

# **A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE VALLETTA 2018 CULTURAL PROGRAMME**

**Daniela Blagojevic Vella  
with Vikesh Godhwani**

# INTRODUCTION

This report starts with an introduction explaining the scope, methodology and the main findings and observations of the analysis over four years. It concludes with overall findings and recommendations.

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) Programme is a much-coveted title that brings with it high expectations for multiple objectives. It offers unique opportunities for cultural visibility, vibrancy and participation. This multi-faceted dimension of the ECoC has attracted a growing body of academic literature and commissioned reports on the subject. O'Callaghan (2012) reflects on the Programme's unrealistic expectations and deliverables that many cities do not achieve, resulting in alienation (p. 186). However, Garcia and Cox (2013) interpret this as an increase in the standard and ambition of the ECoC.

Valletta was selected as the ECoC on 12 October 2012. The Foundation, which spearheaded the application process, has been responsible for the organisation of the ECoC and the creation and implementation of the Cultural Programme. As has been identified in various ECoC evaluations (ECORYS 2012, 2013, 2014; Palmer/Rae 2014a, 2014b) the Cultural Programme is continuously in development and changes are frequent.

Valletta 2018 is no exception with changes happening within the Foundation and in the development of the programme. Changes in artistic direction and senior management posts throughout these five years were discussed widely and attracted significant media attention and debates within the artistic community.

The process of developing an ECoC Cultural Programme can be described in itself as a process of change. These changes and challenges grappled with by those on the ground make the research and evaluation of the Cultural Programme ever more pertinent. The Valletta 2018 ECoC offered a unique opportunity to design and conduct research in parallel with the development and delivery of the Cultural Programme.

This study was commissioned by the Foundation and focused on the creation, development and actualisation of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme and the individual projects included in this programme.

## **Scope of the study**

The study started in 2015 and was led by 3 main objectives, namely (i) to analyse how the Cultural Programme is developed, devised and implemented (ii) to explore the factors that influence the creation of the Cultural Programme projects; (iii) to track the long-term development of the programme in terms of the cultural offer, participation and European collaboration as experienced by the main contributors including the Foundation programming team and producers.

The study set out to investigate the following research questions:

- 1. How has the Cultural Programme been developed and devised?**
- 3. What are the range and diversity of the cultural offer and programming balance?**
- 4. What strategies are adopted by the organisers and creators to engage audiences?**
- 5. How do the projects/events reflect the European Dimension?**

In the first three years of observation, the study focused on the work in progress to establish the full range of projects and the programme's vision as articulated in the published material and as experienced by the

content programmers. In 2018, the study could then observe the programme as it was being delivered and the experience of the creators on completion of their project. Table 1 lists the main highlights across the years.

**Table 1:** Programme highlights 2015-2018

<b>ECoC Cultural Programme development 2015-2018</b>			
<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>
Focus on refining vision and objectives.	Consolidation of projects to be included in the 2018 programme with over 60 projects included.	Finalisation of projects to be included in the 2018 programme.	Opening ceremony held on 20 January.
Development and piloting of initial projects.	Greater emphasis on the international dimension.	Launch of Programme including around 140 projects and 400 events on 27 September.	ECoC year and delivery of Cultural Programme including 140 projects.
Work on recruiting programming team members and engaging strand coordinators.	Engagement of international adviser.	Change in Executive Director and Programming Coordinator.	Announcement that the Valletta Cultural Agency to be set up to carry forward EcoC work.
Initial contracts drawn up.	Launch of the Tal-Kultura Volunteering Scheme.	Inauguration of new offices in August.	Closing ceremony on 15 December.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative study adopted a mixed method approach to reflect the multi-dimensional dynamics of the programme and the developments unfolding over the years as shown in Table 2. The aim was to achieve reliability by triangulating the data collected from the institutional analysis, the semi-structured interviews, focus groups and online survey over the four years as follows:

