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Covid Arts – The Impact of the Pandemic on Artists: Case Study in Malta

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As Covid-19 impacts mount, Bauman's notion of liquidity has become ever more fitting to describe the cultural, economic, and social uncertainties experienced on a global scale in the current times [1]. The liquefaction is not only in the rapidity and mutability of a virus, but also in the uncertainty of the duration on the pandemic. Consequently, there are substantial shifts and disruptions in the everyday life of individuals, principally as employees attempt to shift their work practices online. For others who cannot do this shift, they are shouldering financial burdens through loss of income. Artists are one social group of workers who often engage in non-standard employment terms, including working to the demands of the market and economic conditions.

Perhaps most jarring of all is that the pandemic continues to underpin the notion of inequalities in the right for a living wage amongst workers, especially for those with insecure income such as artists. Here we explore briefly some of the implications of the pandemic on artists' livelihoods in Malta, a small island state (122 square miles, with a population of around half a million).

The first case of the Covid-19 virus in Malta was reported on 7th March 2020. Up until mid-August, there were over a thousand confirmed cases, with nine mortalities. The public health authorities are seeking to extend as much as possible the duration of the pandemic, to slow the spread so that the peak is lower and the Maltese health services would be better able to cope.

Numerous artists shared their concerns on social media in early March 2020 on how the current uncertainties are impacting upon their work and incomes. Such concerns were the impetus for us to conduct an online survey between the 14th and 21st March 2020. While a full ethnographic study would have given more sociological insights into the shared concerns of artists and would have obtained an in-depth understanding of their current life situation, this research method was not possible for a number of reasons.

First, the issue of time constraint. We needed to obtain real-time access to instantaneous data during these fast-changing times. Second, the state's restrictions, including limitations on physical contact, prohibited a face-to-face study. In the absence of sector-led associations, participants were chosen through an opt-in survey shared on social media platforms popular amongst artists in Malta. The survey received 346 responses, of which 167 respondents earn income exclusively from the arts, and 138 partially earn income from the arts.

This survey provided a guiding frame for recommendations which were publicized in the media and discussed with public agencies, including Malta's economic development agency. Subsequently this led to the implementation of the 'Covid Wage Supplement' - an emergency support fund to assist artists to stay afloat and help the culture sector to withstand the crisis. Participants voiced their perceptions on various issues related to the effects of the pandemic on their livelihood and income. Here we summarise some of the results obtained from the survey.

The majority of participants (52.8%) indicated that the cultural activities providing them with a source of income were cancelled. In effect, public artistic events, such as performances, exhibitions and concerts, are the main source of lost income. The majority of participants (67.2%) indicated that they had already suffered financial losses, while 25.9% say it is too early to calculate these losses. A total of 32.5% of respondents' stated that most of their income for this period has been or will be lost, and 28.2% claim that all their income for this period has been or will be lost.

Impact on cultural events: Postponed, changed, cancelled, or shifted online

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During the pandemic, shifting to a work-from-home mode by using various virtual meetings platforms, was not always a solution within the cultural and creative sector. Artists maintained that they could shift online events related to arts education (43.5%), yet it was not possible for private events (4.3%) such as gigs online (Figure 1). Rehearsals, work-in-progress, and creative research register the highest percentage for activities that have changed. Respondents claimed that more than half of the activities providing them with a source of income were cancelled. A number of events (38%) were postponed, and other events were changed (3.9%).

