

Community-based Organisations During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Hal Qormi San Bastjan

Sara Mari Cardona

Corresponding author: cardonasMari@gmail.com

Independent Researcher

Abstract: This research paper addresses the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacted community-based organisations within the context of the Parish of Saint Sebastian in Hal Qormi. The main research questions were concerned with addressing why volunteers invest their time and energy in such organisations, what volunteering means to members of community-based organisations in a period when their work had come to a halt, the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected the work of community-based organisations, and whether they managed to persevere during the pandemic. Data was collected mainly through one-to-one semi-structured interviews with representatives from various community-based organisations within Hal Qormi San Bastjan. Furthermore, being present in the locality and participating in community events proved to be extremely useful when it came to interpreting the data collected during the interviews within the appropriate context. A thematic data analysis was carried out to analyse the data collected. The findings of the study suggest that the fact that in-person meetings could not take place hindered the work of community-based organisations. Moreover, the pandemic seemed to amplify already existing struggles, such as financial challenges and the need to find volunteers. Despite this, community-based organisations managed to pull through and were as eager as ever to get back on track. This research paper is based on the research I carried out in 2022 as the world was emerging out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: community; community-based organisations; participation; COVID-19 pandemic; village feasts; parish

Introduction

Hal Qormi is one of the oldest towns in Malta. A militia list from 1419 indicates that it had a population of 102 men, aged between 16 and 60, who were expected to give free military service in the defence of the island. The population then must have been around 510 people (Wettinger, as cited in Grima, 1984, p. 3). The parish of Saint George in Qormi predates the parish of Saint Sebastian as it has been active since at least 1436. The area of the parish of Saint Sebastian developed around a statue that was set up by the residents around 1814 to thank the saint for delivering them from the plague. Around 1880, a small church dedicated to Saint Sebastian was built in front of the statue and a small but thriving community started sprawling around them. By 1935, the small quarter of Saint Sebastian in Qormi had grown enough to claim the title of parish, separating itself from the parish of Saint George (Saliba, 2018).

The feeling of being a new parish that had to measure itself with one of the oldest parish communities on the island seems to have engendered a strong community spirit that manifested itself in the setting up of a landmark parish church but also in a myriad of community-based organisations which are linked to the parish. These changed along the years. Today, one can find longstanding organisations, such as the Pinto Band Club, which

was founded in 1862. The Pinto Band Club was originally set up in the parish of Saint George, but along the years moved outwards towards the Saint Sebastian area until it became strongly and exclusively associated with the Saint Sebastian parish, and thus, by definition, a great rival of Saint George's band clubs. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, other organisations were set up, such as the Għaqda tan-Nar San Sebastjan (the fireworks group) and Għaqda tal-Armar San Sebastjan (the festa decorations group). More closely related to the parish one finds the parish Ladies' Circle as well as the Saint Sebastian Pageant Group. These parish-based groups seem to keep sprouting. An example of this is the youth group IMPACT. Furthermore, more recently, another group for young adults, CONNECT, was also formed, which goes to show that such community-based organisations are highly sought after within the parish of Saint Sebastian.

The question that kept assailing me was: why do people living in the area of the parish of St Sebastian feel so strongly about their community-based organisations? What do they find so meaningful in them? In 2020, just like in 1813, the community of Qormi, like the rest of the world, was struck by another pandemic—this time round it was COVID-19. It can be argued that the locals could not help but ruminate about their origins in the 1813 outbreak. People wanted to believe it would not be as lethal this time round; however, no one knew whether we were going to weather the storm and how. The next big question then was, what would be the effect of the pandemic on the activity of community-based organisations in the area? Will they weather the storm? What function, if any, would they play during the pandemic? And what does all this tell us about the function that these community-based organisations play in defining individual and community identity?

I engaged with these questions through a qualitative research project that took me around the various organisations, meeting different members of community-based organisations and local leaders. I got involved by attending and participating in the organisation of community activities, both at the height of the pandemic and at the time when the community seemed to be emerging out of the pandemic, yearning for the level of community participation that characterised the community in pre-Covid times. During this time, the community was concerned with putting heads together to plan a present and future marked by engagement with the uncertainty of the pandemic.

Literature Review

What is Community?

The importance of community and strong social networks became prevalent themes within the context of a society that was living through a global pandemic. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most people experienced extended periods of quarantine, loneliness, and self-isolation. These periods with limited face-to-face interactions led many to reflect upon the importance of life within a community. It seems as if being lost in a monotonous routine of online meetings further highlighted the value of face-to-face communication in an age of ever-increasing individualisation.