- a.** An institutional level analysis: An overview of the Valletta 2018 objectives set the context of the broader institutional framework in which the programme was drawn up. In this first year of analysis, the focus was the collection of secondary data from Valletta 2018 documentation, European Commission selection panel reports and background literature, academic literature, Foundation website, programme schedules and other relevant material. This was done to refine further the criteria by which to assess the programme.
- b.** Interviews: Over 4 years, primary data information was gathered from around 40 key respondents through interviews, consultation meetings and focus groups. The interviews were held primarily with those responsible for programming and relevant stakeholders. The participants' knowledge and experiences were used to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject. The interviews and focus group included:
  - i.** Foundation Programming team members (in particular the two Programme Coordinators), regional coordinators and Artistic Director;
  - ii.** Strand coordinators and individual producers of projects in the Cultural Programme;
  - iii.** Independent artists and groups contributing to the programme.

- c. **Project Visits:** Project visits were conducted on a monthly basis. These on-site visits aimed to reach a sample of events and performances representing different categories, art forms and contributors to understand the range and content of diverse activities. For each visit, a data sheet (Annex) was inputted to a central system so that the information on each project visit was compiled. This could be compared and confirmed with the contributions received through the online questionnaire.
- d. **Online survey:** In 2017, it was decided to include an online survey for project leaders to ensure coverage of a wide range of projects happening in 2018 especially. This method was ideal in the case of contributors based abroad. In both 2017 and 2018, the response rate did not exceed 40%. Nonetheless, the outcomes from the online questionnaire give some interesting insights into the programme, which are included as an Annex to this report.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses in methodology**

Unlike most post-evaluation studies, the ongoing evaluation here implies that this research could directly observe the individual projects as they progressed. The variety of methods also ensured that the Cultural Programme was understood holistically and included perspectives of various stakeholders.

However, the variety of projects made it problematic to draw comparisons between the different events. Moreover, the development of the programme is a process of constant reworking and this included a change in the contributors and projects. While acknowledging that there are time and resource constraints, the research had to ensure that the data updates were frequent and that the methodology was flexible.

The methodology used was adequate to gain detailed and in-depth perspectives. However, in-depth interviews have their limitations mainly because of biases by both the interviewees and interviewers. As established in previous reports (Blagojevic, 2015), caution is needed to be aware of personal interpretations for granted what Tinic refers to as the "situatedness" (Caldwell, 2008, p.8). In interviews, it may sometimes be challenging to filter through the self-promotion. Caldwell (2008) invites production studies researchers to sift through the personal branding and industry parlance (p. 318).

Also, studies on events commissioned by event organisers also tend to focus on positive aspects and neglect other critical aspects or do not focus sufficiently on social impact (Richards, 2013). Previous ECoC studies have noted the limitation of conducting interviews after the ECoC event, as they were reliant on respondents' recollections and perceptions (ECORYS, 2014). This study had the advantage of analysing the programme while it was still in progress.

The online survey for project organisers and the project visits helped to gain more data complementary to that collected in interviews. The main difficulty was that of attracting a high response rate especially since the report had to be completed before the actual closing event.

This study is limited to the perspectives of people working on the programme and does not include the views of cultural operators whose projects were not included in ECoC.

**Table 2:** Methodology 2015-2018

Methodology	2015	2016	2017	2018
Institutional Analysis	•			•
Focus groups and in-depth interviews	•	•	•	•
Online questionnaire			•	•
Project visits		•	•	•

## MAIN FINDINGS (2015-2018)

### Cultural Offer and Programming Balance

In analysing the Cultural Programme offer, various elements and approaches were considered as identified in ECoC evaluation studies (Garcia and Cox, 2013; Palmer/Rae, 2014;). These include the chosen themes, seasonal programme, art forms, type of events and programming balance.

The first year of study findings immediately showed the complexity of developing an ECoC Cultural Programme and the practical, day-to-day challenges encountered by those developing the programme. The changes in artistic direction influenced the development of the Cultural Programme, which before 2013 included one artistic director to oversee the entire programme and six assistant directors. In 2015, the study established that the Executive team would manage the core programming while the Artistic Director Mario Azzopardi would oversee the high profile "special" events.