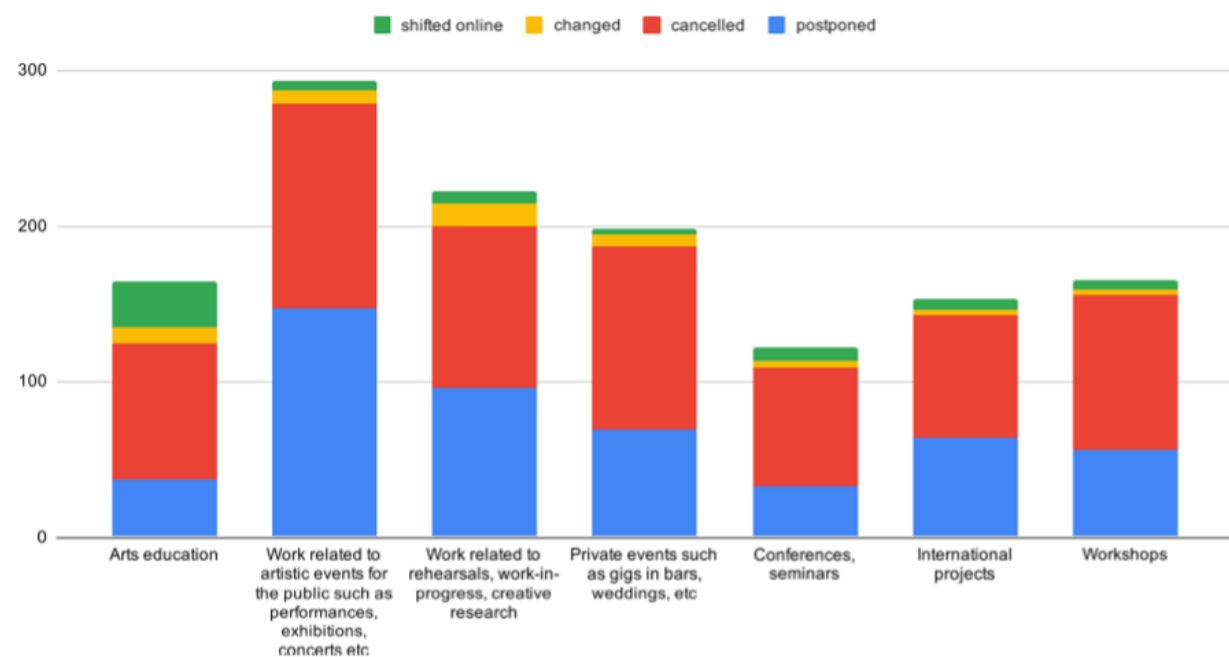


Figure 1: Activities providing a source of income and impact

During the months of lockdown, I'm not generating money, even though I might continue with preparations. Also, if a current project/s is/are postponed to e.g. October, this means that in October I cannot accept new work. So I'm losing more money.

Anecdote by an artist participating in the survey

Consequently, artists suffered substantial financial losses. When asked about the amount of money lost, 18.4% of respondents claimed losses of more than €1000, whereas 17% claim between €500 and €1000 (Figure 2). For those respondents who claimed an income exclusively from the arts, their registered losses were higher compared to those claiming partial income. Asked to forecast weekly financial losses should the current scenario be extended further, both categories of respondents claim mostly between €250 and €500 per week, followed by the €100 and €250 category for those earning an income exclusively from the arts. Such a situation is likely to exacerbate the situation in the months ahead due to postponement of projects.

