

ACCESS: Cottonera Community Resource Centre

Host Country Report

Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity

Introduction

“The concept of ACCESS as a one-stop shop for social welfare services reflects very well the strategy of Government of putting the family and social solidarity at the centre of its national policy. ACCESS is a concrete example of taking the service to the community while making it possible for the community to be involved in its development”. (Minister Dolores Cristina, 2004¹)

The ACCESS Complex is currently the only centre of its kind in Malta and Gozo although replication of the project in other localities is currently being considered. It was launched in November 2002 to act as a service platform bringing together five different entities (Appogg, Housing Authority, Social Security Department, Adult Training Centre, and Employment and Training Corporation) which operate within the social welfare sector in the Cottonera region. This includes the localities of Cospicua (Bormla), Senglea (Isla) and Vittoriosa (Birgu) (also known as the Three Cities) and Kalkara.

ACCESS falls under the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity and aims to address in a holistic manner the diverse needs of the local communities. This paper seeks to outline:

- a brief history of the project and the reasons behind its inception;
- some historical and demographic information and data on the region targeted by the project;
- the project set up and an overview of the main partners and the way they interact;
- other community actors involved and their relationship with the project;
- concrete examples of what ACCESS has achieved particularly in supporting children and families;
- challenges encountered in introducing a multi-agency and client centered approach;
- the way forward for ACCESS and similar initiatives in other regions of Malta and Gozo;

A Brief History of the Project

In the year 2000 a proposal was submitted by the Social Welfare Development Programme (now known as Appogg) for the setting up of a resource centre in Cottonera. A report was drawn up outlining the philosophy, aims, client groups, range of services, staffing requirements and cost of the project. This was discussed with key stakeholders such as the then Ministry for Social Policy (presently the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity), the Cottonera and Kalkara Local Councils, the Employment and Training Corporation and the Housing Authority. A report was commissioned to explore the scope of the project, the needs of the community and the potential

¹ ACCESS Annual Report 2002-2003 p.4.
12-13 June 2007

partners and service providers. The project was approved by the Ministry for Social Policy and a site was identified. ACCESS was a financial project between Appogg, the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC), the Department for the Elderly and Community Services, the Housing Authority and the Ministry for Public Works and Infrastructure.

APPOGG	Lm 70,000
Employment and Training Corporation	Lm 20,000
Housing Authority	Lm 15,000
Ministry for Public Works and Infrastructure	Lm 45,000
Department for the Elderly and Community Services	Lm 15,000

A manager was appointed to oversee the project and a building plan drawn up to transform what was then a storage facility for road works equipment and materials into a community resource centre and focal point for the residents of the surrounding localities. Work started on the construction of the complex in 2001 and came to an end in October 2002. This included the renovation of an existing military building dating back to 1904, the construction of two new wings to house the Family and Childcare Centre and the Adult Training Centre, as well as considerable landscaping to create a welcoming environment.

There were already a number of existing services operating within Cottonera at the time. These included the Department for Social Security Regional Office, the ETC Job Centre and the Community Development Unit all based in Cospicua. The three localities of Cospicua, Senglea and Vittoriosa also had among the highest population density in the southern region with a steadily aging population as most young couples chose not to remain in the locality; the highest levels of unemployment; among the lowest participation rate of women in the workforce, the lowest academic achievement rates and aspirations accompanied by high levels of truancy and absenteeism and one of the highest percentage of residents living in substandard or inadequate housing conditions. It was therefore thought appropriate to pilot the project in this region in an attempt to address complex socio-cultural factors in a community based, holistic, multi-agency, multi-disciplinary and client centred approach. This would hopefully improve accessibility to a number of social services, introduce new and much needed services and develop community initiatives with the aim of empowering those individuals who had the potential to take an active role in bringing about positive change.

A marketing campaign was drawn up to launch the project and make it known within the Cottonera area. It starting operating and was opened to the public on the 16th November 2002.

The Cottonera Region²

The Three Cities are often held to be the cradle of Maltese history, as Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua have provided a home and fortress to almost every people who settled on the Islands. Their harbour inlets have been in use since Phoenician times: the docks always providing a living for local people, but also leaving them vulnerable when Malta's rulers were at war. As the first home to the Knights of St. John, the Cities' palaces, churches, forts and bastions are far older than that of the capital city, Valletta. The local communities here celebrate holy days and festas

² www.visitmalta.com (website of the Malta Tourism Authority).
12-13 June 2007

as nowhere else on the Islands. The most spectacular events are the Easter processions when statues of the "Risen Christ" are carried at a run throughout crowded streets.

Vittoriosa, or Birgu, one of the Three Cities, lies on one of the promontories jutting into Grand Harbour, opposite Valletta. At its tip is Fort St Angelo, perhaps the oldest fortification on the Islands. Settlers and rulers from the Phoenicians to the British all made use of the defences here due to their strategic position. To honour the part played by the city of Birgu, Grand Master La Valette renamed it Civitas Vittoriosa, 'Victorious Town'. Vittoriosa was the first home of the Knights when they arrived in 1530. As such, it contains many important architectural riches.

