

# Developing Community Identity in a Rapidly Changing Community

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## Abstract

The significance of a sense of community is widely acknowledged in the literature. Communities bring their members networks of connections that can shape aspects of their behaviour, social interactions and identities. However, development and modernity are challenging the roles of communities, with weaker social bonds and less neighbourly behaviours on the rise. In a young community known for its terraced family homes, as well as its villa area, recent changes in construction permits are bringing rapid changes, not only to its aesthetics, but also to the density and nature of its residents. This paper, which is based upon a study of the community of Iklin, examined the impact that recent changes are having through the views of the residents via a questionnaire, interviews and a focus group. Using the Iklin study as a model for a mid-sized town or village in Malta, this paper examines which factors contribute to a sense of community cohesion and identity. This discussion posits that, like Iklin's residents, when faced with an ever-changing community of inhabitants that do not feel like they belong, the inhabitants of our towns and villages, will value green spaces as amongst the most sought-after factors within communities, along with a desire for shared spaces and activities. A craving for a sense of community remains present, coexisting with an appreciation for a level of anonymity and distance that is also valued by many.

**Keywords:** community identity, community cohesion, access to green spaces, desire for shared spaces and activities, place attachment

## 1. Introduction

In 2021 the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta, commissioned by the Local Council of Iklin, carried out a community profiling project on Iklin, which is a relatively young town in the Maltese Islands. The issue that led to this research concerned this town's identity and cohesion. Although the earlier Iklin generations and their descendants have resided in the town for longer periods, the second generation of inhabitants who were raised there frequently rely on neighbourhood ties for services such as education due to the lack of internal resources and services in a town that is still in its developmental phase. This has resulted in the establishment of local relationships remaining more tenuous and progressing at a slowed pace. As the town expanded and establishments such as a church and grocery store appeared in Iklin, the local populace encountered novel obstacles arising from an abrupt surge in construction activities within the vicinity. When the original inhabitants were in their infancy and just beginning to form a sense of community, they were confronted with a sudden influx of new inhabitants and alterations to the environment they once cherished.

In this view, the Local Council wished to evaluate the different identity groups and stakeholders that constitute the community in order to get insight into the community's issues, challenges, and assets.

This paper's discussion is informed by the data provided by residents, local councillors, business people and stakeholders, living or operating in Iklin, which will form a springboard for the broader discussion examined in this paper. Based on the study findings, this paper will examine the following research questions:

1. What factors do residents perceive to contribute or hinder community cohesion and sense of belonging?
2. To what extent, and in what ways do these factors impact the community's sense of cohesion?

Further to this introduction, this paper's discussion will review the context, as well as a selection of perspectives and findings of the Iklin research study, to inform the larger discussion. This paper will examine what factors residents and stakeholders perceive as conveying a sense of belonging in modern urban conurbations, in the face of an ever-changing landscape. The discussion will proceed with an exploration of the concepts that inform the framework of the paper, a description of the research design that yielded the findings discussed in this paper; followed by the presentation and discussion of findings.

## 2. Context

A fruitful urban environment sets the stage for a sense of belonging and a shared sense of community. Researchers agree that traditional neighbourhoods acquire their distinctiveness through natural organisation into districts, streets, and open spaces (Oktay, 2002). Conversely, contemporary urban projects are creating a contrasting scenery of similar buildings and designs, resulting in a decrease in available public areas. The relatively recent township of Iklin, situated at the intersection of the older, long-established towns of Naxxar, Lija and Birkirkara, is typical of a modern development that has not yet morphed into a fully-fledged town (Bonanno, 1981). It is also under pressure from the demands of present-day population expansion and the resultant needs for increased construction coupled with limited space for expansion. Consequently, Iklin is experiencing a swift increase in population density, leading to a rapid transformation of its urban environment (Buttigieg, 2013). In a freshly established town that sprang from neighbouring areas, the effects of these developments on the town's identity and the well-being of its citizens can have far-reaching consequences. The concept of community identity shall be explored in detail in the following section.

### 2.1 Community Identity

Obst & White (2005) describe community identity as "a set of people with some kind of shared element, which can vary from a situation, such as living in a particular place, to some kind of interest, beliefs or values" (p.127). Community identity is that collective sense of affinity that characterises and distinguishes that particular group of people from other groups (Ratanakosol et al., 2016). Communities offer their members a platform of opportunities that can impact various parts of their experience, such as social connections, and identities (Brown et al., 2003; Devine-Wright, 2009), and provide chances for significant interactions (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2015). Community offers a wide range of characteristics that influence the identities and social connections of its inhabitants, and subsequently, dictate their behaviour within that area (Devine-Wright, 2009; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000).

The location of birth and length of time living in a certain area play a role in forming a sense of connection to that place (Casakin et al., 2015; Hui et al, 2012). However, these factors are not the only ones that contribute to the establishment of community identity (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Feldman, 1990; Ng, 1998). For example, Casakin et al. (2015) discovered that there were similar patterns between individuals feeling connected to and emotionally invested in specific places. These connections are present among both natives and individuals who moved to a community later on in their life, despite the fact that the development of identity is gradual and intricate (Hernández et al., 2007; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Vidal et al., 2012). Deener (2010) stated that for individuals who are not native residents, developing a strong connection to a community is most effectively achieved by actively participating in regular events and celebrations with other local people. This involvement fosters a sense of belonging.

Place attachment promotes civic engagement, benefiting both individuals and the broader community (Brown et al., 2004a; Kyle et al., 2004). Shao et al. (2017) discovered four factors that contribute to community identity: environmental/structural characteristics, which may change periodically; backgrounds and heritage; functionality, referring to the town's success to meet the needs of various activities; and connections among its members, which foster unity across different races, ethnicities, and social classes.

The visual characteristics of a locality, such as its shape, contribute to its distinct identity (Lewicka, 2011; Manahasa & Manahasa, 2020; Swanwick, 2009). The identity of a location is formed by a reciprocal interaction between the physical attributes that shape the collective personality of its residents, and the expression of their wants and self-interpretations within the urban environment (Haapala, 2003). Community identity is not only shaped by the distinctive visual or social characteristics of a place, but also by its ability to enhance the mental and emotional well-being of its residents (Carmona et al, 2003; Council of Europe, 2000; Jacobs, 1961). Nevertheless, the swift progress of contemporary urbanisation and industrialization is diminishing these communal bonds (Bradshaw, 2008). Oktay (2002) emphasises the need to cultivate an awareness of public spaces in rapidly developing urban areas, particularly where population densities are rising. This is because the quality, design, and architecture of urban spaces are vital in shaping the identity of a place (Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Madanipour, 1996).

