

**Keynote Statement by Her Excellency, Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, the President of Malta, at the 2015 International Conference on Sustainable Development, Columbia University, New York City.
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Distinguished guests, Columbia faculty, alumni and students,

Thank you for inviting me to be here with you today. These are days of great importance, not only for us here in New York, close to where all the action is happening, but also for the rest of the seven billion people that make up humankind. In the decades to come, we will be judged by future generations on these eventful moments we are living together today and on the commitments we are all undertaking.

We will be judged on how many people were alleviated from poverty; on the better access to healthcare services; on the improved availability of water and sanitation; on the sustainable economic growth we will see in the years ahead; on the action we are taking on climate change and on our efforts to secure just, peaceful and inclusive societies. The results we are committing to will be put under scrutiny and will be assessed in terms of progress made.

These goals will continue building on what was already achieved by the Millennium Development Goals. They will focus more energy and resources on the needs of the most vulnerable. They will help humanity move forward in a positive direction where everyone can enjoy their rights. They will continue to spur a spirit of strengthened global solidarity with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all peoples.

To me, the focus on the poorest and most vulnerable is the crux of this momentous event. These include people on the move - asylum seeking migrants. When comparing the goals we are agreeing to against the main push and pull migration factors, it is evident that the two are strongly linked. Migration is fuelled by poverty; lack of food and water security; inequalities; economic factors such as employment and economic growth; lack of sustainable practices; climate change; conflict and wars. These are all reflected in the sustainable goals being agreed to and it is indeed a special moment to see all stakeholders come together to help the most vulnerable amongst us, especially migrants.

Migration is also a crosscutting issue in the three dimensions of sustainable development. The economic, social and environmental dimensions all impinge on migration and this is why any discourse on sustainable development has to always include migration as a cornerstone. It is with great satisfaction that I see this notion included in the development goals and I commend everyone involved for having the courage and vision to acknowledge this from a human rights standpoint.

The adoption of the Post-2015 Agenda will undoubtedly make the headlines throughout the world. Nonetheless those same headlines will also include grim stories on migrants and their journey towards better lives. News bulletins in Europe report on human lives lost in an appalling manner on a nearly daily basis. Human rights are ignored and sidelined. Something obviously needs to be done.

The Mediterranean region and mainland Europe are now facing an unprecedented situation, a turning point, which could mean a new beginning for so many or a tragic end for countless people.

Over the past decades the Mediterranean and European regions have experienced a growing influx of migrants. Some seek asylum from violence and unrest, some are economic migrants looking for a better future for themselves and their children. There are many push and pull factors that influence these migration flows, but the bottom line remains the same. The opportunities that exist in Western society offer hope of a better life. For some, they offer the promise of life itself.

Underlying these opportunities are strong economies that generate jobs and create prosperity. Countries come together to form free trade areas, economic partnerships and shared trade policies. These partner countries realise that it is imperative that barriers between one other are eliminated, and that policies which encourage collaboration and an unhindered flow of trade are recognised as the best way forward.

This outlook has proved largely successful. It creates economic growth, promotes development, strengthens trust between and ties with trading partners, and impacts positively on the day-to-day lives of people and businesses.

It positions these economies as some of the biggest and most influential global players in international trade and investment. It is also seen as a way out of economic crises, delivering lower prices, greater consumer choice, and ultimately a higher standard of living.

This economic reality, unhindered and free, without barriers or borders, a success on so many fronts, is nonetheless in stark contrast with policies on migration. Policies on migration adopted by these same Western societies are based on a markedly different set of principles. Indeed, existing migration policies seek to hinder and stop this collective sense of cooperation and mutual benefit for all. Instead of reflecting policies that promote free trade and an open economy, migration policies crush all hope of freedom.

This is the essential point I wish to share with you today. Why are we failing to recognise that migration can be a positive process, adding particular value? Why are we failing to adopt migration policies that facilitate the movement of people rather than restrict them? Why are we putting up walls instead of building bridges?

Human migration has always played a part in the story of our world. It will always exist because of humankind's ongoing impact on our planet. However, it is up to us to influence the way we deal with migration, and the policies our governments choose to adopt. These policies must be rooted in fundamental rights, linked with economic and trade policies that affirm and celebrate the spirit of the UN Covenants.

The demographic change that is underway in many Western societies is one example of the kinds of issues that governments must increasingly take into consideration. For example, in Europe there are real concerns that there will not be enough workers with the right set of skills to replace people approaching retirement. Striving for the full potential of workers by closing the gender gap and improving labour market outcomes are important elements of any policy response to an ageing population. It is therefore key that these intersectionally sensitive concerns are also open to an awareness of migration.

Research and statistics consistently illustrate the fact that migration boosts the working-age population.

They also show that many migrants arrive with skills that facilitate substantial contributions to human capital development. In the context of the labour market, migrants also play vital roles in both declining and fast-growing sectors of the economy. In essence, migrants not only help through their taxes and social contributions, but they also contribute significantly to labour market flexibility.

The facts paint a very different picture from the distorted viewpoints some political actors would have us believe. Some of these actors choose to capitalise on people's anxieties, and spread deliberate misinformation so as to incite hatred and instil fear.

Understanding the true impact of migration is crucial if we are to debate the topic in a constructive and fruitful way. Such debates are imperative because they help shape the design of policies, directly engaging with processes of migration. We need to bear in mind that a right-based commitment must uphold the dignity of migrants throughout the world.

This is the overarching reality that policy makers, governments, and all stakeholders must respect, and that must guide them during any debate or policy formulation.

Dear friends.

We must reflect on the lessons learnt from economic and trade policies; namely, the need for collaboration, partnership, facilitated movement, and no trade borders or barriers. We must think of how these have resulted in great prosperity for us. We have been liberal in our policies regarding trade and economy. We must now be just as generous with people's lives. We must come to imagine a world where migrants are embraced, rather than pushed away.

Once this is achieved, we may truly nurture a world where peace and wellbeing can thrive. We will be in a position to civilly discuss our differences, in societies that celebrate diversity and opportunities for all humanity. Together with my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, I am in the process of establishing an Institute for Peace and Wellbeing, through which these outcomes shall be studied, facilitated, and promoted.

I invite you all to join us in this initiative, and the exciting research it shall carry out in our European, Mediterranean region.

I encourage you to be active in supporting this vision, and to join the efforts of your civil society in urging policy makers to adopt approaches that safeguard human dignity and encourage mutual respect. I am confident that our collective efforts will ultimately translate into a sustainable peace and substantive wellbeing in our communities, and for each and every one of us.

Thank you.