Cospicua is the largest of the Three Cities on Grand Harbour opposite Valletta. It is known to many by its earlier name, Bormla. The city was renamed by the Knights of St John because of the brave ('conspicuous') role played by its people during the Great Siege of 1565. Most of Cospicua's shoreline is taken up by the older docks - an area now being restored, and developed as a marina. The city suffered extensive damage during World War II and although rebuilt, it has fewer inhabitants than in the pre-war years. Modern Cospicua is an important market centre in the heart of the docklands. The Firenzuola Fortifications, built in 1638, and Margherita Lines, part of the inland defences of the Three Cities, are major landmarks. The Margherita Lines are in fact the only part of old Cospicua which survived World War II.

Senglea stands on a narrow promontory jutting into Grand Harbour. The land was fortified in 1551 by Grand Master Claude de la Sengle. The Maltese often use the area's earlier name, L-Isla, meaning the island or perhaps short for 'peninsula'. During the Great Siege of 1565, Senglea was protected by Fort St Michael on its landward side and by Fort St Angelo on the tip of Vittoriosa across the creek. The heroic role played by its people led Grand Master Jean de la Valette to give the city the title of Citta' Invicta, the invincible city. Like its sister cities, Senglea suffered heavy damage during World War II. More than 75 percent of its buildings were destroyed. The city is noted for its superb harbour views across to Valletta from Safe Haven Gardens at Senglea Point. The stone vedette, known as il-Gardjola, on the bastion-point served as a look-out post to guard the harbour entrance. The sculptured eye and ear above its windows are symbols of vigilance.

Socio-Demographic Overview of Cottonera and Kalkara

Cottonera and Kalkara, with a population of around 14, 287 (Table 1)³, a decrease of 7.9% in 10 years, was in the past known for its shipbuilding industry. This sector experienced a serious decline and the area was hit by high levels of unemployment. Many from the upper and middle classes moved out during the war and leased their properties to new dwellers at relatively cheap rates. The average population density for Malta stood at 1,282 persons per square km. The Three Cities by far exceed this figure (Table 3) with Senglea being the most densely populated at 19,293 persons per square km despite a decrease in population over the past decades. The area is also marked by a high number of vacant dwellings and the proportion of these empty buildings is expected to continue to rise in the Southern Harbour District.

³ NSO (2005) Census of Population and Housing 2005: Preliminary Report, Valletta, NSO.
12-13 June 2007

HOST COUNTRY REPORT

Table 1: Population by locality: 1931-2005 ...

	1931	1948	1957	1967	1985	1995	2005
MALTA	241,621	305,991	319,620	314,216	345,418	378,132	404,039
Malta	217,784	278,311	292,019	288,238	319,736	349,106	372,986
Gozo and Comino	23,837	27,680	27,601	25,978	25,682	29,026	31,053
Birgu	6,573	3,816	4,242	4,017	3,572	3,069	2,691
Isla	7,683	2,756	5,065	4,749	4,158	3,528	3,083
Bormla	12,163	4,822	9,095	9,123	7,731	6,085	5,642
Kalkara	1,899	2,068	2,101	1,945	2,086	2,833	2,871
	28,318	13,462	20,503	19,834	17,547	15,515	14,287

Table 2: Population by sex and locality: 1995-2005 ...

	1995			2005		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
MALTA	186,836	191,296	378,132	200,715	203,324	404,039
Malta	172,668	176,438	349,106	185,366	187,620	372,986
Gozo and Comino	14,168	1,4858	29,026	15,349	15,704	31,053
Birgu	1,562	1,507	3,069	1,393	1,298	2,691
Isla	1,740	1,788	3,528	1,548	1,535	3,083
Bormla	2,997	3,088	6,085	2,780	2,862	5,642
Kalkara	1,438	1,395	2,833	1,448	1,423	2,871
	7,737	7,778	15,515	7,169	7,118	14,287

Table 3: Population density: 1995-2005 ...

	1995			2005		
	Population	Persons per km2	Area (km2)	Population	Persons per km2	Change 1995-2005
MALTA	378,132	1,200	315.15	404,039	1,282	82
Malta	349,106	1,417	246.49	372,986	1,513	96
Gozo and Comino	29,026	422	68.67	31,053	452	30
Birgu	3,069	5,852	0.52	2,691	5,132	-720
Isla	3,528	22,078	0.16	3,083	19,293	-2,785
Bormla	6,085	7,125	0.91	5,642	6,215	-910
Kalkara	2,833	1,611	1.76	2,871	1,632	21

Table 4: Total population by broad age group and locality as at 27 November 2005 ...