When a community fosters a sense of purpose and belonging among its members, it can lead to favourable psychological outcomes (Haslam et al., 2009), as well as an elevated level of altruism and engagement in society (Grey & Stevenson, 2019; Wang et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020). Community participation refers to the voluntary engagement of individuals in community affairs and group activities (Xin, 2020). It fosters a sense of community, subjective well-being, and promotes community development (Christens, 2012; Christens et al., 2016). The presence of a strong community identity can be crucial under challenging situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic (Gillespie et al., 2016; Kwok et al., 2020). The significance of community identity in the welfare of its citizens and populations should not be overlooked especially in relation to community cohesion, which shall be explored as follows.

## *2.2 Community Cohesion*

A cohesive community is characterised by the interaction between its constituent groups (Clarke et al., 2007; Wetherell et al., 2007). Cohesive societies possess a significant amount of what sociologists, like Putnam (2000), define as 'bridging social capital'. This refers to the presence of links between different groups, in addition to the associations within each individual group. Community attachment is a psychosocial phenomenon that involves meaningful and active social relationships. It is characterised by feelings of satisfaction with one's local area. Florida (2002) argues that in recent years, there has been a growing preference for weak social connections instead of robust community and family networks. Homeowners are increasingly opting for privacy and personal space, over social connections with neighbours (Blackshaw, 2010). Tam (2007) suggests that one reason for this is the decrease in engagement in collective activities beyond work, leading to a decline in involvement in activities that unite individuals around common interests. Furthermore, significant societal and economic transformations, along with substantial technical progress, have altered the configuration of human surroundings, and therefore, the locations we live in, frequent, and cherish (Vidal et al., 2012). Rorty (2007) proposed substituting and instituting the notion of community through alternative cultural practices. This would establish a collective basis for the post-modern society by presenting an alternative viewpoint on community and the intricacies of cultural politics.

The influence of modernity is clearly evident in Malta, particularly in our swiftly evolving urban areas, characterised by the proliferation of construction projects and the growth and variety of residential communities. The presence of immigrants in an established area has a significant effect on the social connections within the community, thereby diminishing the sense of trust and selflessness that contribute to the unity of the neighbourhood (Putnam, 2007; 2001). However, the diversification of residential areas also presents opportunities for good interaction, which in turn, increases levels of trust and unity (Laurence, 2009; Savelkoul et al., 2015; Sturgis et al., 2014). In general, individuals living in neighbourhoods undergoing diversification may encounter a range of outcomes, both advantageous and disadvantageous, contingent upon the nature and progression of social interactions. Establishing connections between older residents and more recent ones is crucial in minimising social isolation and lower levels of trust among neighbours (Stolle & Harell, 2013). In addition, considering the attributes of new individuals while evaluating a town's identity might result in the development of constructive interactions within the group (Haslam et al., 2003; Reicher et al., 2006). Local governments have the ability to exert a significant impact in fostering possibilities for community engagement. Despite their active involvement, local authorities have seen diminishing levels of trust from their citizens in recent years, primarily due to limited resources and governing authority (Kersting & Vetter, 2003; Lidström et al., 2016; Schaap & Daemen, 2012). Community identity and cohesion were two areas of interest in the study that shall be presented in this paper. Prior to delving into the study method and findings, basic information about Iklin shall be provided so as to set the context.

## *2.3 The Community of Iklin*

Iklin, established in 1964, is located in a central area of Malta, bordered by major towns including Naxxar, San Gwann, and Birkirkara. It is located in close proximity to important landmarks, such as the national hospital, Mater Dei Hospital, the University and several business establishments (Bonanno, 1981). The construction of Iklin's first house took place in 1954, making it the sole structure in the area for the subsequent 15 years. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, the development of opulent villas began in the top section of the region. During the late 1970s and 1980s, additional advancements were made, notably in the lower region of the valley. One of the actions taken was the building of a bypass, which involved replacing a large amount of fertile land (Malta Local Government, n.d.).

Despite experiencing significant growth since its establishment, Iklin still lacks many of the amenities commonly found in other cities and villages. The town does not possess any educational establishments and instead depends on schools located in nearby towns (Bonnici, 2009; Iklin Scout Group, n.d.). This holds significance that extends

beyond education, as schools not only provide education to the children of a community, but also serve as a crucial factor in uniting local families and promoting social unity (Engel, 2013). The parish church of Iklin, along with its pastoral centre, offers regular mass services and social activities (Quddies, 2020). However, unlike some other Maltese localities, Iklin does not organise its own annual feast dedicated to the local patron saint. This event, which fosters community cohesion and brings the community together, is held in various localities in Malta. The region is home to various businesses and coffee shops, however the coffee shops' opening hours mostly accommodate the offices and stores in the vicinity. Consequently, after regular working hours, residents must venture beyond their immediate area to fulfil their needs.

According to the National Statistics Office (NSO) in 2022, Iklin had a population of 3,399 in 2021. In the 1960s and 1970s, the construction of high-end villas began in the region referred to as Upper Iklin. Further development took place in the latter end of the seventies and during the eighties. Iklin's footprint has been altered by recent modifications in construction legislation. The ongoing construction projects in the town are altering its aesthetic character and attracting a significant number of new people, resulting in rapid shifts within the community.

This occurrence is widespread throughout a substantial part of Malta. Historically, towns and villages were established in close proximity to a central church that oversaw the town square, which served as the focal point of the community (Agius, 2018; Boissevain, 1986). Later, contemporary growth occurred on the outskirts of existing regions and typically followed a pattern of circular roads and intersecting streets, which were convenient for car travel but lacked distinctiveness (Boissevain, 1986). The emergence of these new urban areas has significantly influenced the characteristics of these towns. In the past decade, these towns have faced additional challenges due to a substantial increase in population and the substitution of typical two-story houses with taller buildings (Saliba, 1998). These modifications have an impact on the utilisation of space in residential areas, hence influencing the individuality and social unity of these towns, as observed in Iklin and other places.