The term 'community' can be a rather elusive and complex term. Its complexity can be attributed to the notion that communities are not fixed or absolute, but rather that they are more appropriately referred to as ever-changing structures which exist within a society that is also characterised by change. Jane Thompson (2000, p. 68) comments on the ever-changing nature of communities by stating that,

Communities, like cultures or ethnicities, are not static totalities. They are fluid arrangements of different individuals, values, ideas, and practices—in which the boundaries shift and blur around the edges all the time.

Williams (1985, p. 76) defines the term as:

the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.

Williams states that the term is never used in a negative manner and is associated with good-natured social relations. Shaw (2003) puts forward the notion that our ideas of what community should comprise, tend to obscure our perception of reality, which often does not line up with our idealistic understandings of community. Shaw (2003, p. 5) elaborates by stating that, “without an adequate understanding of the ways in which power relations construct and constrain community life, we are left with the extended clichés of a romanticised community”. Due to this, she highlights the importance of taking into consideration the wider social context surrounding communities. It can be noted that the concept of community implies that there is a distinction between those who form part of the community and those who do not. This points towards notions of inclusion and exclusion within community life while also challenging the supposed unity which is usually perceived as being a key characteristic of community life.

In relation to this, Boissevain (1993 [1965], pp. 158, 159), observes that the celebration of village feasts in Maltese towns and neighbourhoods seems to “establish boundaries and project an image of solidarity to similar, and often rival, units”. Thus, while these celebrations strengthen bonding social capital, they also serve to shed a light on the borders dividing the socially included and the socially excluded.

The village feast is one aspect of traditional life within Maltese neighbourhoods which continues to be sought after and is highly celebrated today. This is especially so when one looks at the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on the celebration of the village feasts; and moreover, by looking at the public’s response and reactions to not being able to celebrate the very much awaited village feast.

As described by Boissevain, it can be said that the village feast of the patron saint serves to both celebrate and create a sense of community within Maltese villages and towns. Boissevain (1993 [1965], p. 158) describes the village feasts as

a manifestation of a desire to celebrate community. People who have grown up together in poverty and are now separated by prosperity, wish to recreate, for a moment, the feeling of solidarity, of togetherness. They achieve this by doing something together, by celebrating – watching fireworks, dancing in the street, drinking, praying, visiting, walking behind the band, listening to music in the square. During these community celebrations, kinsmen meet, as do neighbours and more distant acquaintances.

Research Design

Addressing the Research Question: Developing a Case Study

My main research question centred around addressing the ways in which life within the parish community of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, doing so through the perspective of members within community-based organisations which are active in the area. I attempted to address whether community-based organisations in Ħal Qormi San Bastjan were able to keep operating due to the restrictions brought about by the pandemic, and if so in what ways. Furthermore, this study investigated the

ways in which the pandemic might have influenced community participation while also addressing the reasons why volunteering and being active in the community seemed to be important to people.

I chose to base my research within the context of Ħal Qormi San Bastjan because, even though I have never lived in the locality, I feel a sense of belonging there. I was brought up attending community activities within the locality as my father is from Ħal Qormi and my grandparents live there. Given this, celebrations such as the village feast have always been important events marked in the family calendar. I participate in the community mainly by attending community events and celebrations; however, I was also involved in the organisation of activities and workshops for children with Akkademja Mużikali Pinto (the band club's music school). The fact that the feast could not be celebrated with all its characteristic communal merriment and cheer for two years in a row made it seem as if years of tradition suddenly came crashing down. It is safe to say that these feelings played a role in steering me towards wanting to investigate the ways in which community life in Ħal Qormi was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research questions were addressed qualitatively by developing a case study, since by developing a case study the research question could be thoroughly explored in a holistic manner. The case study focused on the relatively large number of community-based organisations within the parish of San Bastjan in Ħal Qormi. The community-based organisations included in my study were:

1. The Saint Sebastian Parish church;
2. The parish church's Ladies' Circle;
3. The Drama Pageant Group, Qormi San Sebastjan;
4. The parish youth group, IMPACT;
5. The Sodalità San Sebastjan (The group of three Confraternities within the Parish);
6. The Soċjetà Filarmonika Pinto Banda San Sebastjan;
7. The Kummissjoni Kultura Soċjetà Filarmonika Pinto;
8. The Kummissjoni Banda Soċjetà Filarmonika Pinto;
9. The Akkademja Mużikali Pinto within the Soċjetà Filarmonika Pinto;
10. The Għaqda tan-Nar San Sebastjan;
11. The Għaqda tal-Armar San Sebastjan.

