

COMMUNITY BASED SERVICES

WHAT IS THEIR VALUE?

The first Maltese community based service in Cospicua was one of the first services provided by Aġenzija Appoġġ in 1994. The Community Development Unit, as it was referred to then, had two functions – to work on community development and to provide social work in the community. Although the objectives of the service were clear, there was no previous experience to guide the workers. Yet, as the workers mapped out the first steps of community service in Malta, the result of their efforts were evident. They demonstrated that solutions to many of the problems that a community faces lie within the community itself. They started a process of awareness and interest of the residents in their own environment – both social as well as physical - and the belief that something can be done by the residents themselves.

A community: a group of people living in the same geographical area. However, it can also be a group of people sharing the same interest, faith, race or ethnicity, even if they don't live in the same geographical area. Therefore, when one speaks of a community, the main focus is the particular community, with its own characteristics, needs and resources.

Community development: a process, usually carried out by an external agent, whereby residents are supported and provided with skills they need to effect change in their own communities.

Case Study 1:

An Appoġġ Community worker got together a group of residents in a housing estate in Cospicua who were asked what they thought were problems that they, as residents, were facing. The housing estate where they lived surrounded a “garden”, which was the common area. It was often vandalised and used as a dumping ground for many, even frequented by drug users and syringes were regularly found. The residents complained because no one felt safe. The neighbours felt they had no other choice but to avoid the place altogether. The community worker met the residents and listened to their complaints and opinions. However, this was not enough. If they demanded action, why wouldn't they start to act themselves? Amongst the group of residents, a small number of individuals were identified as leaders – those possessing leadership qualities – determination, energy, ability to listen to the needs of the more vulnerable neighbours. A residents' association was formed and it started to work on bringing about change in the area. The group, with the constant support of the Appoġġ community worker, got the other neighbours and the Local Council on their side, and the place which was previously seen as a dump, became a garden, with freshly planted shrubs and flowers, garden benches and lamps. The residents took care of it and years later, the garden is still as well maintained

as it was when it went through its radical transformation.

Case Study 2:

Another group of residents in Cospicua were invited to meet with the community workers of Appoġġ and discuss issues pertaining to the needs of their children. Many expressed the wish to have summer activities for their children. At the time, summer schools were only provided. The community workers got a group of mothers and other young residents together and they started a summer school. “Klabbsajf” was organised using the local resources – school halls as premises, volunteers who came mostly from the community, and it targeted local children. The volunteers, with the help of the community workers, were involved directly in the activities and the decisions taken in Klabbsajf. They received training so that they would be able to give a better service to the children. Klabbsajf has been going on for years and its popularity amongst local children is still as strong as it was when it first started. Volunteers also felt that they gained more skills and found it easier to find employment or get involved in other activities.

The main principles of community development: Case studies 1 and 2 show practical examples of community development that worked locally. After this experience the action taken is “needs-led”. It is the residents who identify the needs and therefore, action taken is relevant, because the need is felt and expressed. Moreover, the residents need to feel that they are listened to and their concerns taken seriously.

- The residents gain confidence and are encouraged to be active in the community, to share opinions, their abilities, to take decisions for the good of the whole community. They are trained formally or informally. This is part of the “empowerment” process. A major outcome of this is skills development – hence the opportunity for better integration in the community or in the labour market.
- The action itself is simple, but from the outset, the residents should be involved. “Involvement” is a key principle, be it in decision taking or in the action itself. This gives a sense of ownership, awareness in their abilities and pride in what they achieve.
- The residents learn the value working and learning together in “partnership”. Everyone has his or her role in the process – local residents, formal and informal leaders in the community and service providers. Service providers, who are usually not local themselves, need to be sensitive to the needs of the community, as defined by the community itself.

- Community development works for “social inclusion and social justice”. The most vulnerable in the community - the elderly, persons with disabilities, other groups that have difficulties to participate in community life – are given a voice and listened to, so that their needs are addressed as effectively as possible.
- All action is aimed towards building support and social networks and systems which will move the residents away from dependency, in a manner that is realistic and simple, yet that leads to “self sustainability”.
- “Evaluation” of the work done is good practice and gives both residents and workers more insight to the processes passed through, to learn of more effective ways of carrying out the work.

Community social work gives a different dimension to the social work interventions that Appoġġ delivers. The fact that the social workers are based in the community means that they are also involved in the process of change, in networking and they get to know the community and its environment. Therefore, when people come to the social workers to seek help – for the service must be one that the residents request themselves – the workers are able to see the families and individuals in the wider context. They don't only see the problems that they present, but also the whole picture of how they function within the community and how the community is affecting them. The presence of social workers in the community means more accessibility and more familiarity of the service for the residents. For these reasons, Appoġġ can give a more personalised service. Community social workers foster a sense of support and reassurance within the community.

An important milestone for Appoġġ, in community based service development in Malta was the launch of the Cottonera Community Resource Centre, which is known as ACCESS. Based in Vittoriosa, ACCESS has been functioning since 2002. For this project Appoġġ teamed up with a network of service providers, namely the Department for Social Security, the Housing Authority, the SAPPOR Day Centre for Persons with a Disability, and the Agency's own Smartkids Child and Family Centre and the Cottonera Community Service, which includes a community development worker and community social workers. The idea of having these entities under one roof was to facilitate joint action for the good of the community – in simple terms, getting resources together to design services that are more personalised and more relevant for the targeted community. Through ACCESS, the workers from different entities run projects targeting Cottonera and Kalkara residents like “**Women in**

Work". This project was designed for women seeking employment. They are invited to focus groups to discuss the issue of employment and the barriers they face when seeking employment. They help design a course which provides skills training. Once the women feel part of the process, they get the best out of the project. "**Progett Taghlim**" taps resources from the local Sixth Form to help primary school children in literacy and numeracy skills.

A good example of the holistic approach that is practiced at ACCESS is Smart Kids, which is a unique service in Malta, in that it not only offers quality child care, but offers support to families. The children cannot be seen in isolation and therefore, support to their families is also given. Having stronger community systems mean that the community is also strengthened. Families could then enjoy a better quality of life.

In 2007, ACCESS was considered an example of Best Practice and was the subject of a Peer Review organised by the European Commission. Therefore, the plan to open new centres in other parts of Malta, namely, in Qawra, B'Kara and Valletta, is a way to respond to the growing needs in our society by means of a more comprehensive strategy already implemented successfully. The new centres will be based on the principles and values already mentioned. It is expected that the development would be somewhat different, because each community has its own needs, resources, characteristics and history. However, now that experience already exists through the development of the community based services in Cottonera, we are able to look ahead and positively anticipate reaching out to and helping the most vulnerable in our communities.

Catherine Fleri Soler

Service Manager – Appoġġ Community and Generic Services

For more information on Agenzija Appogg call on Supportline 179 or else visit www.appogg.gov.mt. Agenzija Appogg forms part of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services which also includes Agenzija sedqa www.sedqa.gov.mt and Agenzija Sapport www.sapport.gov.mt.