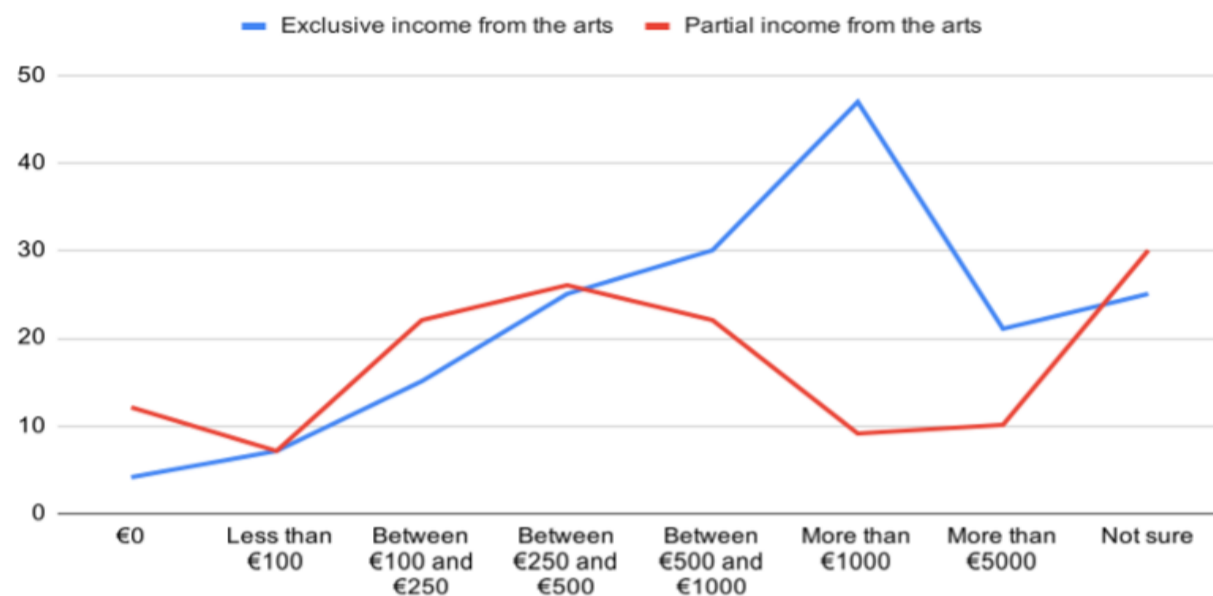


Figure 2: Financial loss experienced by artists

A high percentage of 41% of participants claimed that their family is dependent on their income from the arts. Thus, such financial losses, especially when working on short-term contracts with no advance payment, reflect the non-standard employment practices archetypal in precarious work conditions. Respondents earning an income exclusively from the arts indicated that dependency on their income on family, other artists, contractors, and employees is higher than those earning part of their income from the arts.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the survey, we propose a few immediate responses required to safeguard the wellbeing of artists during unprecedented times. First, there is an increasing need to mobilise, with immediate effect, an emergency fund for artists, prioritising those earning an income exclusively from the arts, and to consider universal basic income as a funding model. In the longer term, this calls for public policy measures to address a few of the constraints of artists

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related to funding and receiving payments. These include measures to secure contracts to guarantee equitable payments and protect the rights of artists. Public funding commitments, be they commissions or grants, should emphasize further the importance of appropriate remuneration for artists and their right to enjoy a living income from the artistic work they generate. Continuous advocacy within the private sector is also needed to ensure that the business community understands and values the contribution artists can make to the development of their enterprises.

Second, it is recommended that public and private institutions receiving services from artists need to fast-track any pending payments to provide immediate liquidity. Moreover, any commissioning of new work has to provide advances to pay for research and development which may be designed at home.

Third, we suggest that artists are to be represented adequately by unions or lobby groups and/or sector-led associations. The lack of collective sector-led voice of artists through unions and associations has been a major barrier for the creative sector in recent years. Such industry-led organisations in Malta are required to further open up discussions on a national level.

Covid Wage Supplement: Governmental Measures in Malta

Following consultation with various sectors of workers who had their operations temporarily suspended, the 'Covid Wage Supplement' was introduced. This measure, managed by Malta Enterprise, Malta's economic development agency, provides a basic wage covering full-time employees and self-employed, including creative practitioners (Malta Enterprise, 2020 [2]). The 'Covid Wage Supplement' scheme in Malta identified two lists of employees or self-employed/freelancers, classified by NACE codes (the Statistical Classification of Economic Activities in the European Community). Full-time employees or self-employed/freelance are entitled to a monthly supplement of €800. Part-time employees within these sectors are entitled to a monthly supplement of €500. Furthermore, Malta's creative sector is adopting its own measures to adapt to the situation. Public cultural organisations were directed by the Arts Council to support the sector by easing up on financial obligations and providing more flexibility in terms of logistics [3].

Concluding remarks

Going against neoliberal trends, safety-net measures of wage supplements in various European countries are targeted at protecting citizens at risk of experiencing the hard-hitting effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. In parallel to other countries, with the introduction of wage subsidies to employers from all sectors whose business suffered financial losses, Malta also implemented a similar scheme. Recent discussions about having self-employed and freelance artists included in the wage supplement scheme is a step forward towards having creative practitioners fairly represented amongst other self-employed workers. Yet we argue for further discussions with artists to design policies tailor-made to guarantee an equitable income. Such policies are a prerequisite to support artists, especially during times like these, when their livelihood is at stake.

References

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