



Research Note

The Social Impact of the American University of Malta on the Cottonera Region

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Abstract. The American University of Malta (AUM) is a private university in the South Eastern Region of Malta. This article aims to look at the social impact of the American University of Malta's Cospicua site on the Cottonera and the surrounding localities.

Keywords: Social impact assessment, community infrastructure, Population change

1 Introduction

The Cottonera is a collective description of the three cities of Cospicua, Vittoriosa, and Senglea. The three cities of Cottonera and Kalkara form the hub of the maritime history of Malta. The Dockyard apprenticeship school was the main producer of skilled tradesmen in Malta and for many young people from Cottonera, the dockyards were their main source of employment (Cutajar, 2014). During the Second World War, Cottonera experienced massive outmigration as its inhabitants had to seek refuge in less exposed towns and villages. After the war, the professional and educated people of Cottonera were replaced by a poorer working class (Attard, 2015).

Data from 2011 Census revealed that 9.3% of people in the Southern harbour are illiterate (National Statistics Office, 2014); figure reflecting the highest percentage rate when compared to other regions. In addition, Cottonera students are under-represented in post-secondary educational institutions, even when these provide vocational education (Cutajar, 2014). This leads to the fact that a substantial number of people in the Cottonera area are more likely to be employed in unskilled occupations (Cutajar, 2014). Moreover, data obtained from Jobsplus show that over the past decade (2005–2016), the Southern harbour had the highest percentage of job seekers, on average 29% (Jobsplus, 2017). This has led

the Cottonera region to be over-represented by people who are welfare recipients and who have a high demand for social housing (Formosa & Gerada, 2015).

A series of regeneration projects in the Cottonera and the surrounding localities started in the 1990s and are still ongoing. Such projects include the opening of the National Maritime Museum in Vittoriosa, the revitalisation of the Vittoriosa Marina Grande, Smart City in Kalkara, and the new promenade in Cospicua which “transformed the environment from a noisy, polluting and dirty ship repairing yard to a modern waterfront accompanied by excellent landscaping and a serene atmosphere” (Formosa & Gerada, 2015, p. 9) and currently the regeneration of Dock 1 in Cospicua for the AUM.

2 Methodology

This article aims to identify possible social impacts as a result of the setting up of the American University of Malta in Cottonera.

This article utilised both primary and secondary sources of data. Secondary data analysis is “an empirical exercise carried out on data that has already been gathered or compiled in some way” (Dale, Arber & Procter, 1988, p. 3). For the purpose of this article, the Social Impact Assessment – American University of Malta Campus – Cottonera Site conducted by Formosa and Gerada (2015) was mainly consulted. On the other hand, primary sources consist of data collected by researchers themselves during the course of their research, in this case, semi-structured interviews.

Interviews were conducted with:

- Ms Alison Zerafa - Mayor, Cospicua Local Council;
- Fr Anton Cassar - Parish Priest, Cospicua;
- Mr Ivan Buttigieg - President Regatta Club, Cospicua.

Notes were taken during the interview and a more detailed description of their responses was written soon

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after every interview. Phrases and sentences which have been repeated in different interviews; concepts which are already pointed out in literature and other relevant sections were labelled. The social impact assessment was written in light of previous studies on the American University of Malta and studies on Cottonera.

3 Assessing the Social Impact

In their Social Impact Assessment (SIA), Formosa and Gerada (2015) asked residents in Cospicua, Kalkara, Senglea and Vittoriosa whether they are in favour or against the American University of Malta situated in Cospicua. Formosa and Gerada (2015) summarised the participants' responses in a favouring sentiment towards the American University of Malta:

*“Stakeholders and residents were receptive to large-scale international investments that would introduce much needed financial capital in the area - as this would not only increase the available range of **job opportunities** for residents in the Cottonera and adjoining localities but would also have a spill-over positive economic effect on **business ventures** and even **renting prospects** (p. 1).”*

Ms Alison Zerafa, Mayor of Cospicua, reaffirms the positive view stakeholders and residents have regarding the American University of Malta. Ms Zerafa added that since the dockyard closed, Dock 1 was left in a neglected state. This, together with the stigma and negative perceptions the Cottonera area struggles with, worsened the image of Cospicua and the surrounding localities. Many residents believe that the presence of a foreign university in Cottonera will minimise the disparaging image of Cottonera and prejudice towards its residents. The regeneration of Dock 1 is giving a different image to Cospicua, in Ms Zerafa's words, *“ir-residenti qed jergħu jaraw lill-Bormla tiegħu l-ħajja - residents are witnessing the rebirth of Cospicua”*. Moreover, as mentioned in Formosa and Gerada (2015) and by Mr Buttigieg, the prejudice towards Cottonera residents will possibly decrease since residents believe that the American University of Malta has a strong potential towards bringing about new job opportunities and hence lowering unemployment rates in the Cottonera region. Mr Buttigieg added that the presence of a University in Cospicua might also stimulate the interest of youths to continue furthering their education.

