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New horizons for a digitally-enabled engagement of the Maltese Diaspora

Introduction

In a fast-changing world, in which human relationships are being transformed by means of continuing advances in telecommunications, one of the key challenges and opportunities ahead for the Malta government-diaspora relations is to find ways of exploiting these technological advances for the benefit of all stakeholders.

In March 2014 the Prime Minister Dr Joseph Muscat launched *Digital Malta – the National Digital Strategy for 2014-2020*, a seven-year strategy that proposes a set of guiding principles and policy actions of how information and communications technology (ICT) can be used for socio-economic development. It sets out a path for the application of ICT to different sectors of the economy and society in order to ensure citizens and businesses benefit from it. The *Digital Malta* strategy is intended to create better employment opportunities, open up new markets for small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and encourage a more entrepreneurial and innovative mindset. Importantly, it is also intended to empower citizens, wherever they are and in whatever they are doing, whether at home, at the place of work or study, and while enjoying their leisure. The *Digital Malta* strategy also sets out ways how government can be closer to the citizen through the use of technology and deliver public services more efficiently¹.

¹ Government of Malta (2014) [Digital Malta - National Digital Strategy 2014 – 2020](#) (pp. 1–76), Parliamentary Secretariat for Competitiveness and Growth.

The purpose of this paper is to act as a conversation starter between government and the Maltese diaspora on the potential opportunities for Maltese communities abroad at a group and individual level to benefit from the *Digital Malta* strategy and, more importantly, on how the government-diaspora relations may be taken to an even higher level enabled by digital technology as envisaged in the *Digital Malta* strategy.

Participation in Malta's political, social, economic and cultural life

In November 2011 the *Council for Maltese Living Abroad Act* (Act XX of 2011) was unanimously passed in the Maltese parliament. The appointment of Council members was announced in July 2012 and the inaugural meeting of the Council took place in Malta in September 2012. This Act also introduced Section 20A into the Constitution of Malta under Chapter II – *Declaration of Principles*: "The State shall facilitate the participation of Maltese citizens who live abroad in the political, social, economic and cultural life of Malta."

As regards nature of the provisions of Chapter II, Section 21 states that while these principles are "not enforceable in any court", they "are nevertheless fundamental to the governance of the country and it shall be the aim of the State to apply these principles in making laws." It could, therefore, be validly argued that, if the principle contained in 20A is "fundamental to the governance of the country", not applying the principle in practice would be a sign of bad governance.

So what practical value does the declaration of the principle set out in Section 20A really contribute to the quality of the government-diaspora relations? There appears to be little doubt that, at least on paper, by introducing Section 20A the intent of the Maltese Parliament was to make a statement on the relevance to the good governance of the country that the State should do whatever it can to enable Maltese citizens living abroad to participate in Malta's *political, social, economic and cultural* life.

Inspired by the principle in Section 20A, the authors explore in this paper new horizons in the exploitation of information and communication technology to empower a digitally-enabled engagement of the Maltese diaspora and give the participation principle some practical meaning.

Developing a road map for effective diaspora engagement

The operation of the Council for Maltese Living Abroad (CMLA) since its establishment in July 2012 has highlighted an urgent need for the development of a roadmap that clearly articulates the strategy of the Government of Malta for sustaining and enhancing its engagement with the Maltese diaspora. This need was discussed at the CMLA meeting held in Malta last October. It was proposed that the government is to jointly develop with the CMLA a strategy to identify goals, map Maltese Diaspora geography and skills, create a relationship of trust between the Maltese Diaspora and the Government of Malta, as well as to mobilise the Maltese Diaspora to contribute to sustainable development.

In 2012 the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) published a [handbook](#) titled *Developing a Road Map for Engaging Diasporas in Development*. As pointed out in the handbook, "Diaspora engagement is a process that requires sustained attention across a broad front. It also requires a strategy."²

Malta was among a group of 62 national governments that had participated in a survey conducted between December 2010 and May 2011 among all states that participated in the Global Forum on Migration and Development.³ The survey results were a key input in producing the handbook and the many examples, insights, and conclusions found in it.

At the October 2014 meeting of the CMLA it was agreed that, as a first step, a joint study be carried out by academics from Malta and overseas with expertise in this subject matter to report and make recommendations to the Government and the CMLA on possible approaches to developing such a roadmap. The ideas explored in this paper are intended as input into such a study.