### 3. Methods

The research that guided this paper's debate adopted a mixed-methods methodology. This comprised a three-fold data-gathering approach via questionnaire, interviews and focus group, through which this study sought to explore the trends, experiences and perceptions of major figures and citizens within this town.

Quantitative data was collected via a questionnaire that was designed specifically to meet the objectives of the study, and which was distributed among residents. The questionnaire investigated resident demographics, participants' civic and social participation in their community, and the meanings they attributed to this. The questionnaire was distributed via email through the Local Council, and was promoted on the Local Council's social media channels. Additionally hard copies were also available from the Local Council offices and via the parish, and it was also publicised during mass. A total of 231 valid responses were received.

Qualitative data was collected via interviews and a focus group. 15 interviews were held with residents and stakeholders, from formal and informal community groups, aiming to get insight into the community's identity and interest groups, as well as to uncover any pertinent issues and difficulties affecting the community. In addition, a focus group comprising residents and stakeholders was also held with 6 attendees. This was aimed at understanding the community from the views of its participants.

Data gathered through interviews and focus groups was pseudonymised, and throughout the research, provisions were made for encrypted data handling and storage. Data was analysed using Excel and word. The qualitative data was analysed following guidance by Braun & Clarke (2006) to extract codes and themes and the main results shall be presented in the subsequent section.

### 4. Findings

Quantitative questionnaire data (data extracted from the original report of the study by Azzopardi & Formosa, 2022)

#### 4.1 Demographic Findings

231 replies were received to the resident questionnaires. Although not a representative sample, the reply rate was satisfactory and allowed the research team to examine trends among inhabitants. The Preliminary Report of the Census of Population and Housing held in 2021, places the current population of Iklin at 9318 in 2021, with an almost equal number of males as females (NSO, 2022). The gender split among respondents was also virtually equal, with 51% female participants, and 49% male participants. The largest age group amongst participants was 61 to 80-year-olds (37%), none of whom had been brought up in the community of Iklin, although the majority had lived there for more than 8 years. This was followed by 31 to 40-year-olds (18%), 76% of whom were brought up in the community itself (Figure 1 refers). The majority of respondents were of Maltese nationality, while three

participants (i.e. 1.3%), stated that they were from Russia, Italy and Belarus respectively. Feedback from the interviews conveyed that a community of non-Maltese nationals is also present in Iklin, however these groups were not captured in the data. Meanwhile the National Statistics Office preliminary report on the 2021 population census (NSO, 2021) places the number of foreign-born persons living in Iklin at just under 12%. NSO 2021 also states that in 2011, just under 2% of the population of Iklin were foreigners, further testifying to the rapid changes that this township is going through.

### Questionnaire Age Groups

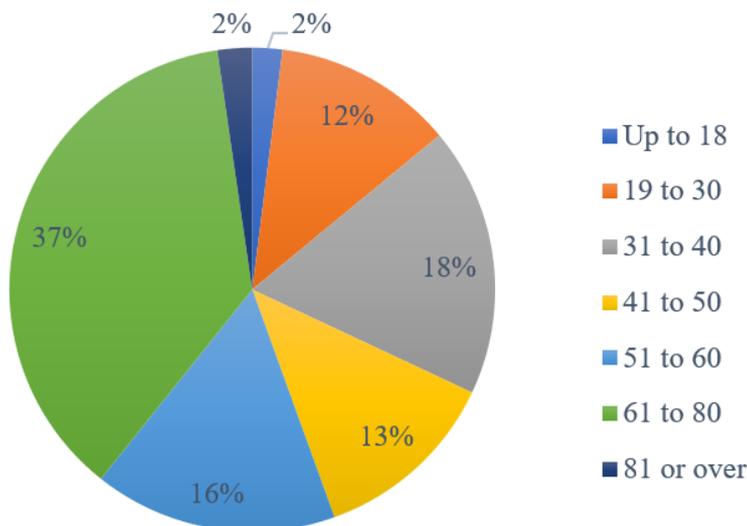


Figure 1. Age group distribution of questionnaire participants\*

In the main, residents of this area are educated, and in employment. Participant level of education was relatively evenly spread between postgraduate level of education (25.5%), secondary level of education (24%), post-secondary/ vocational level of education (23%), and tertiary level of education (22.5%). Only 4% had a primary level of education, while 1% had a doctoral level of education. (Figure 2 refers). The majority of respondents were either in employment (45%) or retired - i.e. past employees (26%), while 10% were self-employed. Figure 3 refers.