Fr Anton mentioned that the American University of Malta will attract affluent students which will further create more business in the area. Formosa and Gerada (2015) mentioned that the establishment of a campus situated in Cospicua means that students will opt for guest houses and rental accommodation in Cospicua and nearby localities. In fact, Fr Anton and Ms Zerafa claimed that homeowners are benefiting by renting and

selling property. Considering the small size of Malta, visiting relatives might not only opt for accommodation in the Cottonera but will have a positive effect on the island (Formosa & Gerada, 2015). In fact, Fr Anton and Ms Zerafa agreed that guest houses and boutique hotels are on the increase.

Ms Zerafa and Fr Anton stated that while some time ago, one found a lot of unsold property in Cospicua, this is no longer the case, as people are selling and restructuring their houses to rent them to students. As a result of this, Maltese citizens are finding that renting prices increased. Ms Zerafa, however, explained that cheap renting used to attract people with social problems to the area; contributing more to the stigma that Cospicua has carried with it for many years. According to Attard (2015), the accumulation of social problems in urbanised cities causes disadvantage to individuals and hinders the development of the city; hence the increase in renting price means that the burden of people with social problems will be distributed onto different localities.

Interviewees added that residents of the area will also benefit from retail, grocery and coffee shops since most businesses are run by locals and opens possibilities of new business ventures targeting the needs of students. In fact, one can already notice the number of cafeterias and pastizzi shops which opened recently in the area.

While the majority of residents and stakeholders agreed with the American University of Malta in Cospicua, they mentioned the following concerns - an increase in traffic, a decrease in parking spaces, and a surge in air pollution (Formosa & Gerada, 2015). These concerns were also pointed out by Fr Anton, adding also possible unpleasant noise from recreational activities to his list - a consequence of economic growth, as he stated in his own words *“l-ekonomija tmexxi kollox - everything is run through economy”*. While Dun Anton does not mention this in a negative tone, Mr Buttigieg added that recreational activities have a positive impact on Cospicua as lately it has become too quiet. He, in fact, stated *“Bormla saret wisq kwieta... aħna nafu Bormla aktar movimentata - Cospicua is too quiet... we know a Cospicua which was more active”*.

With regards to the issue of the introduction of a new group with different religious values and beliefs from the majority of the people residing in Cottonera, Ms Zerafa mentioned that residents were worried about different religions and cultures. Mr Buttigieg is of the opinion that such interaction will enrich the multi-cultural character of the locality. Fr Anton believes that it is inevitable that youths from the area interact with students from the American University of Malta, similar to when in the past the British forces in Malta left a particular impact on the Cottonera region.

Furthermore, Ms Zerafa explained that the announcement of the opening of the American University of Malta led residents to resist change. Taking also into consideration that Cottonera is an ageing population, Ms Zerafa claimed that, residents felt that what is theirs – hence Cospicua – will be taken from them. However, Ms Zerafa explained that the authorities involved the community from the beginning of the project, kept ongoing communication during the planning stage and made them part of the process. This enabled residents to develop a trusting relationship in order to let go of their fears. This enabled them to visualise a direct link between the project and a possibility of an improved quality of life. This has been confirmed by Mr Buttigieg. He stated that the American University of Malta is the main sponsors of the Cospicua Regatta Club for the year 2017. He also stated that other stakeholders in the community should benefit in the years to come, which ultimately all the Cottonera area is benefitting from.

4 Conclusion

This article aimed to look at the social impact of the American University of Malta's Cospicua site on the Cottonera and the surrounding localities. This article concluded that stakeholders and residents believe that the presence of a foreign university in Cottonera will minimise the disparaging image of Cottonera and prejudice towards its residents, due to the regeneration and business created in the area including job opportunities, business ventures and renting prospects.

Residents and stakeholders pointed out four key concerns with regards the social impact of the American University of Malta on the Cottonera, including - an increase in traffic, a decrease in parking spaces, a surge in air pollution and worries regarding students of different religions and cultures. However, the authorities involved the community from the beginning of the project and this enabled residents and stakeholders to develop a trusting relationship and to visualise a direct link between the project and a possibility of an improved quality of life.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide (adapted from Formosa & Gerada, 2015)

Wide-ranging impacts

- Community's views on AUM
- Key issues driving the community's perception
- Concerns of residents and stakeholders

Population impacts

- Population change – Influx of young persons
- Seasonal residents

Conflicts between local residents and new comers

- Culture differences/introduction of new social classes
- Change in commercial focus of the community

Community infrastructure & Arrangements

- Change in community infrastructure
- Change in occupational opportunities