New horizons for digitally enabled engagement

In a globalised world that favours the cost advantages of economies of scale, micro states, such as Malta, can find themselves in great difficulty, if they are not inventive

² Op. cit. p.23.

³ International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), *Developing a Road Map for Engaging Diasporas in Development Handbook*, 2012, Acknowledgements on p.5.

and innovative in deriving sources of revenue from niche sectors. This can prove to be a gargantuan task for enterprises that cannot rely exclusively on the domestic market to make their business sustainable. In some sectors, such as, public transport, health, education, culture and the arts, this could even lead to market failure, consequently requiring state intervention. Such is the case of any product or service based on the Maltese language or culture. Examples are book (and now ebook) publishing, film making, creative arts, or even digital services, such as, mobile apps and educational games. Hence, if we perceive of such a market as having a population of 423,000, the perspective can improve substantially if the Maltese diaspora is taken into account. According to a survey recently conducted by Professor Maurice Cauchi,⁴ it is estimated that there are some 163,000 second and subsequent generation Maltese in Australia alone.

A similar argument can be made for the business and professional community. The Maltese diaspora is concentrated in four of the world's most advanced economies (Australia, Canada, the UK and the US), which are home to many successful Maltese professionals and entrepreneurs. Many examples of countries that benefit from the influence, expertise and entrepreneurial success that the members of diaspora can bring back to the home country are cited in the handbook referred to above. This could be extremely important for the business networks that could be established, and therefore support the internationalisation of Maltese-born globals and tech start-ups wishing to expand to North America or to the emergent markets of the Pacific rim.

In essence, the diaspora should be viewed as an extension of the local market for those products and services that have the Maltese language, culture and society as a focus, and an extension of the country's pool of skills, experience and expertise. Both extensions can be harnessed through the medium of digital technologies, effectively constituting a two-way street towards a new horizon of digitally enabled engagement of the Maltese Diaspora.

⁴ Cauchi, M.N. (2014) [*The Second Generation in Australia - A survey of Maltese-background persons*](#). Victoria, Australia: Maltese Community Council of Victoria, Inc.

Relevance of Digital Malta Strategy to Maltese living abroad

Among its 71 recommended actions, the Digital Malta Strategy includes a set of actions which, depending on the extent of implementation, could be of great relevance to this extended market. These include actions designed to empower the elderly through digital communications (action 3), developing online content and Maltese language tools (actions 10 and 11), transacting with government and accessing health records and notarial deeds (actions 26, 36 and 40 respectively), and the involvement of Maltese citizens abroad in decision-making through eDemocracy (action 33).

The implementation of these actions can be of great value if they are designed to take into account also the needs of the Maltese diaspora around the world. Currently, Maltese citizens abroad living at a great distance from the capital may be compelled to fly to the nearest consulate at great expense to renew their passport. In spite of the ubiquity of educational content on the web, Maltese language learning content, of great utility to second and third generation Maltese, is nowhere to be found: what better medium than the internet to bridge these gaps!

Due to their bond with the home country, successful diaspora investors and especially tech entrepreneurs are an attractive source of *angel investment*⁵ for Maltese start-ups (action 16) or new ventures targeting the European market (action 17). Likewise, these entrepreneurs may have a great role to play to help support, market and distribute software products produced by Maltese born globals (actions 20 and 22).

Upon closer scrutiny one finds that these actions would be the natural enabler of most of the Council's eleven functions identified in Act XX of 2011 combined with Section 20A of the Constitution, namely, that of *facilitating, strengthening and cultivating* the participation of Maltese citizens living abroad in the *political, social, economic and cultural* life of Malta.

The commoditisation of ICT in today's world has brought about a transformation in political, social, economic and cultural human interactions. In the context of a diaspora engagement that is digitally-enabled, the proposed vision would include the following:

⁵ 'Angel investors' are typically retired entrepreneurs or executives interested in mentoring another generation of entrepreneurs, making use of their experience and networks, and providing not just funds but also valuable management advice and important contacts. The term was first used in 1978 by Professor William Wetzel of the University of New Hampshire's Center for Venture Research.