In 2015, the documentation analysis showed a reworking of the objectives from the first bid book's 8 objectives to the final bid book and later to the strategic plan published in 2013 (Table 3). There were clear connections between all objectives, but throughout the planning phase, these were further clarified and refined.

In 2016, the study observed progress in the consolidation of the Cultural Programme with over 60 projects across different disciplines included and confirmed for 2018. Nonetheless, changes were ongoing. Over four years, the projects were either developed further, altered or even abandoned. Contributors and creatives working on the programme also changed. The most impactful changes occurred at Foundation level with changes in the artistic direction in 2013, in top management in 2017 and programming team members throughout 2018, directly influencing programme content.

### Themes

In 2012, the Valletta 2018 bid-book presented four themes and orientations, namely "generations", "cities", "routes" and "islands". The themes were matched to four areas - education, skills, community and events.

At the development stage and later during the implementation phase, respondents from the foundation’s programming team observed that the themes were interpreted as flexible and the approach was not one of strict adherence to the original themes. In the words of the Cultural Programme Coordinator: “Rather than linking individual performances to a particular theme”, the themes were used as a narrative across the full programme with some of the projects having a more obvious link to the themes than others did. Nonetheless, the themes were also mentioned in the external communication of programmes as part of the Foundation’s aspirational vision.

In 2018, the Capital of Culture Programme was described as a celebration of “an island-wide festa”, and the programme themes were identified as “island stories”, “future baroque” and “voyages”. The overall “island” theme featured prominently with no less than 80 mentions in the official programme and a common theme running across project descriptions.

**Table 3:** Reworking of objectives Valletta 2011-2013

<b>Bid Book 17 October 2011</b>	<b>Bid Book September 2012</b>	<b>Strategic Plan March 2013</b>
Supporting a European Vision for Democracy and Culture	Establishing Valletta as a creative city	Transforming Valletta into a creative city
Ensuring Cultural Sustainability through the Reinvention of Cultural Education	Making careers of culture	Stimulating awareness of Malta’s diverse cultural identities
Encouraging the Dynamic Flourishing of Diversity	Growing internationally from the world within us	Driving collaboration and excellence in culture and the arts in Malta
Interpreting and Developing Multifaceted Cultural Identities	Nurturing sustainable relationships with our environment	Improving the quality of life in Valletta through culture
Incentivising and Sustaining the Economy of Culture		
Benefitting European Cooperation by Promoting International Networking		
Contributing to the ECoC Legacy by Supporting Monitoring and Research		
Nurturing a Sustainable Relationship to Our Environment		

**Source:** Valletta 2018 Foundation Bid Book 2011, Bid Book 2012, Strategic Plan 2013

### **Mass events and small projects**

From the early stages to delivery, the Foundation made a clear distinction between large events led by the Artistic Director and the rest of the programme managed by the programming team. These big events were mainly the opening ceremony *Erba’ Pjajez*, *the Pageant of the Seas* and the opera *Aħna Refuġjati* all targeting mass audiences.

The Cultural Programme also included 15 festivals, both public and private, including the Malta International Arts Festival, ŻiguŻajg Children's festival, the Jazz festival and Earth Garden as part of its offer. These already existing festivals either widened their offer or included special events in 2018.

Apart from the popular large-scale events and festivals, the programme was characterised by a significant number of small, grassroots projects and initiatives happening throughout the year and across different locations. These smaller projects were not meant to attract thousands and can be considered more niche, under the radar projects. Projects like *Darba Waħda*, *Naq̄sma il-Muża* and *Fragmenta* are the result of a process-led approach and had been piloted in the previous years. These projects mostly led by Maltese or Malta-based creatives stood the test of time and made it to the ECoC final programme. Similarly, projects like *Oħloq Kultura*, *KantaKantun*, *the Box* and *Sounds Out Loud* had started their collaboration in schools beforehand.