### Level of Education

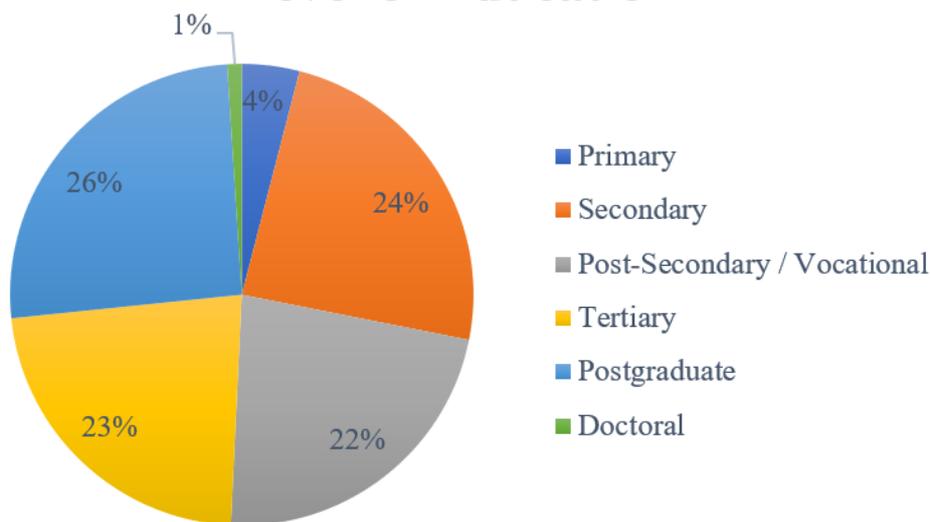


Figure 2. Levels of Education across questionnaire participants\*

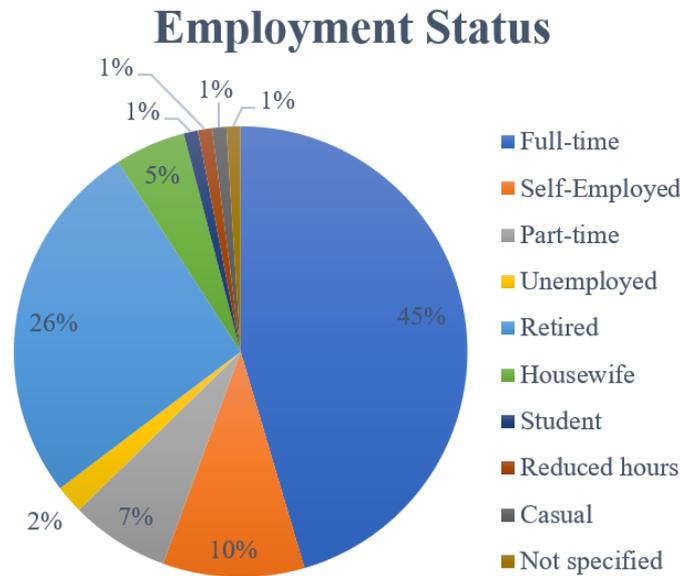


Figure 3. Employment status across questionnaire participants\*

46% of respondents reside in a household with children, followed by couples living together with no children (35%). 6% were from households caring for another family member, while 5% were individual occupants. Figure 4 refers.

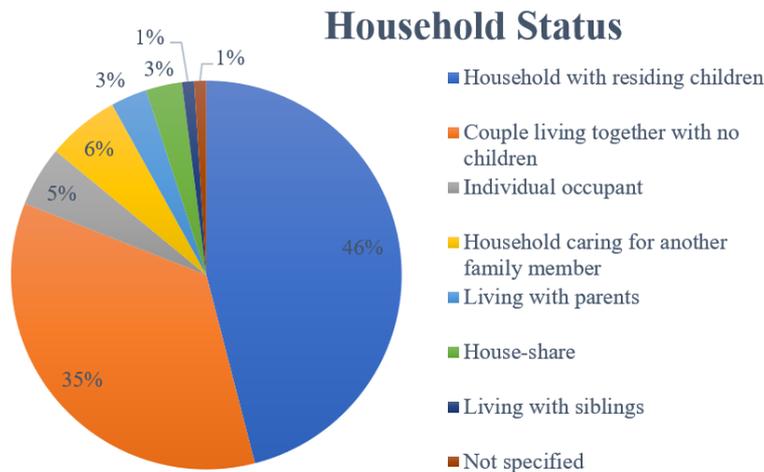


Figure 4. Household Status of questionnaire participants\*

Since religion is a powerful connector, residents were also asked about their religion. 85% of participants were Roman Catholics, 10% reported that they did not practice a religion or were non-believers, and 3% were Christian, but not Catholic, such as Orthodox, Protestant, etc. Less than 1% of participants reported being from: Muslim, Buddhist or Humanist (non-religious), while less than 1% did not state their religious affiliation.

#### 4.2 Civic Participation and Social Spaces

The questionnaire also examined patterns of civic participation among residents, and their attitudes towards social activities within their community. The majority (54%) of respondents did not participate in any civic activities, although 38% stated that they participate in activities related to the church, while 12% reported that they participated in civic activities organised by Local Government.

Given that Iklin is divided into a number of rather different areas, each with their own diverse building characteristics and corresponding concerns, participants were asked what area they lived in. Figure 5 below, illustrates the areas that constitute the locality. The majority (52%) live in Area 5 – one of the more densely population areas of this community, where most of the town’s businesses are located. 28% live in Area 6, i.e. an

area housing a number of commercial stores, and which is also densely populated. The remaining participants live in the central or upper parts of the locality where larger residences such as villas are located, with less commercial buildings. None of the participants live in Area 2, which is mostly rural land.

Since, as shown above, longevity of residence in a locality is correlated with a sense of belonging (Casakin et al., 2015; Hui et al, 2012), length of residence was also explored. Over three quarters of participants (77%) reported having resided in the community for eight years or longer, 14% had resided there for 3-8 years, while 9% had lived in the locality there for less than three years. None were living in Iklin temporarily. Figure 6 refers. 84% of participants were born and bred in Iklin. All of these were of Maltese nationality and had spent their entire life living in Iklin. Amongst these, 38% were between 19-30 years old, 27% were aged 31-40, and 22% fell within the 41-50 age range. Among the native Iklin residents, 5% were aged 51-60, while only 8% were below 18 years of age. Figure 7 refers.

A number of reasons were given for choosing to live in Iklin. The most frequently cited reasons were its centrality, and a liking for its characteristics – as it was previously seen as clean, quiet and peaceful, however these comments were also accompanied by expressions of dismay for the changing character of Iklin. Proximity to family, accessible property prices (in the past), and the fact that services could easily be accessed in nearby towns were also mentioned as reasons for choosing the locality. Figure 8 refers.



Figure 5. Distribution of participants according to the map presented to questionnaire participants to indicate which area they reside in\*

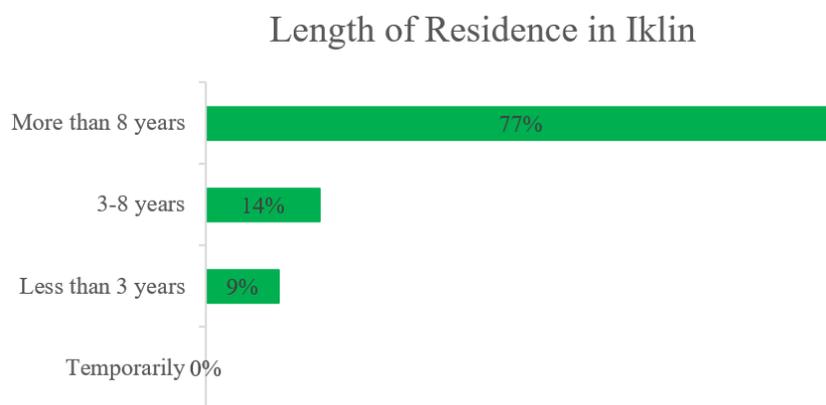


Figure 6. Length of period of residency in Iklin as reported by questionnaire participants\*

