

**White Paper on the Local Government Reform
Response to the Open Consultation
October – November 2018**

This document presents the response to the invitation for open consultation on the White Paper on the Local Government Reform from a think tank that brought together a number of academics, postgraduate students of the University of Malta and local practitioners working in policy, media as well as social spheres that include community action and development, local councils, disability and youth. While the detailed views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the full views of each member consulted, there is consensus on the broad responses being submitted.

General Comment

The consultees commend the attention that the White Paper gives to Local Councils and Regional Councils (to date known as Regional Committees). These structures have potential for community belonging and social commitment, providing spaces to express and consolidate the bond with one's community, as well as establishing platforms for investment and operations in social wellbeing

The consultees welcomed the proposals for additional technocratic expertise within these structures - such as the role of an EU Fund Officer. In so doing, the White Paper consolidates technocratic support to devolved community-based structures.

The consultees also welcomed proposals that are harmonized with broader frameworks, such as the proposal that regional assistance to Local Councils should be delivered in conjunction with the services offered by *servizz.gov*. Through such harmonization, outputs of the already existing regional, local and digital structures are more likely to be enhanced and operative in tandem with the broader scope of digital citizenship.

Notwithstanding, the consultees recommended a more evidence based, strategic and detailed approach throughout. The lack of detail in the existent White Paper suggests a projection of councils that work in a vacuum and *for* (rather than *with*) a *homogenous* (rather than *heterogeneous*) citizenry; as well as councils that operate on the basis of a *reactive* (rather than a *proactive*).

A reactive strategy is more likely to enslave local government to remedial action, such as addressing complaints concerning pavements and street lighting. Without underrating the relevance of citizens' daily needs, local governments' remit in this regard should be clarified, particularly when considering that today the Maltese Islands benefit from entities such as the Agency for Infrastructure Malta.

Strategy is key, as testified by the latest [Report by the Auditor General on the Workings of Local Government 2017](#), which reported a decrease in negative working capital amongst those local councils that implemented a detailed strategy following meetings conducted by the Department of Local Government during 2016.

But what kind of strategy?

The consultees considered that it is time that **local government** becomes officially recognised as a **visionary pillar of Maltese government** in a broad range of areas: arts, culture, education, protection of environmental quality and of biodiversity, physical and mental health, personal and professional development, inclusion, integration, research, innovation, urban and rural development and many more.

Consequently, this document puts forward one overarching objective – namely, a local government reform whereby the relatively small-scale community contexts act as **incubators of holistic social economic and environmental wellbeing based on community development**.

For this to take place, the consultees propose the following **three principles: Emancipatory local governance; Communication, networking and resourcing; Inclusion and diversity**. Each will be overviewed and exemplified with a (non-exhaustive) number of specific examples or measures.

Principle 1. Emancipatory local governance

Overview

An authentic and effective shift from the existent system comprising local councils and regional committees to a local government system requires **operationalization of what constitutes local government and of what is the relationship between such local government and national government**.

Concurrently, Local Councils and (the presently called) Regional Committees execute and enforce national government strategy. The approach is by and large top-down and, consequently, inherently contradictory to devolution since power is not transferred, just delegated.

The consultees question if it is time to carry out a professional study that re-evaluates and re-assesses the association between party politics and local government. Notably, this might attract interest from persons committed to the locality who, to date, shy away from a partisan-led election system. Without underrating the contribution of political parties to local government, the fact that the social wellbeing and community development transcend partisan politics makes the question uncomfortable but pertinent.

In practice, the undersigned are proposing:

- 1.1. A thorough conceptual operationalization of 'Local Councils' and 'Regional Councils' underpinning the White Paper's Local Government Reform.
- 1.2. A review of how policies and job descriptions regulating positions within government foundations and entities (including entities such as the

Foundation for Educational Services and the Foundation for Social Welfare Services) to verify the alignment of these with the proposed Local Government Reform.

Examples:

Mayors

The consultees welcomed the proposal to have full-time mayors, but recommend that a fully-fledged job description be appended to this proposal.

Although it is understandable that Mayors' duties include overseeing Council operations, the "surveillance" rhetoric corroborates the previously criticised top-down approach. It is therefore recommended that this should be done away with.

"Legacy" and "delegation" were amongst positive commendable practices identified by the think tank in association with the role of Mayor.

There were mixed feelings as regards the general principle of limiting a Mayor's term as this might unjustly penalise an effective and well-meaning Mayor, ultimately to the detriment of his/her locality, particularly when the locality's population is small and so there is likely to be a limited number of candidatures.

Notwithstanding, three legislatures should provide a sufficient amount of time to establish a legacy that is aligned to the principles of proactive community development as explained in this document.