It should be noted that the above list does not include all the community-based organisations which are active in the parish community of Saint Sebastian, however, the list does include a fairly wide-ranging number of community-based organisations. Community-based organisations which associate themselves with the parish but are not included in the study include Kummissjoni Żgħażaġħ Bastjaniżi, Għaqda Teatrali Narbona, and Pintoninu Kids Club. In addition to this, it should also be noted that the study is only concerned with community-based organisations which associate themselves with the parish, therefore, community-based organisations such as the hockey club or the football club which are active in the parish were not included in the research.

Sampling

I opted towards purposive sampling methods. Namely, I put together a list of community-based organisations which ought to be included in the study and then proceeded to identify a possible key person from each organisation on the list which I could interview. All the people I contacted were kind enough to agree to participate in my study. This may be explained by the fact that participants were proud of their work within their respective organisation, and thus, they were more than happy to contribute to my study which was concerned with looking into the community-based organisations that the participants are extremely passionate about.

Data Collection

The main form of data collection was done using one-to-one in-depth semi-structured interviews with members from community-based organisations. Most of the interviews were carried out in person in Ħal Qormi, except one which was carried out virtually via video call. The fact that most of the interviews were conducted in person—at the band club, the music school, the street decorations store (*il-maħžen*), the parish office, the parish centre, and some participants even welcomed me into their homes—made it easier for me to relate to and better understand the participants' experiences. Nevertheless, the interview which was conducted via video call proved to be very insightful and rich in information.

The interviews followed a flexible interview guide which included a set of questions and themes that I wanted to address. The questions prepared were not necessarily asked in the exact order as they were laid out in the interview guide, and there were also instances where I felt the need to ask follow-up questions. The questions were open-ended, making the interview process very open and adaptable. Nevertheless, similar questions were asked to all the participants.

During the interviews, which were recorded with the participants' consent, I asked participants about the work carried out by their respective community-based organisation and its operations prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. I also asked about the ways in which the pandemic impacted the organisation and its members, also addressing current issues and any perceived issues which may crop up in the future. I asked participants about the impact that their respective organisation has on the local community, and I attempted to address issues of participation, or lack thereof, from members of the local community. I also asked about the celebration of the village feast, and its significance to the participants and to the local community. Lastly, I asked respondents whether their work within the organisation was personally rewarding.

Coming from a family that is very active within parish circles, I could adopt a conscious positioning of a sympathetic listener who speaks the same language as the participants and who has been somehow drenched in the same culture since early childhood. My position was that of the inquisitive co-participant who would like to know more about things that are important for both participants in the interview situation.

In addition to conducting interviews, I also gathered data through participant observation by attending community events, visiting the band club, attending the annual general meeting of the confraternity group (*il-Fratellanzi tas-Sodalità ta' San Bastjan*), and conducting a music appreciation workshop for children in collaboration with *Akkademja Mużikali Pinto* (the band club's music school). Furthermore, I also made use of online sources, namely, online newspaper articles concerning current events in Ħal Qormi as well as browsing the Facebook pages of the community-based organisations which feature in this study. Such Facebook pages provided an insight into the work which was being carried out by the organisations at the time as well as work and activities which were organised in the past.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and a thematic data analysis was carried out. Neuman (2014, p. 477) states that “To analyze data means systematically to organize, integrate, and examine”. During the data analysis stage, one of the main aims is to reduce the data gathered through the interviews into more manageable parts of information, so as to be able to effectively interpret it. Thematic data analysis is composed of two major components, coding and memoing. Coding is the method by which one allocates codes or labels to the data which is being sorted while memoing refers to the process of taking notes of the ideas which arise about codes and the relationship between these codes. As is stated by Punch (2014, p. 177) “Together, coding and memoing provide the building blocks for this style of qualitative analysis”.

I started out by going over the transcripts and highlighting important parts of the text which were especially relevant, in terms of answering the research question. Furthermore, I looked out for the main themes that started emerging from the data. As I went along this process of theme generation, I also kept memos, taking note of ideas that helped me connect themes ideas and codes. I looked out for the main themes that started emerging from the data and that informed and enriched the knowledge that I started gathering in my quest to answer the research questions. Through this meticulous sifting of the data, the main organised and saturated but connected themes emerged and took shape. The last stage of analysing the data involved combining all the coding and memos into an articulate representation of the data collected.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, great care was taken to ensure that the implementation of the research project was carried out ethically, safeguarding participants and upholding professional integrity. Interviewees, all of whom were above 18 years of age, were given an information letter and a consent form which had been submitted to the University of Malta’s Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee. Therefore, formal written consent was given by participants prior to conducting the interviews. Participants were only made identifiable in the study if they had given their consent. With regard to workshop which I organised with Akkademja Mużikali Pinto, formal written consent was obtained from parents of the children who participated in the workshop. Assent forms were also signed by the children themselves. The consent forms and assent forms were also submitted to the University of Malta’s Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee.