### Age Groups of residents brought up in Iklin

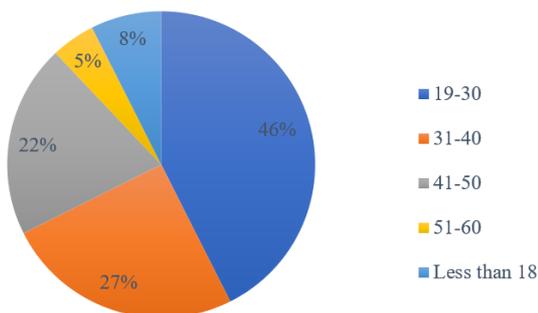


Figure 7. Age group distribution of questionnaire participants who were brought up in the community of Iklin\*

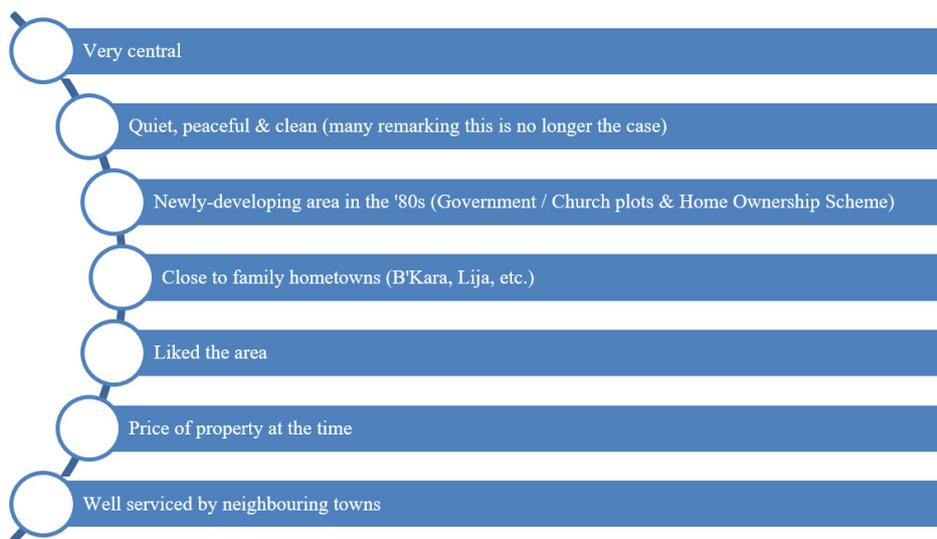


Figure 8. Reasons for living in Iklin as expressed by questionnaire participants in order of frequency of reason\*

#### 4.3 Levels of Satisfaction

When asked how satisfied they were with where they live and also with their life in general, the majority of respondents stated that they were overall satisfied with both their place of residence (Iklin) and with life in general, although life satisfaction scores were higher than locality satisfaction scores. Table 1 refers.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents’ self-evaluation of their level of satisfaction with living in their locality and with their life in general\*

Participant Levels of Satisfaction with their Locality vs Life in General		
Attitude	Satisfaction with chosen locality of residence - %	Satisfaction with life in general %
Positive Attitude (Most satisfied + Satisfied)	56.5%	64.5%
Neutral Attitude (Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied)	27%	22.5%
Negative Attitude (Least satisfied + Dissatisfied)	16.5%	13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100 %</b>

Despite high place of residence and life satisfaction, relatively low civic participation indicates that a lack of sense of community is present among residents of Iklin. In order to examine what changes residents may wish to see in their chosen locality of residence, they were asked to select what amenities or features they wish to see more of in future. By far the most resounding response was that residents wished for more access to green spaces. Almost 90% of participants replied that they wish to see more green areas in their locality, which was followed by almost 70% who stated that they wished for more open spaces. This suggests that the low civic participation is driven by a lack of common open spaces where residents can interact and get to know each other in informal non-structured activities. Additionally, 35% expressed a desire for an outdoor gym and 28% reported wanting more amenities and outdoor spaces for children. 24% said that they would like to have more cafes in the area, while a further 24% requested better public transport, and 21% expressed a wish for more services for youths. Figure 9 refers.



Figure 9. What Iklin residents would like to see more of according to questionnaire responses\*

Although not representative of the general population, the quantitative data captured by the questionnaire reveals patterns about the residents of Iklin. Similar to the gender split within the general population, residents were pretty equally divided between male and female respondents, the largest age group was that of 61 to 80-year-olds, followed by 31 to 40-year-olds, and residents are mainly of Maltese nationality (98.7%). The majority are Roman Catholics (85%). The questionnaire also revealed that most residents live in family groups or couples (46% living in a household with children and 35% living as couples with no children), and that in the main they are educated, and employed or retired. The extent of residents' civic participation is however relatively low, indicating a lack of community cohesion despite high levels of satisfaction with their locality and their life in general.

The questionnaire data hinted at a lack of community spirit among residents of Iklin. Although most of the questionnaire respondents (84%) were native inhabitants, the town was often referred to as one that lacks a collective identity. Despite high self-reported levels of satisfaction with their chosen locality of residence, and high life satisfaction rating, low civic participation indicates that the factors that contribute to community cohesion are lacking.

These indications were examined more closely via the qualitative data captured through the focus groups and interviews, during which residents and stakeholders expressed their views, experiences and voiced their concerns and desires for their locality. This data shall be presented as follows.

Participants' perspectives – Findings from the focus groups and interviews with residents and stakeholders (themes extracted from the original report of the study by Azzopardi & Formosa, 2022)

The interviews and focus groups engaged with residents to explore their views and experiences of community identity and cohesion. Thematic examination of the data revealed four themes that residents and stakeholders

considered to be at the root of this sense of lack of community identity: A lack of shared activities and shared spaces; family ties outside the community; a division into areas or districts having different urban organisations and reflecting different lifestyles; the rapidly changing nature of the township to accommodate a new, more densely packed way of living. These shall be explored in the forthcoming sections.

#### 4.4 Lack of Shared Spaces and Activities

Across both the interviews and the Focus Group a common theme was the lack of shared activities and lack of shared public spaces. By far the greatest lament was a lack of access to green spaces.

*"We don't have enough trees. [...] There's a considerable lack".* (Participant 5)

[We would like to see] *"Green spaces, because they bring people together. Picnic areas, places to walk out dogs, where to have a seat in the sun"* (Participant 4)

Several participants described how the area was originally largely rural in nature, and how streets used to be fronted by gardens but that now the whole town is being built up. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the current lack of available spots for walking, children's play areas, meeting places for young people, and spaces for families to assemble for recreational and social activities.