Some initiatives like *Il-Festa l-Kbira* and *Ħabbilni ħa Nirbaħ* were not listed on the official programme but were then inserted as part of the programming later in the year. On the other hand, some projects like *Story Works*, *Qatt ma' Ninsa*, *Windrose Project* and *Pjazza fi Pjazza* were abandoned and came to a close before the capital of culture year.

### **Art Forms and Seasonal Programming**

Throughout the years, the Foundation managed its programme by grouping the projects according to genre or type with a coordinator responsible for each strand. The categorisation was made either by the type of artistic discipline or by the theme or by the kind of target group and interaction with the audience. The strands were useful to help in the internal management of the programme and to ensure a balanced offer. In its internal documents and website, the Foundation uses multiple tags to categorise individual projects as follows: community, visual arts, design, children and young people, performance, opera, music and film. These categories were also used in external communication with the Cultural Programme publication and website, clearing making references to these categories.

In 2018, the Cultural Programme included activities across main art forms with music (31%) and visual arts (28%) being the most represented genres. The music strand included 7 Foundation events and 17 Open Call events. Theatre, dance and literature were less prominent. However, a substantial number of projects adopted an interdisciplinary approach (21%) with different art forms included, suggesting broader definitions and approaches.

Throughout the planning phase, the team considered the timing of other long-standing activities such as the Malta International Arts Festival, the Baroque Festival, the St Paul's Feast and local council festivals. The equal distribution of projects across different months and seasons and other practical issues for outdoor events was another concern in devising the project timing.

In practice, during the delivery stage, the distribution of projects was not ideal. Following the opening event in Valletta, the first quarter of the year included a focus on musical events showcasing work by international groups and artists. The second and third quarter saw an increase in the number and frequency of performances as well as outdoor events as is expected since this timing also coincides with arts festivals like Ghana Fest, Valletta Film Festival, the Malta International Jazz festival and the Malta International Arts Festival. The September and October months can be said to have been the opera season with *Aħna Refuġjati*, *Aida*, *Corto Maltese* and *Tosca* all happening within the span of a few weeks.

As observed in the 2018 report, the concentration of big events during one season, as in the case of opera, created difficulties and pressure for the organisers. In the words of the Programme Coordinator:

"This meant that performances were competing for the same venues, talent, technical resources and audiences. The number of events happening in the last quarter created a strain on the limited resources available". Various respondents working on the programme emphasised that the unprecedented increase in the culture offer created pressure on resources and coordination of activities.

### **Space and Location**

From the outset, the Foundation announced that Valletta 2018 projects and events would be performed across various localities and not only in Valletta. The Valletta title is described as "an award shared among all localities on our Islands" (Cultural Programme 2018, p.3). The five Regional Coordinators worked with the programming team to broker the Cultural Programme in Valletta, Gozo, the North, Centre, South and South East regions and to engage residents across different localities. In 2016, the study observed that the Regional Coordinators also stepped up their role and helped the Foundation to understand the needs of different locations to address gaps in the programme and to identify the different target groups across the five regions. The role of the regional coordinators was a new initiative within the Maltese cultural sector, and as expressed by the programming team their role is still to be fully exploited.

Both public and private spaces were used to host various events, but respondents commented that private venues were found to have fewer facilities and equipment. Use of public space also presented some challenges. Outdoor events required substantial work on logistics and lengthy processes to acquire permits from various entities.

### **Traditional and Contemporary**

The focus on contemporary art and bringing "contemporary culture to our capital city" (Cultural Programme p.15) was a priority articulated by interviewees responsible for programming. In 2016, the Executive Director observed that Valletta 2018 could not just be a reflection of the past, but it is crucial to challenge ideas of what it means to be Maltese, Mediterranean and European in contemporary society.

The programme, however, also describes a suspension between traditional and contemporary. Similarly, 57% of the project leads responding to the 2018 online survey described their project as contemporary while 43% described their activities as including elements of both traditional and contemporary.

Overall, the Cultural Programme included a varied cultural offer and a mixture of projects ranging from the much-publicised mass events to community-focused niche projects. Such variety necessitated diverse forms of engagement with audiences varying from mere attendance to co-creation and active collaboration.