As is stated by the American Sociological Association’s (2018, p. 6) code of ethics “Sociologists are aware of their professional and scientific responsibility to the communities and societies in which they live and work”. To uphold this professional and scientific responsibility, the relationship between myself as the researcher and interviewees was treated with great care, while also striving to ensure that participants felt safe to express themselves, doing so by fostering a sense of trust.

In addition to this, great care was also taken to produce a research project which is honest and truthful to the findings. One of the ways in which the quality of the research was ensured was by using different data collection methods. In addition to the interviews, data was also collected through observations, participant observation, as well as using online sources such as online newspaper articles about current events in Ħal Qormi and the Facebook pages of the community-based organisations active in the locality. Using different methods of data collection placed me in a better position to describe the social processes at play within the appropriate context in a reliable manner.

Results and Discussion of the Data

Were Community-based Organisations Able to Keep Operating During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

One of the main challenges that had to be faced with regard to the daily operations of community-based organisations was that most organisations had to resort to carrying out their work virtually, as the health restrictions did not allow for people to meet up physically. The transition towards operating using virtual means of communication impacted different community-based organisations to varying degrees and had differing consequences on different organisations, since not every aspect of the work being carried out could be transitioned to online means of communication.

For instance, Shaun, from the pageant group, stated that just a couple of weeks before the pageant was going to be staged in April 2020, with preparations being well underway at that point in time, they had to cancel everything. This also resulted in a loss of money for the pageant group, since money had already been spent to organise the pageant which would not be made up for. Shaun also stated that not being able to meet up as a group was a difficult challenge to overcome. To keep the group alive, members of the pageant group would try to work on things individually from their own homes. For example, the person in charge of the costumes would get the fabric from the parish store and dedicate their time to working on the costumes from home. Furthermore, Shaun stated that he would try to work on the script, however, given the stressful situation of the pandemic, this was not always easy since the pandemic caused a lot of mental stress. However, Shaun also praised the resilience of the team as, when restrictions were eased and the group was allowed to start working on the pageant again, people came back with enough willpower and energy, ready to attempt to regain what they had lost in two years within a short time span. Albeit not without challenges, the pageant group managed to hold the Good Friday pageant again in April 2022.

During the interview, Pawlu, from the confraternity group, explained how the group was very active in the community prior to the pandemic, mainly through the organisation of spiritual meetings as well as social activities for their members. Confraternity members would participate in processions, such as the procession of Our Lady of Sorrows, the Easter procession, and the procession during the village feast of Saint Sebastian, and the mass preceding such processions. The fact that meetings and activities could no longer be held was a challenge for the organisation, however, they managed to adapt by turning towards the use of social media and online meetings. Nevertheless, Pawlu described this situation as being far from ideal.

Similarly, band club committee meetings were held online, as were the youth group meetings, and the music lessons organised by Akkademja Mużikali Pinto. The ladies' circle resorted to uploading messages on Facebook to lift the morale of their members. The parish priest also stated that due to the circumstances of the pandemic, the parish had to turn to different means of communication to maintain contact with community members. This was done by investing in the use of social media. Moreover, mass was being livestreamed on Facebook, and certain celebrations were broadcasted on a local television station, in order to maintain some form of contact with community members who are not familiar with social media, mainly elderly people for whom the concept of Facebook and social networking sites may still be foreign.

Apart from the physical meetings, processions were also cancelled due to health restrictions. This was a challenge for the confraternity group, since taking part in processions and having the honour of carrying the statue during processions, seemed to incentivise people to attend the meetings. Pawlu stated that one of the negative effects of the pandemic was a decrease in attendance among members. For someone to be able to carry a statue in one

of the processions held throughout the year, they must be a member of the confraternity, then the group of people who will carry the statue is chosen during the annual general meeting according to a system of points based on attendance. During the annual general meeting, which I had the opportunity to attend in March 2022, the selection of the people who will carry the statue in the different processions was highly anticipated, and it was made apparent that carrying the statue is regarded as a great honour by members of the confraternity group.