*"We were so proud of our road, the whole road had long front gardens with the houses behind. Now at the gardens are being built up. Next door there is a wall so instead of being able to enjoy the view, it is all built up. My neighbours have moved out. I hope the property won't be bought up by a contractor who will turn it into a condo. From here to the bottom, all the properties have been built up, all the way to the street."* (Participant 17)

*"I would like to see Iklin full of trees, everywhere green, with more places for people to go out and where they can have a place for entertainment, like gardens. And I'd like that we have at least one place - not like a bar - but where people can meet, like a social club".* (Participant 10)

This echoes findings from the questionnaire, where the overwhelming majority listed having more green spaces as one of their most sought-after desires for their town. Several participants felt that the lack of spaces to mingle was impacting stress levels and mental wellbeing, on top of exposure to noise and air pollution.

Additionally, a number of community features that are staples in other towns and villages in Malta and Gozo are either lacking in Iklin or very limited. Often, enterprising community leaders and residents work very hard to expand nascent organisations; however, they face the hurdles of lack of community interest and competition from larger competitors in neighbouring towns. For example, Iklin does not really hold a local *fiesta*. This is a major civic event, deeply embedded in Maltese culture, and is a notable opportunity for socialising. The traditional Maltese village *fiesta* is a celebration of the local patron saint, organised by the parish (Malta.com, 2019). Iklin does not have a *fiesta* in the traditional sense, with marching brass bands, fireworks, street food vendors and town-wide celebrations. Iklin's *fiesta*, was described by participants as a humble, indoor celebration. Moreover, although there was consensus that this event can help with community cohesion, participants were undecided about the need for a traditional type of *fiesta* and, a number seemed to be quite satisfied with the *status quo*, or even preferred to do without.

*"Fiesta is non-existent. Festas bring even kids together. It's an excuse for kids to go out. You get to know people, even adults"* (Participant 4)

Likewise, although Iklin does have a small football club and Scouts group, both face a lack of potential members due to the small population of Iklin, and competition from other larger football clubs in neighbouring areas. In fact, participation figures for both entities, are below the expected figure for the size of the community, both in terms of young participants, as well as adult volunteers.

*"We thought that there would be far more interest in children's football, especially since there are a number of young families in the area. We expected that more children from Iklin would participate, but in fact this is not the case, because we only have about 10 children out of a group of about 102-130. WE only have a small number of participants from Iklin."* (Participant 2)

The parish serves as the primary catalyst of the town's collective endeavours, accommodating various age demographics. For example, the parish-run *Żgħażaġh Azzjoni Kattolika* (Catholic Action Youth) known as *ŻAK*, is geared towards youth and currently serves about 60 youngsters. Remarkably, in a town where residents consistently perceive a lack of community spirit, participants believed that this group fostered a sense of community specifically for young people. The Group 60 Plus, which is run by elderly volunteers, organises weekly social gatherings, mass, light snacks, and other initiatives, and currently caters for about 25-30 people. This is

currently the only ongoing initiative catering for elderly town citizens. Participants expressed how more activities aimed at the elderly were needed, as these would help reduce loneliness and create connections.

*“The Catholic Action Youth Group] brings people together. It tries to give youth circumstances and exposure, as much as possible, and there is appreciation for youth. [...] The youngsters feel more like they are part of the community”.* (Participant 5)

*“[Through the Catholic Action Youth Group], it has become more of a community, from the perspective of a parish”.* (Participant 5)

Moreover, participants reported that the town does not have public spaces for residents to gather, and several stated that the small playground in the village centre was not enough.

*“It doesn’t have a village core [...] You can’t go to a square, Even Balzan has this, and Attard, and there’s the community there. Here there is a little church, but it’s kind of between 2 roads. It lacks a heart.”* (Participant 9)

*“There aren’t areas for entertainment. Not even gardens, for example, clubs, shops where you can go for a coffee or something, we don’t have this ... I think for older people, so that they can meet up for example after mass and go for a coffee, it would help.”* (Participant 14)

Although the Local Government organises cultural and social events, as does the Parish Church, these were also considered by many as not being sufficient or adequate to bring residents together, highlighting the need for these to be developed further. Several respondents said that they would appreciate it if more activities such as exhibitions and talks were to be organised.

As evidenced by their statements, the residents do wish for more spaces and activities that would bring them together. However, interestingly, some participants did express a contrary opinion by opting to appreciate the privacy and relative anonymity that the town provides.

*“Here people are independent, everyone takes care of their own affairs, like. ‘Hello’ and ‘goodbye’, you speak, maybe you see someone, say a few words and that’s it. Like there is no need for a lot of confidences. You come and go into your house”* (Participant 6)

Buys & Bow (2002) found that high levels of trust among inhabitants increase social capital and community cohesion, but also that high levels of privacy can serve to reduce social bonding and place attachment within communities. The authors argue that a lack of community cohesion can result when neighbours place more value on their privacy than on shared experiences.

#### 4.5 Ties Outside the Locality

Another theme that emerged from the data was its connection with neighbouring localities. A number of respondents explained the deficiency in community identity as being brought about by the fact that many families still have connections to family, friends and services in other localities. The central location of Iklin in Malta is a great advantage to residents; however it comes at an uncomfortable price. While several participants identified the town’s centrality as being one of the main reasons for their choice of residence, they also pointed out that the town is well-served by the adjacent localities and amenities such as San Anton Gardens, and that this easy availability drives them outside their community to satisfy several needs. Yet conversely, this also creates a lack of demand for these services or amenities within their community, with the result that potential connections are lost. Some participants expressed a desire for more in-house facilities, particularly among older residents, who hoped to see more services such as butchers, greengrocers, hairdressers and others. However, residents generally tended to prioritise having open, green and public spaces, which they place above having services directly in-town.

*“And this is one of the difficulties we face in Iklin. A lot of things – if it’s a bank, we don’t have a bank, I have to go elsewhere. Now we don’t even have a butcher, you have to go elsewhere to buy your meat. There are things that are missing”* (Participant 5)

The town’s centrality also has a major drawback, echoed unflinchingly by all participants: traffic. Particularly among older people, this aspect seems to significantly affect their quality of life. Participants frequently expressed concerns over noise and air pollution, emphasising both health concerns and immediate problems such as reckless driving and continuous traffic congestion.