	0-14	15-24	25-49	50-64	65-79	80+	Total
MALTA	68,963	58,240	139,530	81,825	43,598	11,883	404,039
Malta	63,547	53,759	129,527	75,613	39,885	10,655	372,986
Gozo and Comino	5,416	4,481	10,003	6,212	3,713	1,228	31,053
Birgu	350	379	803	652	431	76	2,691
Isla	455	433	970	686	423	116	3,083
Bormla	997	827	1,696	1,135	787	200	5,642
Kalkara	525	440	1,028	533	292	53	2,871
	2,327	2,079	4,497	3,006	1,933	445	14,287

Table 5: Percentage total population by broad age group and locality as at 27 November 2005 ...

	0-14	15-24	25-49	50-64	65-79	80+	Total
MALTA	17.1	14.4	34.5	20.3	10.8	2.9	100.0
Malta	17.0	14.	34.7	20.3	10.7	2.9	100.0
Gozo and Comino	17.4	14.4	32.2	20.0	12.0	4.0	100.0
Birgu	13.0	14.1	29.8	24.2	16.0	2.8	100.0
Isla	14.8	14.0	31.5	22.3	13.7	3.8	100.0
Bormla	17.7	14.7	30.1	20.1	14.0	3.5	100.0
Kalkara	18.3	15.3	35.8	18.6	10.2	1.9	100.0

Table 6: Primary School population classified by locality and type of school and number of classes: 31 March 2005 ...

School		No. of Classes	Pupils		
Locality	Type		Boys	Girls	Total
MALTA		1,270	12,686	11,002	23,688
Malta		1,130	11,587	9,934	21,521
Gozo		140	1,099	1,068	2,167
Birgu	School C	11	79	67	146
Isla	School C	16	139	114	253
Bormla	School C	19	170	167	337
Kalkara	School C	14	130	110	240
		60	518	458	976

HOST COUNTRY REPORT

Secondary School population classified by locality and type of school, sex and number of classes: 31 March 2005					
School		No. of Classes	Pupils		
Locality	Type		Boys	Girls	Total
MALTA		830	8,909	9,342	18,251
Malta		749	8,058	8,335	16,393
Gozo		81	851	1,007	1,858
Lorenzo Gafa, Fortini, Vittoriosa		11	225	-	225
Erin Serracino Inglott, Cospicua		22	-	479	479
G. Despott, Verdala, Cottonera		26	637	-	637
Government Dependent School population* classified by locality and type of school, number of classes and sex: 31 March 2005 ...					
Birgu	Primary / Secondary/ Post Secondary	58	1,388	99	1,487
Bormla	Nursery	2	14	22	36
	Primary	18	325	186	511
Independent Private School population* classified by locality and type of school, number of classes and sex: 31 March 2005					
Birgu	Primary / Secondary/ Post Sec.	32	649	25	674
	Nursery / Primary	1	18	-	18

Table 7: Absences in Government Primary schools classified Region/Locality Total Primary Pupils by locality of school: September 2004-March 2005...					
Region/Locality	Total Primary Pupils	Absences			
		Authorised	Unauthorised	Total	Average
MALTA	18,435	56,786	88,043	144,829	7.86
Birgu	113	471	755	1,226	10.85
Isla	205	1,101	1,035	2,136	10.42
Bormla	269	2,908	1,139	4,047	15.04
Kalkara	184	677	731	1,408	7.65

Table 8: Absences in government dependent and independent private primary schools classified by locality of school: September 2004-March 2005

Region/Locality	Total Primary Pupils	Absences			
		Authorised	Unauthorised	Total	Average
MALTA	11,161	5,282	50,156	55,438	4.97
Birgu	852	16	3,838	3,854	4.52
Bormla	511	-	2,561	2,561	5.01

Table 9: Absences in government secondary and boys'/girls' schools classified by locality of school: September 2004-March 2005

Region/Locality	Total Primary Pupils	Absences			
		Authorised	Unauthorised	Total	Average
MALTA	18,251	174,433	114,558	288,991	15.83
Malta	16,393	159,977	105,368	265,345	16.19
Birgu	225	3,883	1,865	5,748	25.55
Bormla	1,116	9,468	10,328	19,796	17.74
Absences in government dependent and independent private secondary schools classified by locality of school: September 2004-March 2005					
MALTA	9,953	6,607	38,373	44,980	4.52
Birgu	1,030	171	5,218	5,389	5.23

A Dutch study by Terpstra⁴ looked into the subculture of a group of lads coming from a particular neighbourhood hit by a sharp decline in the textile industry on which it thrived. Unemployment was high, rent was cheap, educational aspirations were low, living on benefits was taken for granted, illegal and delinquent behaviour was accepted and many were involved in the black economy. Despite being a Dutch study, the characteristics described are similar to those of the Cottonera community which was hit by a similar decline in the shipbuilding industry resulting in very similar resistance and coping patterns being adopted. The number of families/individuals receiving Social Assistance benefits as at April 2007 stood at 43 in Birgu, 193 in Bormla, 74 in Isla and 37 in Kalkara. Of these, 16 in Birgu, 39 in Bormla, 23 in Isla and 7 in Kalkara were separated⁵.