Jennifer, representing Akkademja Mużikali Pinto, stated that the music school had to transition to online learning. The music school managed to organise online masterclasses for brass and woodwind instruments. Despite this, virtual music lessons could not act as a complete substitute for physical lessons as there were students who may have lost interest and did not return to physical lessons when the health restrictions were eased. Jennifer stated that:

as a band club we are seeing that even certain band members are losing interest, this is even more so in the case of students that are growing up and are not witnessing any type of possibility that one day they will be able to play with the band.

In addition to this, at the time Jennifer stated that:

children today do not know what a band is because we are living in a time when children cannot listen to the band playing in the streets.

Jennifer remarked that due to these setbacks, getting back on track would not be an easy task. I worked with Jennifer to organise a workshop for children in collaboration with Akkademja Mużikali Pinto. The workshop was aimed at fostering an appreciation of music among young children. I taught the first part of the workshop, which focused on appreciating music through movement and dance, then during the second part of the workshop band members took over to give children the experience of playing instruments and joining in with the band. The organisation of the workshops proved to be difficult due to challenges imposed by the pandemic. The date of the workshop had to be changed and postponed several times, mainly because people might have still been scared to send their children, as well as due to a rise in COVID-19 cases. Despite this, when the workshop was held in April 2022, there was a good turnout, children were eager to participate, and they enjoyed themselves. This shows that while getting back on track might not be easy, there is still interest in participating in activities organised by community-based organisations.

The representative from the festa decorations group stated that since the feast had not been celebrated for two consecutive years,

children and adolescents between the ages of ten and thirteen did not see the feast being celebrated, they did not see youths meet up, they did not see people at the decorations store.

This may become an issue in the near future, since new volunteers are needed in order for the group to continue carrying out its work within the community. With regard to these adolescents, the participant claimed that "It will be more difficult for them to feel passionate about joining any organisation they may have wanted to form part of". Due to this, the participant referred to the formation of a gap, since during the time period when youths usually get involved with the group, they did not get the opportunity to do so, as the feast could not be celebrated, thus making it harder for them to get involved at a later stage in their lives as by that time they could have found other interests.

In addition to this, the participant from the festa decorations group referred to the struggles related to the fact that members of the group could not meet up as they normally would. This also meant that the door of the decorations store would be closed, so people could

not step in and have a look at the work being done. Despite this, the participant stated that work on the decorations did not cease; in fact, since the decorations were not put up in the streets, they had more time to work on them. The work, however, had to be done individually or perhaps there would be two people at a time at the decorations store. The participant commented that this impacted the general dynamic of the group.

Christabel, from the youth group, stated that since one of the main aims of the group was to bring young people together, this could not be fully accomplished since members of the group could not meet up in person at the parish centre. Despite this, participation and membership seemed to increase rather than decrease during the pandemic. Christabel explained this by stating that youths' need to belong and to connect with other youths increased during the pandemic. Therefore, to fulfil this need, groups such as IMPACT might have become increasingly sought after. Christabel stated that:

as much as possible, we did not give up during the pandemic, and every chance we got we used to meet online. When the health restrictions would allow, we would meet in person.

Despite the increase in membership, finding people who are willing to take on the role of a leader within the group was still a challenge. The struggle of finding people who are willing to dedicate their time to volunteering within community-based organisations was echoed throughout most of the interviews and can be described as a common struggle faced by the majority of the community-based organisations active within the parish of Saint Sebastian.

Oliver, a member of the band club committee, stated that since we seem to be living busier and more stressful lives, people might have less time to volunteer their time in community-based organisations. This was already prevalent before the pandemic, however, during the pandemic the issue of finding volunteers was greatly amplified. In addition to this, the fact that the band club could not organise fundraising activities was also a setback.

In relation to this, Karl, another member of the band club committee, referred to two main struggles: financial struggles and the struggle of finding people who are willing to volunteer. During the interview he stated that:

not having manpower is worse than not having finances [...] because if you have the manpower, you can acquire finances one way or another. If you work you will start to recover financially, but if you lose the manpower, you won't have anyone that can work to acquire finances.

Karl also stated that youths who used to earn money from playing with the band during the pandemic, might have resorted to finding another part-time job, and now that feasts are starting to be celebrated once more, these youths might not return to playing with the band, thus resulting in a loss of band players. Another struggle which was mentioned by Karl was that the prices for the hiring of external band players increased drastically, making it ultimately more difficult for the band club to get back on its feet and get back to organising community celebrations to the extent that was characteristic of such celebrations prior to the pandemic. Oliver referred to this by stating that it might be dangerous to assume that band clubs can go back to organising the village feast with all its grandeur just as if nothing has happened. It is important to acknowledge the fact that the circumstances that community-based organisations must face have changed, and the struggles may have increased, largely due to the pandemic.