#### 4.6 Division into Distinct Districts

Participants also mentioned that the community of Iklin is made up of very distinct areas, each with its own characteristics, which in turn affects the lifestyle of the residents.

*“I see Iklin divided into 3 or 4 different parts...there is the part by the Church, that’s by itself, there is the part near JB, that’s isolated from the rest. And there is upper Iklin, also set apart. So the community is already more divided than other localities”.* (Participant 10)

*“There are different strata of people who live in Iklin. [...] Even, their way of living. [...] The difference between the people from up there and those that live in the area around the Church can be felt...”.* (Participant 2)

The upper portion of Iklin is primarily comprised of expansive villas featuring driveways, high walls demarcating residences, and potentially reduced neighbourly interaction. In contrast, the lower portion of Iklin features residential buildings that may be more compact and that experience congested parking concerns, abundant commercial activity, and the rapid development of apartment blocks. Inhabitants tended to differentiate between three types of zones: the 'villa' zone (located in the upper portion of the town), the 'Church' zone (located in the heart of Iklin), which is more domestic, and the commercial zone (located in the lower portion of the city). Each of these regions possesses unique attributes. Participants residing in the central and lower regions, characterised by dense commercial activity and close proximity to major roads, frequently highlight concerns pertaining to traffic congestion, debris, parking, and road maintenance, in addition to the resulting effects on the market value of their properties. To a lesser extent, residents of the Central region shared some of these, and were unconcerned by any underlying disparities that existed between the regions. Conversely, inhabitants residing in the upper region, although still profoundly appalled by the evolving character of the town, experienced comparatively lesser repercussions from concerns such as the changes induced by extensive construction. Nevertheless, the mere perception of separate regions failed to foster community unity or a shared sense of identity.

#### 4.7 A Changing Urban Landscape

In addition to all the factors listed above, several participants also mentioned that, like several other areas in Malta, Iklin is experiencing rapid changes. Changes in construction permits have enabled a denser urban development (Debono, 2022), so that in Iklin, as elsewhere, new construction practices have changed the character of the town, particularly with the erection of buildings that are higher than the traditional two-storeys.

*“When I moved here, all the buildings were the same height ... there was a very pretty aspect. The bottom part of Iklin was made up of terraced houses, there was a certain uniformity, so in the streetscape and skyline there as a certain tranquillity, a serenity, a peace, with the back gardens, it was very pretty. Then suddenly, the terraced houses were demolished, unfortunately, and blocks of flats are being put up in their place”* (Participant 2)

*“The beautiful houses that made I-Iklin, I don’t know, in the 80’s and 90’s - one after the other, they just go down”* (Participant 1)

Additionally, this has resulted in a surge in the number of inhabitants, giving rise to a community dynamic characterised by individuals whose levels of affiliation with the locality vary. A number of participants stated that the town's original topography consisted almost exclusively of terraced dwellings embellished with private gardens. They also noted that the region had a number of pristine rural areas until recently. Several people lamented the absence of urban planning and believed that the town was progressively eroding the distinctiveness and aesthetic that were once associated with the area.

The widespread and rapid changes also brought a sequence of other transformations. New developments have exacerbated the already strained parking situation, while also impacting the town's sense of community. Similarly, the changing town composition and population increase, have given rise to issues such as litter and further pressure on the infrastructure. In the following section, these findings shall be explained against a backdrop of extant literature.

## 5. Discussion

The importance of having a sense of community is one that features extensively in the literature. As seen from the review of literature, place attachment and aesthetics are drivers of community identity (Kyle et al., 2004; Manahasa & Manahasa, 2020), fostering community cohesion through functionality and connection (Shao et al., 2017). Changes in urban development, planning and density are bringing new challenges to our towns and villages and to the preservation of community identities. The case study of Iklin sheds light on the values to which residents attach significance, and what connectors they perceive as leading to a functional community, as opposed to merely living in a locality.

The study of Iklin revealed several areas of importance – these shall be discussed in this section and exemplar quotes shall be included, which have been extracted from the original report of the study by Azzopardi & Formosa

(2022). Primarily the findings showed that the most sought-after value was a request for green spaces. The prominent desire for green spaces was consistent and to such a degree that any decrease in the limited, available greenery is immediately noted, such as the pruning or cutting down of trees. Another significant request was for more public spaces and places of leisure, where residents could relax, entertain themselves, and interact.

*“... or a small picnic area, four benches, so that our lings can get some air, because there were four trees, they uprooted them and paved everything over”* (Participant 17)

Residents felt that the fast pace of recent developments was depriving them of open spaces, greenery and shared areas. This is compounded by an accompanying absence of home-grown celebrations, which leaves them feeling unconnected to their locality. A sensitivity to residents' needs, and effort to include space for shared activity is vital, particularly given the fast pace of current development in the Maltese islands, in order to preserve and strengthen the social bonds of the locality.

The example of Iklin also shows that when residents are forced, by necessity or convenience, to seek services and amenities outside their town of residence, they miss out on the chance to create meaningful connections within their community. A further factor that impacts community cohesion and sustains the setting up of boundaries between people, is variance in typology within localities. When residents perceive different areas as having different values, distinct from the main or more densely populated area, it becomes more challenging to maintain feelings of concord. This could intensify the lack of integration instigated by a lack of common spaces in which to interact, and by the large-scale seeking of services outside the locality of residence. These views are significant in view of the fact that although in Iklin, satisfaction with place of residence and life in general was found to be high, participation in civic life was wanting. The experience in Iklin shows that inhabiting common spaces and activities with others in one's locality prompts the creation of networks within the community, which research shows is vital to mental as well as physical wellbeing (Hodges & Gore, 2019; Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2020). On the other hand, however, the Iklin study also highlighted that privacy and anonymity are also valued features of modern life. Although initially the two may seem to be contradictory, the dichotomy of private house and public shared space can certainly coexist since they inhabit different spheres of life. The Australian Government (2010) defines territorial privacy as limiting intrusion into the home or other areas, including public areas. Buys and Bow (2002) add that in the context of communities, privacy means granting selected access to one's self. This idea of granting controlled access and setting boundaries upon outside intrusion into the private sphere of one's life, fits well with the experiences described by Iklin's residents. Rather than desiring to not have contact with neighbours, persons living in Iklin expressed a clear wish for more shared public spaces where they can interact with their neighbours. Thus, instead of wishing to reduce trust and social capital, they rather aspire to have designated spaces, where the urban infrastructure can lead to safe interactions with neighbours.

