

## Voices

Hydrate to celebrate

Water accessibility, affordability, and availability at music events in Malta.

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Imagine this scenario: You and your friends are happily dancing to your favourite tunes at one of Malta's most iconic entertainment venues. You decide not to drink alcohol. You approach the bar as there are no water fountains, and tap water in clubs most often includes a warning that it is not safe for human consumption.

First, you must wait in line behind people deciding between a tray of shooters or a beer. After around fifteen minutes, it's finally your turn! You ask for four bottles of water for yourself and your friends. The bar personnel deduct money from your pre-paid wristband, and you rejoin your friends on the dancefloor.

After an hour or so, you decide to get more water and head back to the bar. It's 11pm so the bar is even busier than before... but you wait patiently in line. Finally, it's your turn. You ask for four bottles of water and present your wristband to pay. The bar personnel inform you that you only have enough credit for three bottles, and that you should go to the cashier area to top up your wristband. The minimum amount is €20. You feel confused. Although mathematics has never been your forte, you know you had €20 on your wristband and only bought four 50cl bottles of water. You go back to your friends with only 3 bottles, still thinking, "Where did all that money go?"

You now need to ask your friends to lend you money to top up your wristband with €20 once more. You still cannot understand why you need to pay all this money just to buy water, and question how environmentally sustainable this practice is.

 ***Average spent per person on 50cl water bottles between 6pm and 4am: between €20 and €40.***

 ***Average waste generated per person between 6pm and 4am: five to ten water bottles.***

 **A packet of six locally-produced 50cl water bottles costs around €2.50.**

Such a scenario is commonplace in Malta, an island that hosts a growing number of [tourists](#) within its burgeoning festival and nighttime economy. In this context, we need to think about water, and specifically its availability, accessibility and affordability, for a more sustainable future.


### **Water accessibility in the UK**

In the United Kingdom, [the 2003 Licensing Act](#) made the provision of free tap water in nighttime venues a condition of patrons' license. In 2019, an article on [Dj Mag](#) by Chandler Shortlidge highlighted the intricate relationship between human rights, safety on the dancefloor, and club owners' responsibility in providing accessible water.

Speaking about the situation in the UK, Shortlidge revealed that, despite licensing legislation enacted in 2010 ruling that club operators must provide potable water stations, various clubs and venues continue to circumvent this legal provision. He explained that, even where water is cheaper, the reluctance of some venues to make it freely and easily available puts human lives, operating licenses, and the electronic music scene as a whole in serious and unnecessary jeopardy.

Quoting Dr Chris Luke, an A&E physician who specialises in emergency treatment for nightclub-related problems, he explained that dancing for hours on end in a hot nightclub is akin to running a marathon. The consumption of alcohol and other drugs contribute to speed dehydration and increase risks of heatstroke and other health related problems. Dr Luke recommends drinking a few hundred millilitres of water an hour.

Shortlidge explains that clubs and events also won't necessarily lose money when providing free and accessible water to punters. Speaking about the Dutch entertainment company ID&T, which operates events like Tomorrowland, Mysteryland, and Sensation, he explained that the company originally began giving water freely to cut down on plastic waste. However, it also saw customers who were happier, and simply spent their money on other concessions, like food, merchandise, or alcohol. Shortlidge mentioned also other Dutch events whereby the sale of refillable branded water pouches ensures that festival goers have easy access to cold, fresh drinking water, whilst festival operators cut down on huge amounts of plastic waste.

 **How could Malta improve accessibility, affordability, and availability of drinking water at music events?**

There is no beating round the bush. The price of €3, or more, for a small 50cl bottle of water purchased at a club or music event threatens people's health and wellbeing. We know [from existing research](#) that providing free water is a harm reduction tool; people

might drink less alcohol, reducing the negative impact of alcohol and other drugs' intoxication. The persistent and unmonitored water racket by patrons needs to be urgently discussed at a national level and appropriate legislation introduced to make sure water is treated as a basic human right and not categorised as a recreational beverage on a par with alcoholic beverages.

Should responsibility fall solely on bar operators? Not necessarily, and one needs to distinguish between financial capabilities of large-scale operators hosting more than one thousand people, as opposed to small scale operators and club owners.

Interestingly, over 20 years ago, Sedqa had already tried to address this matter by distributing free water bottles in various venues. However, this informal service had to stop due to lack of financial and human resources. It is a pity that similar preventive services were not invested in and instead, were left to be forgotten.

As Malta continues to celebrate its touristic milestones, promoting itself as a safe entertainment island, it is now more important than ever that the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, the Ministry for Health, and the Ministry for Tourism join forces to financially sustain the availability of free water in different venues and locations across the island. Irrespective if taking place in a public square or a private club, the sustained availability of drinking water at events is a basic human right and has the potential to transform the current unsustainable and risk prone reality into one which promotes welfare and well-being, particularly for vulnerable groups such as young adults with limited financial means who make up the bulk of attendees.

As advocates for human rights and public health, we encourage key stakeholder to organise, in 2025, a national conference on **water accessibility, affordability, and availability** within the night-time economy.

Discussions should also prioritise environmental sustainability and a reduction of plastic waste by festival and music event organisers. Whilst promoting basic human rights for all, these discussions would encourage the development of a more sustainable, responsible, and proactive night-time economy in Malta.

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