### **Audience participation**

#### **Strategies and challenges**

The ECoC discourse was strongly characterised by participation, community outreach and public engagement. The study needed to acknowledge that participation is a wide-ranging term to define. Increasingly, the emphasis on participatory culture is to involve citizens not only as spectators but also as creators or co-creators (Jenkins, 2016).

The Cultural Programme preview published in 2017, announced: "Inclusivity, accessibility and participation are at the core of our Cultural Programme. All our community and participation-focused events are an open invitation to a celebration that begins in the symbolic heart of our programme (...)" (p.15).



The interviews before the ECoC year, particularly those with the Foundation's programming officers showed awareness on the "quality participation as opposed to numbers" (Focus Groups, 2017) and ambition towards active and meaningful participation. In the words of one of the respondents: "I hope people are transformed from a state of passivity to a state of being active. As someone active, you believe in the power to change things. Ultimately, from an ethical or moral perspective, you are spending public money to make people active citizens."

The study set out to identify how creators of the programme set out to involve citizens. In 2015 and 2016, programmers, project leaders and artists shared a common concern that reaching out to audiences is not without difficulty and that increasing audience participation requires a significant cultural change. The programming team members spoke about moulding the marketing strategies or engagement techniques according to the specific projects and target groups, always being sensitive to their particular needs.

There was also an awareness of the balance needed between promoting the programme as a whole and disseminating information about individual activities. This difficulty was experienced throughout the delivery.

As identified through the 2017 and 2018 online questionnaire, the Foundation and project leaders used mixed methods to reach out to audiences. This was also emphasised in the qualitative analysis with the project leaders as they agreed that marketing needed to vary according to the particular needs of individual projects and reflect the eclectic nature of the programme. The various methods used include social media, traditional marketing and communication, information session and use of regional coordinators and volunteers.

In 2018, generally, the programming team observed unpredictable trends in participation. Some events were initially thought of as hard to sell and were eventually sold out. Other performances registered lower attendance than expected. Respondents also commented on influencing factors like location, weather and the world-cup football games. Other producers commented on the positive trends in participation which were "bigger and better than expected". The 2018 online survey confirms this as respondents showed levels of satisfaction in the numbers reached.

Moreover, it proved easier to get the general public to initiatives that were familiar such as the very traditional *il-Festa l-Kbira* rather than to the more contemporary innovative work. For *il-Festa Kbira*, a large number of local councils even arranged free transport for people to attend due to demand. In some cases, like with *Orpheo*, workshops and community involvement was successful while in other cases like in *Każin Barokk*, getting local communities to engage proved harder due to the last minute decisionmaking nature of devised performances.

The Foundation's programming and communications teams needed to work continuously at awareness raising level and repeated efforts were needed to engage different groups of citizens. As observed by the Programming Coordinator, for some events and workshops, the Foundation issued calls several times in an attempt to encourage more take-up.

Other trends were observed by the programming team such as the difficulty in attracting participation by creative professionals to commit to a week-long workshop led by top artists. On the other hand, short, one-off workshops targeting younger audiences were more popular. The commitment by creatives or the lack thereof was a common concern of programmers observed across the four years.

The significant amount of events and the limited size of audiences was mentioned by respondents as an ongoing challenge. In the words of one of the strand coordinators: "The reason we did not reach the

desired audience numbers in all of the foundation events is that there were perhaps too many events on the go, often clashing, which automatically results in a dilution of potential attendees". Similar concerns on the programme activities competing for the same audiences were expressed by another project coordinator. Specifically, it was noted that:

*The project was very successful in terms of satisfaction of artists, participants and audience members. The only hiccup that we had was that another last-minute event was planned on the same day as the concert, which severely hampered audience numbers.*

Commenting on the Foundation's efforts to attract audiences, 61% of the project leads responding to the 2018 questionnaire said that enough was done while 39% were not satisfied, more specifically one respondent commented that there was no marketing strategy for the individual project and others commented on stretched resources. An international contributor commented that audience engagement strategies were done by the Foundation but they were not aware of what methods were used.