The representative from the festa decorations group stated that the group struggled financially since they needed to find new ways of organising fundraising activities. As opposed to organising dinners as a fundraising activity, since the health restrictions did not allow such activities to take place, the festa decorations group adapted by organising

food deliveries, or the delivery of sweets and pastries, activities which minimise social contact, through which the group could still generate funds.

With regard to financial struggles Christabel, from the youth group stated that the pandemic was a setback because they were not able to organise fundraising activities, however, now that the health restrictions have been eased, they can start organising their fundraising activities once more. She went on to state that financial struggles remain pertinent since organising activities for about fifty youths requires money, and thus, fundraising is important for the group to be able to operate.

Why is Participation in the Local Community Important to People?

The discussions I had with representatives from community-based organisations indicate that participation in such organisations fosters a sense of belonging among their members. Most members used phrases such as “having a second family” when referring to their respective community-based organisation. Therefore, the group dynamics within these organisations seem to be closely reminiscent of the relations between friends or maybe even family members. This sense of friendship and belonging may have become even more important during the period of a global pandemic which had driven people into isolation.

Creating a sense of belonging among their members seemed to be a priority for most community-based organisations. For instance, Jennifer, who manages the band club’s music school, stated that apart from organising music lessons, most of which are carried out on a one-to-one basis, prior to the pandemic they used to organise live-ins. Such activities enabled students, who did not see each other during their music lessons, to meet interact and socialise with one another. Such practices enable the creation and maintenance of strong social bonds.

Similarly, one of the main aims of the youth group, was described as “bringing youths together”. Christabel stated that one of the primary reasons that youths join the youth group is to find a sense of belonging. This especially applies to youths who might not feel this sense of belonging in their homes due to having a difficult family background. Youths who form part of the youth group tend to find a second family at IMPACT as they would be engaging with other youths their age and forming social connections leading to friendship. With regard to other members who may not be coming from a difficult family background, the youth group then serves as a sort of escape from the daily routine and presents youths with an opportunity to meet up with their friends once a week. Christabel went on to describe the role that the youth group plays in the lives of its members by stating that, “when they come to IMPACT, they feel that they found a family, someone who loves them, someone who listens to them, someone who will help them.”

In addition to this, Rita, from the ladies’ circle, described how during periods when it was not possible to hold their regular meetings and activities due to the health restrictions, group members would constantly ask when the meetings were going to resume. This indicates that the group plays a significant role in the lives of its members. This is especially so in the case of elderly women who live alone and thus rely more heavily on the group to get out of the house, socialise, and interact with other members of the community.

Rita explained how on special occasions, such as Women’s Day, Mother’s Day, and on members’ birthdays, they make it a point to give members a small present or a card, as a way of boosting their morale. It stated that “There were instances where elderly women said that not even their children had phoned to wish them a happy birthday”, thus making the fact that the ladies’ circle thought of them on their birthday even more important to them.

The strong sense of belonging among group members attending the ladies’ circle can also be observed from the ways in which group members care for each other and try to contact

and check up on people who miss a meeting. Similarly, Pawlu, from the confraternity group, stressed the importance of keeping in touch with group members, especially when they are absent from meetings, to make sure that they are well and to assure them that they are still welcome to attend the meetings.

The importance of community-based organisations in fostering a sense of belonging among their members was further amplified because of the pandemic. Shaun, from the pageant group, described how because of the pandemic, the degree to which certain members of the group rely on the pageant group to get out of the house and socialise with peers and fellow community members was made apparent. He stated how the pandemic brought him to the realisation that the scope of the pageant group goes beyond simply meeting up to organise and rehearse for the pageant. He remarked that as a group they are making an effort to create opportunities where the members can socialise and enjoy each other's company. When reflecting on the reasons which might explain why people participate by joining the pageant group, he stated that it might be "because there is a sense of family and they make new friends".

These sentiments were echoed by the representative from the festa decorations group. The participant stated that on Saturday mornings, group members would meet up, and apart from doing manual work, they would take it as an opportunity to spend some time together as friends. The participant also stressed the importance of maintaining contact with members of the group as well as cultivating a sense of respect among members. In addition to this, the representative from the decorations group stated that, "when you form part of a team, and you are working towards something, it gives you a great sense of satisfaction".

Justin, from the fireworks group stated that:

as members, it's not simply being interested in making fireworks, but you feel like you belong, you feel part of something. I think that people want to feel like they are part of something. And the fireworks group gives you that.

Considering this, it can also be stated that associating yourself with a particular group or organisation also contributes to your sense of identity.