Local councillors

A strategy that evaluates local councillors' input is required. As things stand a local councillor's input is regulated through his/her monthly remuneration, which, in turn, is subject to attendance to a monthly local council meeting. This leaves room for anomalies whereby a local councillor who does not contribute much than attend the monthly meeting is fully remunerated; whereby an occasional slip in this regard of a hard-working councillor is negatively sanctioned.

Executive Secretary

This role should be strengthened with due attention to more collaborative powers within the framework of the Public Service. One of the major weaknesses of local councils is that they find it difficult to collaborate effectively with government departments.

Community workers

Community workers (to be distinguished from community officers who were formerly known as 'wardens') are those professionals providing personal, social, physical and emotional support to those in need in the community, such as those experiencing poverty and social exclusion that may include the elderly, persons undergoing long-term medical treatment for physical or mental illnesses, immigrants, persons with disability and

the elderly. This is usually done through community outreach programs, as well as through rehabilitation and support services.

Concurrently, community work seems to be underrated and limited to reactionary and remedial action addressing social problems, rather than a capacity-builder of human, social and cultural capital. Such limitation also does no justice to community work as a profession. Until the proactive capacity-building remit of community-workers remains formally unacknowledged community workers will be severely impaired in standing for who they are professionally.

1.3. **A long-term professional development strategy with specialised /targeted educational initiatives.**

In this regard, call for tender referenced MJCL/MPU/128/2018 to provide specialised training for public employees in the Cultural and Creative Sector (CCS) augurs well and should be monitored and evaluated to identify best practices and working frameworks for other professional development initiatives within the local government sector.

The consultees proposed **periodic compulsory training** held for all mayors, councillors, executive secretaries and other local government officials regardless of their age or years in office. This ensures that all are trained in skills required to run a local council and fulfil their positions. The consultees advocate a **training and professional development strategy** that targets the following (among other) relevant areas:

- High-level ‘customer care’ which explicitly and systematically counters relationships and interactions between local government officers and citizens that are based on patronage, parochialism and vote-threats.
- Local government expertise required by elected officials, such as mayors and local councillors. The consultees propose a fully-fledged mentoring programme that supports local and regional councils’ officers at all stages of their involvement, from induction to professional development and lifelong learning.
- Project design and management particularly with a view to successfully applying for and managing EU funds.
- Public policy, policy design, evidence-based interventions and public consultation mechanisms.
- Relevant soft skills and transferable skills (e.g. conflict resolution, debating, writing, preparing and delivering speeches, summarizing, body language etc).

Examples:

- Restart a programme similar to local youth councils together with the school colleges per region to tackle subjects such as civic education and full participation of youths.
- Local Council campaigns and initiatives to increase active involvement of young people in sub-committees and community initiatives.

- 1.4. A role in the design and enforcement of fiscal, regulatory and enforcement mechanisms:
Fiscal mechanisms and detailed provision concerning permits and similar Local Council responsibilities.

Example:

Stricter and fiscal enforcement on registering parking permits issued by local councils with Transport Malta.

Principle 2. Communication, networking and resourcing*Overview*

Contemporary regional and local administrative structures in the Maltese Islands are often limited by a 'siloed' approach. Counter attempts are often enslaved by excessive bureaucratisation, partisan alliances and electoral cycles.

Moreover, the undersigned identified a gap between politicians in central government and regional or local officers and administrators. A gap that is often exacerbated by the establishment of regional and local entities which, good intentions notwithstanding, end up competing for public attention or pool of available resources, rather than collaborating for synergy.

The consultees endorse a proactive local government rationale that fosters community development resourced from the supranational entities such as the European Union, but also from the diversity, indigenous knowledge, networks and attachments of the various communities and their respective citizenries. This does not imply acquiescence and 'laissez-faire' but **capacity building that starts from (but certainly does not stop at) the local capital.**

| *In practice*, the consultees are proposing:

- 2.1. An audit of contemporary network and communication dynamics between international, national, regional and local entities to understand the state-of-play, identify gaps that need to be addressed and underutilized financial and social resources.

Examples:

- Communications and networks between LEAP centres and local councils;
- Communications and networks between Maltese and foreign local authorities through schemes such as twinning; and

- Resourcing from funds such as the Urban Improvement Fund which, according to recent figures, [is underutilized by € 28 million](#).

2.2. The introduction of additional technocratic positions (apart from the EU Fund Officer) that will strengthen the implementation of the principle of communication and networking and disseminate the value of local government reform.

Examples:

- An Information Technology Officer, particularly relevant in today's digital and social media-oriented society.
- A community consultation function, capable of sounding out communities in a representative and meaningful ways (e.g. stratified sampling, focus groups, interviews etc.).