### Specific Target Groups

At the development stage but even more so in the 2018 analysis, the specific target groups of individual projects could be observed. Table 4 illustrates some examples of targeting specific groups either as co-creators or as audiences. Some projects also consisted of different initiatives targeting multiple groups.

**Table 4:** Information on specific target audiences as gathered from project visits and online questionnaire

Specific Group Targeted	Examples of Cultural Programme projects/events
Migrants	<i>Rima, Utopian Nights, Exiled Homes</i>
Maltese Diaspora	<i>Latitude 36, Sempre Viva</i>
Valletta Residents	<i>Ġewwa Barra, Valletta Forum, Valletta Design Cluster - Design4Dcity</i>
Children and Youth	<i>Kanta Kantun, Años Luz and Hush. Programmes, Gaħan18, Ohloq Kultura, The Box and Taf x'Naf, The Strange Travels of Señor Tonet, Mewġa Mużika, Code Red, Solar Cinema, Rulina, Subjective Maps, Playspace, Poetry Potato Bags</i>
Disabled	<i>Sounds out Loud, InVisible, Tactile</i>
Hospital patients	<i>Deep Shelter, Dance4All</i>
Amateur Musicians	<i>Mewġa Mużika</i>
Older Adults (and children)	<i>Darba Waħda, 1001 Dreams</i>
Local Councils and residents in particular localities across Malta and Gozo	<i>Magna Żmien (Birgu, Mellieħa, Siġġiewi and Victoria (Gozo); Subjective Maps (Victoria and Birżebbuġa, Qawra); Solar Cinema (various); Altofest (Rabat, Manikata, Qormi, Hamrun, Santa Venera, Żejtun, Cospicua, Vittoriosa, Gżira and Sliema); Bodies in Urban Spaces (Mellieħa); Naqşam il-MUŻA (Birżebbuġa, Marsa, Kalkara and Gżira)</i>

The Foundation categorised over 15 projects as 'Community Projects'. These included process-led projects like *Subjective Maps*, *Altofest*, *Rulina*, *Latitude 36*, *Exiled Homes*, *Ġewwa Barra*, *Rima*, *Shake It*, *Darba Waħda* and *Magna Żmien*. The emphasis of this kind of programming was not on the quantity of the persons participating but on the quality and type of engagement.

Projects like *Ġewwa Barra* and *Altofest* were designed to include active participation and co-creation from early stages where creatives worked directly with residents over a longer period. In these activities, the approach was to engage groups like the Valletta residents in the creation process. The use of space for such projects is also part of the participatory element and in *Altofest* residents hosted events inside their private homes and community spaces. Valletta 2018 offered a unique opportunity to develop these long-term projects which would probably not have been developed and sustained were it not for the ECoC and its focus on community.

Other projects like *Cabinets of the Future* worked with experts and citizens through communal workshops. It created opportunities for participants to share aspirations and concerns that explore visions of the local future. Similarly, the initiative *Utopian Nights* encouraged the public to engage on societal issues. While larger events focus on mass audiences, such projects strategically focused on working or appealing to niche groups. 54% of survey respondents said that they targeted specific groups.

Migrant groups and the Maltese diaspora were the specific target group of projects like *Exiled Homes*, *Rima*, *Utopian Nights* and *Latitude 36*. Producers of *Exiled Homes* described the openness of the Filipino community to work collaboratively and enthusiastically.

Children and youth were another target, and over 11 projects were designed to target younger audiences like the performances *Años Luz* and *Hush*. Programmes like *Sounds Out Loud*, *Gahan18*, *Ohloq Kultura*, *The Box* and *Taf x'Naf* were delivered within school settings and created opportunities for children to co-create and explore different art forms.

Vulnerable groups were another target group identified by programmers. Young people with different abilities and their carers worked on the *Sounds Out Loud* project. The visual arts exhibition *Tactile* targeted the visually impaired community. The group Opening Doors participated in the programme and worked with persons with different intellectual abilities as well as volunteers, artists and other practitioners. The group's performance (*In Visibility*) is one of the final events of the 2018 Programme.