Hence, the sense of community and togetherness among a population of people is influenced not only by external circumstances, but also by a considerable number of internal elements. Creating a feeling of togetherness among a group of varied persons can be difficult if the members of that community lack common interests. Mere proximity in a neighbourhood is insufficient to develop a meaningful relationship. It is crucial to consider common experiences and ideals. Furthermore, although many inhabitants crave a sense of community, they also strongly prioritise the importance of privacy and personal space which clearly clashes with the strong push for urban development, not just in this specific community but all over the Maltese Archipelago. The effectiveness of cultivating a sense of community in this particular situation may rely on innovative and original methods of understanding and delineating the qualities and characteristics that form that community. The establishment of a novel community notion can be accomplished by employing alternative cultural activities that incorporate traditional initiatives and re-evaluating them in the context of contemporary circumstances. For instance, online tools can adapt to the rapid changes in society and digital environments, allowing for the formation of community ties in a virtual setting. This may be particularly attractive to younger individuals and organisations who want a more secluded approach. Additional innovative options could involve the implementation of roof or vertical gardens on newly constructed buildings, which could be used to hold discussions and events. Whilst traditional activities such as the village *festta*, may be one way of enhancing the community identity and cohesion, this may not necessarily be aligned with what the residents want, as per the mixed feelings about this event that emerged from the findings of the study. Hence, contemporary and diverse activities that cater for different age groups and constituents need to be considered and planned carefully to avoid overwhelming the residents. These may be ways of facilitating community interaction whilst ensuring that the residents' highlighted need for privacy is not threatened, as that would have a negative impact on any initiative for interaction.

In the end, communities, whether geographical, virtual or otherwise, provide opportunities for connection. These interactions, especially given the rising rates of loneliness and mental health challenges, are vital for individuals' quality of life.

### *5.1 Recommendations*

Throughout this paper, several recommendations have already been provided within each area of discussion. Additionally, as guided by the Community Cohesion and Participation Framework by Involve (2024), other initiatives may be considered, such as the need of:

- Charting the area of the locality in a comprehensive manner in order to ensure that no group in the community is unintentionally excluded from the scheduled activities. This is particularly important in relation to groups whose perspectives may be presently being marginalised in decision-making processes, such as non-Maltese residents, commuters who are unable to attend events during the day, young people and newcomers.
- Integration of input from the community into policy cycles and establishing mechanisms for public participation in policy consultations and community planning.
- Identification of the formal and informal networks, including residents' associations, faith groups, parent groups, sports organisations, and community activists, that are present in the area. Importantly, any interactions or overlaps amongst these entities need to be considered, as well as the identification of ways of facilitating the interaction between diverse networks and organisations.
- Identification of catalyst-figures in the community, referring to individuals who play a pivotal role in uniting people. The networks, expertise, and experiences of these individuals may be a great asset in enhancing community cohesion.
- Increased awareness of where individuals are currently engaging in social interactions within the community and subsequently considering how these social hubs could serve as connecting points for community organisations seeking to collaborate with residents or as locations to bring community members together.

Additionally, the findings of this study shed light on the need for future research in this area. Primarily, there is a dire need for action research to design, implement and evaluate techniques and activities that could enhance the community identity and cohesion of this particular town. Using pragmatic and enjoyable research methods such as the World Cafe may be an effective way of bringing residents together whilst eliciting recommendations for improving their town and its identity. Finally, this study has shown how important it is to explore residents' perceptions of a community's identity and cohesion, as well as the impact on their quality of life. It would also be beneficial if this study is replicated across other communities since it is an effective way of getting in touch with what people need and want to lead a satisfactory life within their area of residence.

### *5.2 Limitations of the Research Design*

Despite best efforts, the questionnaire response rate was not high enough to be statistically representative of the community of Iklin. However, although the questionnaire data cannot statistically be deemed to represent all of the township's population, it reveals trends among them. Additionally, although the questionnaire was open to participation by all of the community's residents, participation was on a voluntary basis, therefore was dependent on individual choice. Furthermore, the selection of interview and focus group members was mostly based on initial consultations with the Local Government and Parish Church of the town. In order to ensure representation of different sectors within the community, such as from local business, small enterprises and community groups, efforts were made to reach out to such entities, however unfortunately these did not result in increased participation. The views represented may therefore not be wholly representative, or inclusive of all sectors of the community. Thus, despite every attempt to ensure representation of a wide variety of community players and stakeholders, harder-to-reach groups may not be entirely represented.

## **6. Conclusions**

Informed by the findings of a case study of Iklin, this discussion argues that among the values that residents hold most dear are access to green spaces, common areas for shared activities, dedication of planning attention to urban cohesion, and integration of older typologies in urban planning. A consequence of the construction of the apartment blocks that replace the more traditional terraced houses of the past, is a changing of the layout and character of the locality, together with changing demographics. The rapid influx of new residents may bring difficulties but it also offers opportunities. Despite the quantitative data showing that residents enjoy a high place of residence and life satisfaction, relatively low civic participation indicates that a lack of sense of community is present among

residents of Iklin. Initiatives such as cultural events may enhance community cohesion and create opportunities for regular socialising amongst the older and newer residents.

This paper recommends that future urban developments keep the keen demand for green spaces at the heart of any changes to the urban fabric, as well as prioritising the creation of spaces for leisure which would allow residents to meet and interact. Creating scenarios for resident interaction would help preserve community identity and assist cohesion notwithstanding demographic changes in the locality. Additionally, engaging residents and local government in planning, and giving local government greater jurisdiction over new developments or town extensions would encourage civic participation, as well as increasing the likelihood of preserving community cohesion. Consideration also needs to be given to the presence of basic services and amenities within the community, as otherwise localities remain little more than a collection of dwellings that do not offer residents much beyond a roof over their head.

This paper has examined how diverse factors may make the residents of Malta's towns and villages feel integrated with or estranged from their communities. Given that human beings are social animals that seek to create bonds with their environments and communities, preserving and strengthening these bonds and imparting a sense of belonging, would make our towns cohesive and fruitful environments that go beyond being mere conglomerations of dwellings.

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