Success in school is not particularly valued and there is a resistance to the highly structured environment of the educational system. Absenteeism rates in the Three Cities are above the national average in both primary and secondary state schools with Cospicua Primary (15.04 days per pupil compared to national average of 7.86) and Lorenzo Gafa' Boys Secondary (25.04 days per pupil compared to national average of 15.83) of most concern. In the scholastic year 2005-2006 Bormla registered the highest number of students who were absent for more than one month⁶. Abuse of the benefit system is simply one of the survival strategies as are illegal activities such as

⁴ Terpstra, J. (2006) Youth subculture and Social Exclusion, *Young*, Vol. 14(2): 83-99, London, Sage Publications.

⁵ Reply to PQ25034.

⁶ Reply to PQ24491.

usury and the peddling of illegally imported or stolen good. From the age of fourteen onwards, finding a job becomes the main focus. However,

[f]or many boys it is hard to meet elementary demands, like being present on time, keeping appointments, obeying the rules, accepting instructions, not calling the boss names or fighting in the workplace. Even the demands of accuracy and neatness imposed by an unskilled job are often hard for them to meet. As a consequence, many of them are fired within a couple of days or weeks, after which they are unemployed again. This pattern repeats itself many times. (Terpstra, 2006:90)

There are over 600 individuals from the Three Cities and Kalkara registering for employment the great majority of whom are male. Of these around 64 are under 20 years of age (39M; 35F)⁷.

Community based initiatives such as ACCESS focus on promoting civic engagement among residents that can help to address the negative self-image often held by community members who view themselves as 'failures' and intervening at different points in the life-course through projects and services to break the cycle that results in the reproduction by subsequent generations of the parents' position of limited opportunities and social exclusion. ACCESS staff are continually confronted with the dissonance between post-modern values sought by employers and those espoused by working class young people in order to assist them in adapting to a post-industrialised society for while social class may rarely be discussed directly by young people it continues to be threaded through the daily fabric of their lives: it is stitched into codes of respect, accent, dress, music, bodily adornment and comportment. In short, the affective politics of class is a felt practice, tacitly understood and deeply internalized. (Nayak, 2006: 827)⁸

Aims of the Project

The philosophy of ACCESS, from its inception, has always been to move away from mere service consumption to one of individual and community empowerment. The principles on which it is based include supporting the family as the best environment for personal growth; mobilising resources within the community; building informal and formal support networks; developing the individual potential; participation of residents in order to foster a sense of ownership and creating self-reliance rather than dependency.

The initial report drew up a number of aims to be addressed by the project. These were:

- to provide a one-stop shop for the fulfillment of the social and personal needs of families as units and of individual family members themselves;
- to strengthen the fabric of society by a strengthening of families/individuals in this region;
- to assist and facilitate the operations of existing local groups and of new ones which may arise to fulfil some, as yet unmet, social need or common interest;
- to serve as the focal point for the delivery of a wide range of services for families and individuals in Cottonera;

⁷ Reply to PQ24810.

⁸ Nayak, A. (2006) Displaced Masculinities: Chavs, Youth and Class in the Post-industrial City, *Sociology*, Volume 40(5): 813–831, London, Sage Publications.

- to assist in the social regeneration of the Cottonera region, in such a way as to complement the physical and architectural regeneration being undertaken or which shall be undertaken in the near future.

In 2006 these aims were further developed with the formulation of the mission and vision statements for ACCESS drawn up by the management team of the complex. The mission statement set ACCESS *'to be a catalyst for sustainable community development and long-term social change through a genuinely collaborative, participatory, holistic and empowering approach which improves the quality of life for all residents in Cottonera and Kalkara.'* The vision for the project encompassed the aims of enabling and facilitating the development and well-being of the Cottonera and Kalkara communities by:

- listening to people and assessing their needs and issues;
- being supportive, inclusive and valuing all service users, volunteers and staff regardless of age, race, religious belief, gender, ability or sexual orientation;
- working in partnership with others and seeking to build alliances of benefit to the community;
- delivering quality in all that we do to achieve the best within our resources;
- striving to remove barriers to participation through ensuring accessibility to services and working with community groups to build their skills, knowledge and capacity so they can act to address their community needs and issues;
- planning and evaluating practice and enabling staff to work effectively with the community;
- addressing the particular needs of children, listening to them and enabling them to have a voice;
- promoting a culture of service user involvement in the planning, implementation and evaluation of projects and services.

While a process of change was necessary, the scope of involvement was to move away from an interventionist approach to one supporting community initiatives. In order to involve the grass-roots community, foster a sense of ownership and raise awareness on issues of social justice it was first necessary to get to know the community. Making contacts with community leaders, voluntary organizations, Local Councils, parishes and identifying informal and formal networks and structures was an important step in this process. It was also at times necessary to involve local people in debates and discussions on various aspects of their community in order to elicit their needs and interests and identify the necessary strategies that could bring about change. This involved identifying resources within and external to the community that could be utilized and accessed such as funding sources, skilled members of the community, educational institutions and so on.

