, how much time is invested in getting to know the residents' needs and potential? There is also the question of continuity and sustainability. People need stability from the workers and the services when they have little stability in their lives.

Therefore, continuity and sustainability are vital for the people to start trusting the services (workers) and thus feel more encouraged to participate. Then, once there is participation and residents do benefit from the services, how can they continue to develop once the service is discontinued? Personal development is vital for the process, but knowing the difficult situations people face daily, one cannot expect to put a rigid time frame for such a target.

Another point regards another basic principle in community development – partnership. Partnership depends on the ability of the local service providers or community leaders to see the relevance of networking and to take the commitment to form part of this network for the benefit of the people that they service. Whenever service providers see the need for networking, they would commit themselves to forming partnerships. However, if service providers have their own plans for their users and exclude any form of communication with other local entities, then effective partnership would fail. While it is the responsibility of the main actors, the community development workers, to facilitate the process of partnership and networking, much depends on the willingness of other local actors.



With regards to funding and selection of applications, it is vital that these target the **real** disadvantaged people. This is not to say that people who benefit from funding are not disadvantaged. However, a question lies on whether or not the funding reaches those who are *most* disadvantaged, especially with the knowledge that people who are mostly excluded would find it more difficult to participate. How, then, could it be ensured that even the people facing the toughest situations are included in the process?

Conclusion

These challenges are outweighed by the positive effects community development has on the residents. Community development is a positive move towards improving the quality of life of the community as a whole, decreasing the risk of social exclusion.