- *On the political level*, Maltese citizens worldwide being able to vote electronically in elections for the EU and Maltese parliaments and to participate in policy making initiatives of the Maltese government that affect them;
- *On the social level*, Maltese citizens around the world being able to connect through ICTs, reducing psychic distance,⁶ facilitating business and giving the Maltese generally a much needed wider world view;
- *On the economic level*, harnessing the wider pool of talent, expertise and experience of diaspora members globally, enabling diaspora entrepreneurs to tap the European market via Malta; and
- *On the cultural level*, widening the market potential of what is essentially a majority language in Malta, but a minority language worldwide, thus providing a better opportunity to perpetuate Maltese culture among Maltese communities abroad.

Recommendations

As input to the joint study to be commissioned by the Malta government regarding options for the development of a road map for effective diaspora engagement agreed to at last October's CMLA meeting, the authors make the following recommendations:

1. The terms of reference for the joint study on the road map should specify that consideration be given to the concepts and ideas set out in the *Digital Malta – the National Digital Strategy for 2014-2020* and how they may be applied to Maltese diaspora engagement as key enablers of closer and effective political, social, economic and cultural ties with Malta.
2. The Malta government should consider entering into bilateral arrangements with other EU Member States, which have missions in cities and countries where Malta does not, with a view to sharing resources to capture and securely transmit to the relevant Maltese authorities digital data relating to applications and renewals of Maltese EU biometric passports. This would

⁶ The term 'psychic distance' refers to differences of a cultural, political, economic or linguistic nature between countries or societies that can sometimes constitute a psychological barrier when conducting business. The term was first used by Johanson J. & Wiedersheim-Paul F. (1975) and Johanson J. & Vahlne J-E. (1977).

obviate the need for Maltese citizens overseas to incur significant expense to travel long distances to the closest Maltese embassies and consulates. The same principle may be adopted for the issuance of electronic identity and therefore allow diaspora citizens to participate in public consultation on policy making and even e-voting.

3. The diaspora should be treated as an extended market when creating Maltese culture and language learning digital content. Mobile apps and social media, especially YouTube, should be the preferred channels to keep alive the emotional bond between the members of the diaspora communities and their mother country.

4. Student internships, industry-academia research collaborations and staff exchanges focusing on digital technologies that intersect with areas of specialisation identified in Malta's *National Research and Innovation (R&I) Strategy 2020* are of particular interest and should be promoted and encouraged, particularly where the host country possesses a cutting-edge: these areas include digital gaming, financial services, maritime services, aquaculture and health⁷. Synergies and competitive advantages of mutual benefit can be achieved in emerging and highly disruptive areas, such as, the exploitation of large and complex data sets (Big Data) and the Internet of Things.⁸

5. Through the involvement of the Maltese embassies and consulates, as well as Maltese community councils and organisations overseas, an inventory of diaspora skills, experience and expertise should be drawn up and made accessible to Malta's industry and business leaders through institutions, such as, the Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry, Malta Enterprise, Malta Information Technology Agency and others.

6. The role of embassies and consulates should be re-assessed to focus more on the creation of business networks and trust relationships of mutual value to entrepreneurs in Malta and in the countries that host Maltese communities.

⁷ MCST (2014) [National Research and Innovation Strategy](#) (pp. 1–28). Bighi, Malta: Malta Council for Science & Technology.

⁸ The *Internet of Things* (IoT) is a computing concept that describes a future where everyday physical objects will be connected to the Internet and be able to identify themselves to other devices.

Conclusion

The authors of this paper believe that a quantum leap in diaspora engagement can be achieved through the exploitation of digital technologies. However, fundamental to achieving such a quantum leap is the realisation that the relationship with the diaspora must be interpreted as a dynamic two-way street. Extending participation to the diaspora, and increased investments in business, cultural and social engagements are just one side of the equation. More sustainable models for the spread and perpetuation of Maltese art, language, culture and society overseas, coupled by a harnessing of talent and expertise through professional networks and business ventures are the other. Both can be enabled through the ubiquitous electronic medium of the internet and its many offshoot technologies.

As revealed in Prof. Cauchi's survey, the emotional bond with the home country becomes inevitably weaker from the first to later generations of the diaspora. Digital technologies provide a great opportunity for the Malta-born generation abroad to renew and revitalise this connexion, and for their overseas-born descendants to start appreciating their ethnic and cultural heritage, thus taking diaspora engagement to exciting new horizons.

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