The Foundation also set out to facilitate the participation of vulnerable or hard to reach groups by working with active ageing centres, schools and hospitals. Another strategy was to provide specialised transport to those communities that required it such as mental health patients at Mount Carmel Hospital who visited the *Orfeo Majnun Parade* and the Toi Toi performance *Down Memory Lane*.

Performances like *Kazin Barokk* and *Kantina* also engaged audiences in a more active manner by making them part of the performance; in *Kantina* audiences were invited to have a meal during the performance while in *Kazin Barokk*, audience members were encouraged to play a game to immerse them in the world of gambling.

The Volunteering scheme was launched in 2016 and was observed as being a common element for public engagement adopted by previous ECoCs (Garcia, 2013). This strategy was also used by the Foundation to encourage active citizenship through the *Tal-Kultura Volunteer Scheme* done in collaboration with the organisation SOS Malta. The aim was that of fostering a sense of active citizenship through the volunteering

experience. The take-up for this scheme by non-Maltese residents was significant. However, their role in engaging audiences was mostly limited to offering assistance to usher guests and distribute materials during events.

### **European Dimension**

In November 2012, the selection panel observed that the Valletta 2018 bid needed improvement in highlighting the European dimension of the programme and that this should not be solely interpreted as a showcasing of Malta to Europe but rather raising awareness on Europe with Maltese citizens (Final Selection Report Valletta, 11 November 2012). The monitoring report (September 2015) recommends that the European dimension should be further emphasised.

In line with ECoC objectives, the European dimension in the form of transnational collaboration and cultural diversity is a priority in the design of Cultural Programmes. The island theme and Malta's geographical position was interpreted as an opportunity to create meaningful links between Europe and Africa.

Beyond the rhetoric of external communication that stresses the importance of making connections beyond island-life, it is essential to understand how creators set out to collaborate with European artists in practice.

A significant shift was observed in 2016 preparations showing a more outward-looking approach and emphasis on the international dimension. The appointment of Airan Berg as International Artistic Advisor contributed to this development and increased the focus on establishing international links. An International Officer was also engaged early in 2016 to assist the programming team in this area. The programming team deliberately sought to explore European connections and the new programme content attests to this. The Programming Coordinator and other members of the team travelled to various festivals and more links were created through these visits.

The vast majority (92%) of respondents responsible for individual projects viewed their work as relevant to European audiences while 69% believed their project could be exported in the future. Throughout the entire programme, the European and/or international dimension was present either through the themes tackled or through the participation of international artists and communities. The migration strand, in particular, focused on creating connections, representing minorities and working on the themes of departure, exile and stories of minority groups. The programming team also commented that foreign artists associated Malta with migration and this seemed to be the most common thematic interest for international collaborators.

The Meeting Points strand and the artist residencies also had the objective of improving international networking with a focus on the Euro-Mediterranean region. Artists from different countries including Jordan and Australia were hosted and encouraged to share their work through these residency initiatives.

The exchange with the EU-Japan Fest Committee also allowed for international exchanges. The *Valletta Design Cluster*, the *Tactile* exhibition and *Modern Music* days all benefitted from this collaboration. The island theme also made this collaboration further relevant as shown in the project *Island Lights* highlighting aspects within both Maltese and Japanese cultural experiences as islands.

The collaboration was also ongoing with the twin European of Capital Culture Leeuwarden-Fryslan. This included higher education student mobility programmes for MCAST and Friesland College students. The projects *Poetry in Potato Bags*, *Taf X'Naf*, *Subterranean Matter*, *Kirana*, *Ohloq Kultura* and *Aida* also established direct links with the Dutch counterparts. Links with Austria were created through the Artistic adviser Airan Berg.

Beyond the diversity, exchange and Maltese culture export benefits, the programmers also reflected on the challenges in establishing meaningful international collaboration. The Programming Coordinator described the showcasing of international acts in Malta as being relatively straightforward to manage when compared to devised and collaborative work with foreign artists.