Therefore, it may be said that due to the pandemic members from different community-based organisations were made to reflect on their participation within different groups forming part of the community. This included the ways in which their participation impacts their life on a personal level, as well as how their participation impacts life within the community surrounding the parish church of Saint Sebastian on a general level.

The parish priest spoke about the importance of maintaining a sense of openness within the church. He stated that:

this sense of openness makes the parish a caring family, an open family. Because when you become closed off, things start to rot. However, when you open up, and you are not scared when faced with certain challenges, it makes the parish stronger.

In addition to this 'openness', the parish priest also argued that parishioners feel a sense of belonging since the various community-based organisations act as a point of reference, thus instilling a sense of belonging among parishioners. Furthermore, he stated that parishioners feel safe within the parish.

In addition to the sense of belonging, members of community-based organisations described the ways in which volunteering in such organisations was personally rewarding as a sense of pride and satisfaction were primary reasons why volunteering was important to members. Furthermore, participants stated that knowing that the work they carry out

during the year is being admired or is making a difference in some way or another can be extremely rewarding.

During the interview which was carried out at the festa decorations store (il-maħžen), the representative from the decorations group explained that spending a whole year working on small components of a single project, to then see your work on display, adorning the streets during the week of the village feast, is extremely rewarding, and that there is a certain feel-good factor which is derived from that experience. The participant claimed that “you would be dedicating a lot of time throughout the year, which is then transformed into inexplicable moments of great satisfaction when you see your work being enjoyed”.

In addition to this, Christabel, representing the youth group, recounted how they feel emotional when they see that the work they have been doing, is making a difference in the lives of youths in the community. She referred to the example of young people who previously did not have any friends and used to spend most of their time inside, and now they not only attend the youth group, but through the youth group they found a group of friends with whom they meet up during the weekends, and not just during the youth group meetings.

Shaun from the pageant group stated that, in addition to personal satisfaction, in that he can see his ideas come to life, there is also satisfaction in seeing people from the younger generations getting involved in the group and contributing towards the community. Shaun also claimed that it is great to see people coming out of their shells and going on to tackle more demanding roles than the ones they would have been cast in during previous pageants.

Justin, from the fireworks group, stated that forming part of the fireworks group is a source of satisfaction, and this satisfaction motivates him to continue working and manufacturing fireworks. During the interview he claimed that,

In a normal feast, the greatest satisfaction I get is when the week of the festa is over, we meet on the stairs leading up to the church on Sunday night, we enter the church and the parish priest gives us the benediction with the blessed sacrament. For me the biggest satisfaction is the moment that we, the fireworks group, enter in front of Saint Sebastian and present flowers to him [...] We will all be in a single file, next to each other, and we get into the church to salute Saint Sebastian, and thank him, and I tell him “We’re all here, rallying behind you,” meaning that we’re all back safe and sound [...] you spend one whole year manufacturing fireworks. That week will be very demanding and very dangerous. The fact that we would have gone through that danger and no one got hurt [...] for that moment only I’ll go back to manufacturing fireworks for the following year.

A Community Celebration

Throughout the interviewing process, the village feast of Saint Sebastian was frequently referred to as a “community celebration”. Speaking of the feast as a communal celebration that is the result of the collective efforts of the same community, Karl, a member of the band club committee stated that:

At the end of the day, the village feast is a community celebration, meaning that the feast is organised for the community, since without the participation of community members there would be no use in organising the feast.

The same participant also stated that “it is the community itself which donates money and lends a helping hand in order to carry out certain things.” This is a testament to the notion of ‘togetherness’, and the existence of community ties which still seem to be rife among members of the community, despite the ever-increasing struggle of finding people who

are willing to volunteer their time in order to contribute to the organisation of community activities. The latter issue was one of the most prevalent struggles which was described by the majority of people interviewed. In relation to the village feast as a community celebration, the parish priest stated that “the feast, for instance, is a beautiful moment, it’s social, people enjoy themselves”.

With regard to the celebration of the feast during the pandemic, when not much could really be done, most interviewees stated that they were far more relaxed, and it was definitely less stressful. However, they seemed to agree that for those who are fond of the village feast this was not a pleasant experience, and that their hard work would be repaid with the satisfaction that the celebration of the feast would have gone well. The representant from the festa decorations group stated that:

In reality, two years [without the celebration of the feast] were enough because those who are used to working to be able to celebrate the feast, would be looking forward to sacrificing a bit so that the satisfaction at the end would be greater.