The ACCESS Partners

As mentioned above, there are five partners within the Cottonera Community Resource Centre. A brief description of each is given here.

Appogg Smartkids Family and Childcare Centre

Smartkids Daycare and Family Support Centre is increasingly recognized as a model of best practice on the island in the care of children aged between 18 months and three years and incorporates the services of a daycare and family support service, catering for the whole family. The Centre is committed to providing quality childcare services in order to support and strengthen the family unit, guided by the underlying principle that the family is the best environment for personal growth. The Centre also provides training programmes for parents to enable them to become more empowered individuals as well as better parents. The center offers state of the art child care facilities, drafted to European standards. Fees are assessed according to each family's joint income with around 90% of families falling into the category of non-paying clients, and 10% paying a subsidized fee. Keeping a percentage of fee paying, middle class families also helps to reduce the risk of children attending being stigmatized.

The Centre welcomes a number of student placements throughout the year, mainly from the Malta College of Science, Art and Technology. These make it possible for the Centre to expand its cohort of children throughout the summer months to include past service users between the ages of 3 and 5 years. The Centre has also worked on developing a language and communication room, which includes a puppet theatre, a book and toy library, a music corner, a quiet corner, and a dressing up corner. Moreover volunteers have helped in decorating walls with murals designed by the Centre Coordinator.

Appogg Cottonera Community Services

This service has been present in Cottonera for over ten years expanding its remit from Cospicua to the Three Cities and Kalkara on joining ACCESS. The mission of the Cottonera Community Service is to work closely with the local community in order to facilitate and encourage a process of change within the community through local participation. The Unit strives to enhance the local potential, to offer optimal individual and family social work services that are aimed especially at the most vulnerable in the community, whilst taking into consideration the context, culture and everyday life of the residents.

The life situations of service users present a number of difficulties including substandard housing, unemployment, relationship breakdown, poor health, substance abuse, large family compositions and poor social skills. The nature of cases dealt with vary considerably ranging from adolescents with emotional and behavioural difficulties, children at risk, persons with mental health difficulties, childcare issues, family problems and difficulties associated with ageing. A number of community work projects focus on literacy, employment, leadership skills and informal education among others. The service has also been instrumental in supporting the introduction of Homestart Malta a voluntary organization providing a parent-to-parent support service.

The Employment and Training Corporation Job Centre

The Employment and Training Corporation, Malta's Public Employment Service, was set up in 1990, to provide and maintain an employment service; to find suitable employment and to assist employers to find suitable employees; to provide training services to clients seeking new jobs and to clients already on the job but wanting to improve their knowledge and skills. The ETC Job Centre at ACCESS is one of four regional centres and offers a number of employment services, training and job searching facilities. It comprises a registration area and access to all information required in relation to employment and training opportunities.

Job Centre services include the information on job vacancies and training opportunities, profiling of job seekers and drawing up personal action plans, and the issuing of CV's and employment histories. In addition to these services, available at all Job Centres, the ETC has also been actively engaged in the development of specific projects in partnership with other entities at ACCESS such as the Women in Work project that seeks to motivate and empower women to become active in the labour market and Project Reach which addresses the issue of school absenteeism. One of the ETC programmes called Job Skills targeting young job seekers was initiated at ACCESS in collaboration with the Appogg Agency Community Worker and later adopted on a national level.

The Department for Social Security Regional Office

Social benefits play a major role in assisting individuals and families at risk of poverty. It is estimated that the number of those living below the poverty line would double from 15 to 30 percent without such assistance⁹. The Department for Social Security Regional Office provides services to the public throughout the whole lifespan. The office deals with all types of applications for social benefits which an individual might require at some time or other in the life cycle. Applications are submitted, among others, for Social Assistance, Maternity Benefits, Children's Allowance, the issuing of Social Security numbers for those starting employment for the first time, '*Karta Roza*' (Pink Card) for free medicines and requests for subsidies on water and electricity bills. This office also deals with a number of pension schemes including Retirement Pensions, Disability Pensions, Invalidity Pensions, Widow's Pensions as well as foreign pensions. The office has also been involved in the delivery of information sessions to ETC registrants as well as to those participating in the Women in Work project.

The Housing Authority

The cities of Cospicua, Senglea and Vittoriosa rank high on the list of localities with sub-standard housing. The majority of houses within the Cottonera Lines are not owned by the residents, often resulting in a lack of maintenance and the need for substantial repairs and alterations. The service has evolved from one that was office based to one that is more outreach oriented with a community worker being engaged to raise awareness in the community about the various schemes and services offered by the Housing Authority. The Community Worker also assists service users in filling in the relative application forms and supporting individuals and families throughout the process.