Collaboration on original and commissioned work proved to be more difficult in practice. As expressed by the programming coordinator, “the focus of some of the international artists was about bringing their art here and less so about collaborating with local artists”. In the case of the performance *Każin Barokk*, the original idea was that of collaborating with local artists, but throughout the selection process, very few Maltese performers were included. In other auditions and calls for participation in internationally-led workshops, attracting the participation of Maltese creatives also proved to be challenging. In some cases, it was problematic to bring Maltese creatives on board to work on international projects that required a long-term commitment. Although good collaborations were created, the programmers commented that there was still some fear and hesitation from local artists in making use of the international opportunities provided to them by Valletta 2018, particularly by the less established artists.

### **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

In the first years of study, respondents highlighted difficulties related to finding the right professionals to work on projects and to strengthen human resources to ensure the successful delivery of the programme. The commitment of professionals over a number of years proved to be an ongoing struggle.

The lack of experience by cultural players in Malta to produce projects at this scale was an equally mentioned barrier. Respondents, both Foundation representatives and artists, highlighted the need for capacity building, development of knowledge, competencies and skills. These challenges reflect changes in the Maltese arts sector but were particularly pronounced as the ECoC approached. The need for greater professionalism in the culture industry became more apparent. As articulated in several interviews, many view the ECoC process as one that should lead to a change in mindsets and improved quality standards in the arts.

Another challenge voiced throughout was the lack of effective strategies to attract and engage audiences. Contributors needed to understand the overall objectives of the Cultural Programme and to share best practices on reaching and engaging audiences. Early on, interviewees spoke of the need for a forum to debate and strategise around the issues faced by cultural players. There was a need for contributors to understand the over-arching Valletta 2018 vision and how the work of individual artists or groups contributed to these broader objectives. Project leads reiterated the need for more communication with the Foundation.

Beyond the actual development of the programme, the focus groups generated debates on the challenges faced by independent artists in Malta. The concerns included the lack of resources and access to public institutions. The artists interviewed also saw a potential for the Foundation to facilitate relationships with both cultural stakeholders and audiences.

The contractual agreements drawn up by the Foundation, the rigid public procurement procedures and “bureaucratic processes” were also described by programmers and producers as a major challenge hindering relations with artists. In some cases, collaborators found it difficult to understand why lengthy administrative measures were being adopted at the detriment of artistic quality and requirements.

Respondents' concerns on lack of resources and flexibility show that the implementation of the programme needs to be seen in the broader context, such as the need for improvement of organisational strength in the Maltese creative sector and the need for overall capacity building at both public institution and cultural operator level.

The experience gained by the programming team and producers throughout these years should be used to improve future cultural aspirations and programming in Malta beyond 2018 in the next phase of legacy development. Most respondents spoke of their ambition of carrying projects forward in years to come or to showcase work abroad.

## CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

This study looked at the development and delivery of the ECoC. The focus was the creator's experience on the ground and the strategies used to offer varied projects, engage the public particularly in community-based projects and create European and international links.

The cultural offer was varied in range offering opportunities to different groups across many localities in Malta and Gozo. The programme was balanced in relation to the involvement of both Maltese and international artists. Most producers saw their projects as relevant to the broader international audience, and the vast majority also saw the potential for their project to travel and be developed further in years to come. Valletta 2018 gave opportunities to creatives and audiences alike to experience projects that may have otherwise not been created.

Concerning the restraints of this study, because this analysis has been undertaken just before the end of the ECoC, the overall reflection by programmers and producers may not yet be fully apparent and articulated. It is recommended that future studies in 2019 focus on gathering responses from the main programme contributors a few months after the programme has ended to allow for detachment and hindsight reflection on the effectiveness of the Cultural Programme.

This report focuses on the perspectives of those directly involved in programme delivery and does not include perspectives of cultural players who distanced themselves from the programme or did not participate. Further studies should also explore the attitudes of local creative practitioners and operators who may have been alienated by ECoC. Moreover, studies on governance and how political changes affect the development and delivery of the Cultural Programme are also relevant to understand large-scale national initiatives and how they can be more efficient and effective.