Conclusion

The research that I carried out indicated that members of various community-based organisations that are active in the parish of Saint Sebastian associate a sense of togetherness and belonging with the notion of community. Furthermore, notions of community among interviewees tended to be synonymous with strong social bonds with fellow members of the local community, who have come to be recognised as friends. Participants also stated that their respective community-based organisation had come to resemble a second family. In relation to notions of belonging, Block (2008, p. 3) states that:

Community offers the promise of belonging and calls for us to acknowledge our interdependence. To belong is to act as an investor, owner and creator of this place, to be welcomed even if we are strangers. As if we came to the right place and are affirmed for that choice.

This is also reflected in the parish priest’s statements regarding the importance of being open and welcoming as a parish. It was stated that this sense of openness strengthens the parish and fosters a sense of family among parish members.

Furthermore, the fluidity associated with the term ‘community’ can be observed in the ways in which the various community-based organisations found ways of adapting in order to remain relevant and maintain contact with their members within a social context which experienced drastic changes in the way people interact and relate to one another due to the newly enforced health restrictions.

In addition to this, the members of the community-based organisations that were interviewed seemed to have a positive outlook towards the term ‘community’. This relates to Williams’ (1985, p. 76) definition of community, in which he highlights that the term seems to have positive connotations. Furthermore, Etizioni’s (1993, p. 31) notion of community also seems to line up with the ideas of community put forward by the participants interviewed during this study. In his definition, Etizioni focuses on the concept of togetherness, which seems to be rife within the community surrounding the parish of Saint Sebastian in Ħal Qormi.

Putnam (2020 [2000]) questions whether or not online networks would ever be able to fully stand in for social networks which depend on face-to-face interaction. Putnam (2020 [2000], p. 416) states that:

the core component of social capital, as we use the term, is social networks; and the core insight of social capital theory is that social networks have value, both for people in the networks and for bystanders [...]. The Internet is certainly a network, so it is entirely natural to ask whether it could facilitate social capital.

In relation to this, my study suggests that virtual means of communication proved to be extremely useful during a time-when face-to-face meetings were restricted. By resorting to various means online communication methods, community-based organisations were able to keep in touch with their members during periods when the health restrictions did not allow group members to meet physically. Nevertheless, participants seemed to agree that depending solely on virtual means of communication was not a viable solution with regards to the operations of their respective organisation. For instance, despite the efforts of most of the organisations to transfer their meetings online, all organisations except one recorded a loss of participation from their members. Furthermore, participants also stated that the quality of the interaction which occurs virtually may be inferior to face to-face communication. It can be said that all the people who were interviewed expressed a wish to return to being able to operate 'normally', without the restrictions of preventive health measures.

Moreover, the notion of the village feast as a community celebration that acts as a kind of social glue that brings people together in a festive atmosphere seemed to be echoed throughout most of the interviews. Boissevain (1993 [1965], p. 158), who was writing about Malta in the 1960s, refers to the village feasts of the patron saint as a "manifestation of a desire to celebrate community", which is very much in line with the participants' account of the village feast. This is not to say that the village feasts have not changed or adapted throughout the years, however, the notion of community still seems to occupy an integral role in the celebration of the feast. The fact that the village feast could not be celebrated due to the pandemic was very significant for interviewees who take pride in putting in work throughout the year to prepare for the annual celebration. The Easter Sunday procession with the statue of the Risen Christ, with the participation of the band, the confraternities and the accompanying fireworks along the streets decorated by members of the Għaqda tal-Armar, on 17 April 2022, seemed to mark a kind of rebirth, a sort of coming out of social hibernation, a slow but steady re-evaluation of those social bonds that can be banked upon to stir the community into action.

In 2022, as we were emerging out of the pandemic, I had concluded that despite setbacks brought about by the pandemic, community-based organisations held so much meaning for their members that they had survived the pandemic, maybe not unscathed, but still determined to fulfil their vital function in the local community of the parish of Saint Sebastian. It can be said that, presently, in 2025, the community-based organisations which were included in this study are all still active within the community and more organisations have been established. The latest established organisation is a youth group for young adults. One reason for this can be the resilience, adaptability, and passion of volunteers whose dedication to their respective organisation seems to produce a place-based sense of belonging to the local community associated with the parish of Saint Sebastian. Therefore, the concern that children would not want to participate in community-based organisations due to the halt in activity which was brought about by the pandemic did not come to fruition. For instance, nominations for the executive committee of the band club in 2025 indicated that a healthy number of young people showed interest in forming part of the committee. In addition to this, community celebrations, the most notable of which being the celebration of the village feast, are still highly sought after by residents as well as people who identify as forming part of the local community.

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