⁹ MFSS (2004) National Action Plan on Poverty and Social Exclusion: 2004-2006. Valletta, MFSS.
12-13 June 2007

The Adult Training Centre for Persons with a Disability

Around 18 service users with varying intellectual disabilities attend this Centre on a daily basis. The activities offered at the Centre are designed to encourage and lead service users to manage their lives better and according to their personal wishes and preferences. Individual plans therefore play an important role in meeting the needs, abilities and wishes of each service user. Social, educational and recreational activities are held regularly throughout each week. Individual and group training is provided on a regular basis enabling each person to develop his/her personal skills and abilities. This has assisted service users in increasing their independence at home as well as in society. The day care services also serve as respite and support to the service users' main Carers. This is important as many of these Carers are elderly parents who in their own right require support. This aspect, while important, remains secondary to the provision of learning opportunities for service users.

How ACCESS Functions

ACCESS falls under the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity (MFSS) as do most of the entities which are part of the complex with the exception of the Employment and Training Corporation which falls under the Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment. A Board of Directors, oversees the overall strategy of the complex and its various services and projects. Senior officials from the entities based at ACCESS are present on this board as well as a representative from the MFSS and from the Foundation for Educational Services which is very active in the area and focuses mainly on literacy and numeracy acquisition. The ACCESS manager also sits on this Board which meets every two months. A Management Team comprising the Unit Leaders of the entities at ACCESS meets every two weeks to discuss operations, joint projects, emerging needs, new developments in the community, staff training issues and to update one another on any new initiatives which might be undertaken by each service.

There is no common set of policies and procedures as each entity responds to a parent 'company'. Smartkids, and the Cottonera Community Services which fall under Appogg and the Adult Training Centre for People with a Disability are all agencies within the Foundation for Social Welfare Services and might have policies in common. However, as mentioned above, ACCESS does have a Mission Statement and a Vision which are shared by all entities. With the exception of the Department for Social Security Regional Office, which forms part of the Civil Service, all entities fall under the Public Sector.

Apart from the formal structure of Board of Directors and Management Meetings joint training sessions and team building events serve to facilitate positive working relationships among staff from the various entities. On an informal basis services users are often referred to other services by the service provider which is their first point of contact. This is facilitated by the fact that all entities are based in the same complex. Literature on all services is also available at the reception area for the benefit of staff as well as service users. A number of joint projects are organised involving collaboration between two or more different entities at ACCESS as well as other local or national organisations active within the community. An important aspect of the role of ACCESS is to network with other community groups and this is done through meetings with community leaders such as mayors, parish priests, and voluntary organisations' representatives where possibilities for co-working are explored. The relationship with Local Councils has improved over the

years as trust and respect for each other's work and contribution to the community has developed.

The Staff

Staff at ACCESS vary in skills and qualifications depending on the nature of their work. These range from low skilled jobs such as cleaning and security related positions, vocational posts such as gardening, maintenance, childcare and support workers, administrative posts such as clerks, to professionals such as social workers, psychologists, and youth and community workers. Most staff are either public service or public sector employees and salaries vary according to their role and the grade occupied. Opportunities for career progression do exist. In the case of Smartkids, Cottonera Community Services and Adult Training Centre employees, these are eligible to apply for all suitable vacancies that arise within the FSWS. ETC Job Centre employees may apply for positions within ETC while Social Security employees may apply to all relevant positions within the Civil Service. Most entities offer various training opportunities throughout the year and lifelong learning is encouraged and supported. The contribution of volunteers is valued and these are often involved in the delivery of Community Development projects such as literacy projects and the summer school organised annually. Training and supervision is generally provided for volunteers. A number of students undertaking various courses at post-secondary or under-graduate level also carry out placements with ACCESS entities as part of their course requirements, while job placements are periodically made available to registered unemployed. These are supervised and mentored by ACCESS staff.

Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion among Children and Families

There are a number of factors that place individuals at risk of poverty and social exclusion. It was estimated that 15 per cent of the general population is at risk of poverty. The at-risk-of poverty rates by population sub-groups were estimated at 55 per cent - single parents, 50 per cent - the unemployed, 29 per cent - persons in rented accommodation, 21 per cent - children (0-15 years), 18 per cent - retired persons¹⁰. Since the Three Cities have a high rate of registered unemployed, separated persons and families living in rented accommodation as well as an aging population it is reasonable to assume that the percentage of those at risk of poverty is higher than the national average in these localities. One of the main tasks of the services offered through ACCESS is therefore creating equality of opportunity for those who come from disadvantaged families in order to reduce the perpetuation of poverty and social exclusion from generation to generation. The establishment and consolidation of Smartkids and the Cottonera Community Services is one policy measure that is having a direct and indirect impact in improving the quality of life of children and families in the community.

It is now widely held that many aspects of an individual's psychosocial development is formed between the ages of 0 to 5. The quality of care a child receives at the start of life has a significant impact on their later development such as their ability to form lasting relationships and exercising control over their behaviour. Smartkids supports parents in developing a healthy attachment with

¹⁰ MFSS (2006) Malta National Action Plan on Poverty and Social Exclusion 2004-2006, Valletta, MFSS.
12-13 June 2007

their children and utilizes structured activities and individualized programmes that target six areas of child development. These are emotional and social development, physical development, cognitive development, knowledge and understanding of the world, communication and language, and creative development.