2.3. The need for more informal and interactive communication and networking spaces.

These would include digital and social media platforms (e.g. live streams on social media whereby audience can interact) and themed face-to-face gatherings addressing interests / issues / forthcoming initiatives and developments that are of interest to the particular region or locality, for which citizens need information, preparation and support.

Whilst applauding the proposal for a mobile app that facilitates communication between citizens and local government, the undersigned underline that citizens are likely to be motivated to participate when they feel they can truly and easily access the discussion, as opposed to current monthly local council meetings where layperson attendees cannot speak.

A local government reform should acknowledge and dwell on the need for organised interactive yet informal citizen spaces by drawing on best practices manifested on social media platforms such as [Sliema Community Group](#), [Sliema Residents' Association](#) and [Haż-Żebbuġ Residents](#) – Facebook platforms that have spontaneously emerged from grassroots' and laypersons' initiatives.

Beyond the digital dimension, discussion and consultation mechanisms need to be made accessible for all. This will be elaborated in Section 3.4.

The safeguarding of and provision of informal public space within a locality and the capacity of the council to reach out to people (including children, the elderly and foreigners) in their own spaces and places should also be considered.

2.4. Partnerships - Existent public-private partnership practices may be enhanced.

Examples:

Commissioning evaluative research to identify and assess social wellbeing outcomes of existent public-private partnership.

Broadening collaboration with voluntary organisations (VOs) in the management of local sites – which already exists in band and football clubs' operations but which might be extended to include also public open spaces that are somehow related to specific VO.

E.g. Registered VO Għaqda Sajjeda Dilettanti Sliema recently manifested interest to manage the public space that surrounds its meeting premises.

Social, economic and environmental impact assessments to inform the design and implementation of planned partnerships that fall in the above-mentioned categories.

- 2.5. A targeted media campaign to disseminate what the local government reform entails in practice, with emphasis on how local government transcends electoral cycles and on how its care of citizens and 'customer care' differs from parochialism and patronage (refer to 1.3.).

Principle 3. Inclusion and Diversity*Overview*

Democratic local government cannot ignore minorities and the consultees support the attention that the White Paper gives to the increasing multicultural dynamics of contemporary Maltese communities.

Notwithstanding, the consultees noted that the White Paper's limited or negligible attention to youth, persons with disability and other emerging interest groups, such as reconstituted families, immigrants and persons living alone. These are vulnerable to hardships, social exclusion, limited community engagement and political participation, and possibly suffering from loneliness in an increasingly fragmented society featuring increased emphasis on short-term consumerist gratification.

In practice, the undersigned are proposing:

- 3.1 Commissioned research that profiles communities' demographics with special attention to family and household structures, ethnic diversity, physical, intellectual, sensorial and psychosocial disability, physical and mental health.
- 3.2 That each Local Council includes portfolios for family, youth and persons with disability, amongst others that may be possibly identified as relevant to local government in contemporary times.

- 3.3 That all official documentation addresses **persons with a disability** using this jargon and in a specialized manner - as opposed to the White Paper's current address to persons with special needs that homogeneously groups persons with disability with persons having other 'special' needs, such as elderly people.
- 3.4 Outreach: Not everyone is IT literate and some people, for example persons with intellectual disabilities, might need easy read versions to be able to understand communication received from the Local Council. It is of utmost importance that the Local Council would know their people without intruding in their lives.
- 3.5 Formulating research-based quality-assurance indices that measure, monitor and validate an improvement in the quality of life for everyone, including children, non-Maltese residents and visitors – in other words, those who hold no voting rights, amongst others who are potentially vulnerable and socially excluded.

Contributors:

:: Prof Andrew Azzopardi - Dean - Faculty for Social Wellbeing, Head of Department - Youth & Community Studies;

:: Dr Marie Briguglio - Lecturer - Faculty for Economics, Management and Accountancy;

:: Dr Maria Brown – Visiting Senior Lecturer – University of Malta;

:: Mr Colin Borg - Senior executive at the University of Malta, part-time lecturer - Department of Public Policy and Department of Youth & Community Studies, Ph.D. student studying the governance and management of higher education in Malta;

:: Mr Eman Borg - Sustainable Development Goals Officer at Kunsill Nazzjonali taż-Żgħażaġh, President at LGBTI + Gozo and Secretary General at University of Malta Rowing Club;

:: Ms Denise Farrugia - Masters Student - Community Action and Community Development - Faculty for Social Wellbeing;

:: Ms Stephania Fenech - Deputy Mayor Zejtun Local Council & Masters Student - Community Action and Community Development - Faculty for Social Wellbeing;

:: Mr Oliver Scicluna - Commissioner for the Rights of Persons with Disability; and

:: Mr Melvic Zammit- Journalist - Public Broadcasting Services.

For further clarifications and information, kindly contact Dr Maria Brown on mbrown1919@gmail.com or +356 9940 4820.

29th November 2018.