Emotional and Social development is fostered through interaction with carers and other children in a safe environment. Physical activities are an integral part of each day's activities both indoors and outdoors and the centre also provides for a snack and ensures that the children receive appropriate nutrition. Cognitive ability is stimulated through carefully structured tasks using a large number of clear verbal instructions and questions, refraining from being controlling or intrusive, and offering praise and encouragement throughout the task. The experiences and learning opportunities created include opportunities to manipulate various materials and explore the surroundings which are hypothesised to be fundamental in fostering children's intellectual maturation¹¹. Knowledge and understanding of the world is fostered through the exploration of themes such as Maltese folklore and culture or the environment. Activities such as story telling and singing are some of the methods used to foster communication and language learning. Creativity is valued and play, painting, modeling and cooking are some of the activities carried out.

The Centre uses a key-worker system where children are attached to one carer who plans activities and programmes for each child and monitors their progress throughout. An important part of the work of the key worker is establishing a relationship with the primary carers of the children and providing them with feedback on the child's progress. The communication works both ways as parents/carers also inform key-workers on what is happening in the home that could have a bearing on the child's behaviour or learning. Parents/carers also receive support from the Centre coordinator who provides one-to-one consultation sessions when required.

The importance of providing the children with a stimulating environment while at the centre is of primary importance. There is also recognition however, that such an environment needs to be continued in the home. Therefore working with parents to ensure that they understand the importance of the provision of toys and learning materials to the child, stimulation of language, variety of opportunities and stimulation, organization of the physical environment, modeling, and parental responsiveness and acceptance are a main feature of the coordinator's role. This is done through parenting skills seminars, family workshops and individual consultations organized periodically throughout the year.

The Cottonera Community Service supports individuals and families on a short term as well as on a long term basis through social work intervention as well as through community based projects. Social workers support families of children at risk in order to prevent such children from being taken into care. This could entail working with parents to address issues of neglect, physical or verbal abuse and mental health and referrals to specialized services such as those for addictive behaviours or psychiatric services. Social workers also deal with children and adolescents exhibiting emotional and behavioural difficulties. Such children often face difficulties within the formal education system and run the risk of truancy and dropping out of school all together. This puts them at an increased risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. Changing life situations such as becoming a parent, marriage breakdown, unemployment or homelessness can have a debilitating effect on individuals and families and intervention at such times can be necessary for

¹¹ Saltaris, C. et al. (2004) Nurturing Cognitive Competence in Preschoolers: A Longitudinal Study of Intergenerational Continuity and Risk in International Journal of Behavioural Development, Vol. 28(2), 105-115, London, Sage Publications.

those who lack adequate support systems. Social workers also network with other community groups and organizations that can provide support at such times.

Community work projects such as 'Progett Taghlim' (Teaching Project) aim to increase the academic attainment of children particularly by promoting literacy and numeracy and the value of education. This project utilizes young volunteers between the ages of 16 and 20 who each work with one child once a week, after school hours, assisting with homework. Project Reach on the other hand works with those adolescents who are frequently absent from school. This project emerged following a study carried out by the Employment and Training Corporation which found that those students who dropped out of school early were more likely to suffer long term unemployment. By addressing individual, family and school factors the project hopes to reduce the incidence of absenteeism and to improve the educational and employment prospects of these young people.

'Klabb Sajf' (Summer Club) provides a safe environment and informal education activities for children between the ages of 6 and 12 years. This project provides creative and educational activities for children with the assistance of volunteers from the community on a twice weekly basis. Learning through art and crafts, drama, sport and dance are an integral part of this project which ends with a talent show produced by the children themselves. ABACUS, a group of volunteers from the community put up a number of forum theatre events, held in local primary and secondary schools aiming at enhancing awareness of psycho-social issues such as bullying and relationships among children and parents.

Home-Start Malta has recently celebrated its first year of service. Home-Start is an international voluntary organisation committed to promoting the welfare of families with at least one child of pre-school age. Appogg has worked hard to establish this organisation locally. The aim of the project is to train volunteers who offer support, friendship and practical assistance to families under stress in their own homes, helping to prevent family crises and breakdown. Appogg has been instrumental in accessing private funding for this project, setting up the necessary structures, such as a management committee, selecting a coordinator and providing premises for the project.

The Pre-Adolescent Outreach project was set up to offer a space for young people between the ages of nine and eleven for creativity and self-expression through informal education activities that also helped them to think for themselves and challenge their environment. The project enabled them to observe, learn and practice social skills, provided them with information that was useful to them and involved them in activities such as drama, sport and art. Eight children participated in the projects which involved ten sessions and an additional five outdoor activities. The children showed an increase in self-confidence and were better able to interact in a group setting. They also learnt new skills such as in the use of the internet.

Monitoring and Evaluation of Service Provision

The programme of work for ACCESS is outlined in its Operational Plan which is drawn up on an annual basis and as from 2006 a Business plan covering a three year period was also developed. Overseeing the Implementation of the Operational Plan is the responsibility of the ACCESS manager who reports to the Board of Directors on progress at each meeting. Two reports bringing together the work carried out at ACCESS were produced for the period November 2002 to De-

ember 2003 and January 2004 to December 2005. Most entities such as Appogg and ETC also produce their own reports which include information on the services based at ACCESS. All these serve to keep service users informed on the work being carried out and also provide an opportunity for feedback and discussion.

In addition, all services keep various data and statistics that provide information on the uptake of services, keep track of waiting lists and evaluation reports are also drawn up for specific projects such as Project Reach, Klabb Sajf and the Smartkids Summer School project. Monthly reports are also submitted by Appogg services which provide information on the uptake of services, waiting lists, case loads, and project implementation among others. Staff appraisals are carried out on an annual basis evaluating performance as well as learning needs and professional development targets for each individual. Staff meetings and supervision help to ensure a high quality output and assist in preventing stress and burnout among employees. Training opportunities for staff also ensure that they continue to upgrade their skills and knowledge and also serve as team building activities which facilitate co-working. Attention is paid to standards of care and these are strictly adhered to in order to ensure quality of service.

A community based initiative such as ACCESS has increased impact and benefit to the localities it services because it has been allowed and often encouraged to be flexible in service planning and delivery wherever possible. A culture of service user involvement is also slowly gaining ground among the Board of Directors and Management Team and while there is still some way to go staff are increasingly conscious of the need to involve service users at various levels of planning, delivery and evaluation of services. Outreach activities are another feature which particularly in community development make it possible for ACCESS projects to target those who are most excluded and who would often not seek help of their own initiative. More human resources are needed in order to reach those most at risk as often these require quite labour intensive methods such as home visits and street work.

Increased efficiency has come about in various ways and in various sectors of operation. The Foundation for Social Welfare Services is responsible for overseeing the ACCESS finances and also provide logistical support in the ordering of stationery and consumables, IT support services, the establishing of maintenance agreements and so on. This has an impact on both cost-effectiveness as well as efficiency as more time is freed up for project management. Housing a number of services under one roof enhances efficiency simply through proximity. It often saves time and resources when referring service users, seeking information or even getting together to plan projects. Being in the community also increases efficiency in that it is easier to identify needs and to be aware of new initiatives or issues that may arise.

It is difficult to gauge the impact that the setting up of ACCESS has had on the local community due to a lack of comprehensive data on all aspects of ACCESS operations. However it is possible to make some inferences. In terms of Smartkids, for example, it is evident that the service has made a difference to service users and has a good reputation. Parents often find out about the service by word of mouth. Feedback from parents is very positive and the waiting list also confirms the high demand for the service from both middle class as well as low income families. Attendance for parental skills seminars is also high which is an indicator of the quality of service and its ability to adapt to service users needs as recruiting for such courses is often quite difficult. The involvement of fathers in the service is also an indicator of the impact of the service as traditionally in Malta it is mothers who have tended to take on the caring role. Positive transitions to kindergarten are also an indicator of the positive impact of this service. Smartkids is also acting

as a training provider by offering placements to post-secondary students undertaking child-care courses. It has also been involved in the drawing up of quality standards for child care centres. It is still too early to say what difference if any, this service will have on the educational attainment of the children who attended Smartkids in the future. A tracer study would need to be carried out.

The Cottonera Community Service also has an impact on children and families. Through community work initiatives it has implemented a number of projects targeting literacy and educational attainment. Through social work support it plays a key role in reducing the number of children in care as children at risk can be monitored in the community and intensive work can be carried out with families to change harmful behaviours and improve parenting skills. The Cottonera Community Service has also been influential in the setting up of Homestart Malta which provides parent to parent support. The Women in Work project has assisted a number of women in finding employment on a part-time or full-time basis while others have undergone training courses or work placements thus helping to improve their employability prospects; the Reach project has worked with school drop outs and absentees for the past three years and is now showing some success in increased attendance rates and re-integration into school.

Conclusion

As we continue to work for, with and within the community we are able to get to know the people we serve and encourage and enable them to become collaborators. It is hoped that members of the community will increasingly take on a leading role in addressing their needs on their own terms. Being a part of this community has allowed us to know and be known, to observe people function in their own environment, to tap existing resource, to support community initiatives and to initiate a culture change leading to better co-working that is more sensitive and respectful towards people's situations and experiences. We must however be mindful of those areas which continue to divide communities. While this is an exciting time for Cottonera and Kalkara with the development of SmartCity and the regeneration of the Cottonera waterfront ensuring that the community is given a voice is a continuing struggle. Moreover, these localities cannot and should not be isolated from other factors which impinge on Maltese society, such as European Union membership.