

**Speech by Her Excellency the President of Malta during the World Leaders Forum, Columbia University, New York City.**

**September 2015**

Distinguished guests, Columbia faculty, alumni and students,

Thank you for inviting me to be here with you today. I am honoured to participate in this esteemed forum, from which world leaders have, throughout the years, conveyed strong messages of global vision. My intention is to follow in this tradition, in light of the Sustainable Development Goals. My message shall speak most forcefully to the problem of inequality, and how this impinges on the fulfilment of true sustainable development. My message concerns those among our human family who are most vulnerable, denied access to equal opportunities from the very beginning. In this, we must acknowledge the complexity of human struggle in the form of contemporary migration, and discover how we, as students, as leaders and policy makers, as one united community, can transform the unfolding situation for the better.

It is with great hope for the future of our work that I saw “reduced inequalities” among the list of agreed sustainable development goals. We must treat this as an invitation, extended to the world community, to uncover the root causes of inequality. We must openly and honestly explore the structural deformations that maintain inequality, and the interlocking ‘matrix of oppression’ that holds so many in subjection. Indeed, inequality is an issue of cross cutting concern, which underpins many of the SDGs. If one were to take a closer look at the goals, the intersectional approach we must apply to our focus on inequality becomes clear; be it in securing the elimination of poverty, or achieving gender equality.

Poverty is driven by inequality, and cannot be addressed without resolving underlying sources of inequality. Inequalities take different forms that are mutually reinforcing, which build barriers that hinder people from the enjoyment of equal opportunities, and violate the inherent dignity of the human person. We should all begin our journey through life with equal access to the opportunities, benefits, and responsibilities offered by our societies. These must include access to adequate healthcare, access to education, and full participation in the reform of those systems that perpetuate processes of division and exclusion in our lives and the lives of our communities.

Why must reducing inequality sit at the heart of the Post-2015 agenda?

The Millennium Development Goals offered a promising start. Millions of people are now spared extreme poverty; developing regions have seen an increase in primary education enrolment; there is more access to safe sources of water; the rate of HIV infections has fallen - but there is much more that must be done. In some ways, there are stronger barriers of inequality we must now overcome, so as to ensure that not one of us is left behind.

If we want to live in a more sustainable and peaceful world, we must accept that the insidious reach of inequality affects everyone, not simply those directly afflicted. The

effects of inequality are not a problem reserved for the excluded and most disadvantaged. Inequality infects the social and cultural fabric of our nations, and affects all strata of society.

For example, in an economic context, inequalities translate into reduced economic growth because affected people do not successfully enter the work force. Once this happens their potential as workers, innovators, entrepreneurs, and business people is lost. This loss is felt by the entire economy; it ripples throughout society, when the added value they could have brought is practically lost.

Inequalities also compromise social cohesion and security. In aggravated cases it can result in situations of escalated conflict and manifestations of violence. Valuable human lives are put at risk, opportunities are destroyed, and the potential of future generations is compromised.

Addressing inequalities is imperative not only because it is the only right thing to do, but because it is a prerequisite for the sustainable and peaceful world we would create together.

Although the last few decades have seen significant progress in certain areas of concern, the reality is that a number of inequalities have persisted and enlarged since the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals.

In a world enthralled by the force of market-driven economies, certain policies tend to favour the interests of those who already possess a considerable advantage. Oftentimes this comes at the expense of the poorest and the most marginalised of people, especially where these policies relate to the provision of basic social needs.

The restriction of access to natural resources, so vital for survival and economic independence, has also increased. Compounding this, the risks associated with environmental degradation and climate change have become issues of unavoidable concern. The situation has put already disadvantaged communities in a place of increasing precariousness. In some instances the threats to their survival have become intolerable, pushing them into further isolation and vulnerability.

Therefore, the issue of reduced inequalities must always qualify and inform our post-2015 outlook. In real terms, what should be done to reduce inequality?

We must break cycles of disadvantage, passed intergenerational within particular groups and communities. We must break cycles of reinforcement that foster discrimination and exclusion. Most importantly, we must address the cultural and structural causes of these inequalities and not merely focus, case-by-case, on symptomatic manifestations. We must ensure that systems of exclusion are replaced by strategies of inclusion. We must set the elimination of inequality as our goal, and strive to begin multi-dimensional social processes that help people to gain control over their own lives.

In a post-2015 world we need to move away from stereotypes and prejudices that fuel inequalities. We need to bring to the fore those elements that are prioritise wellbeing and hope. Where, for example, some may label migrants as intruders and a burden to society,

it is our duty to disrupt this damaging discourse and replace it with the reality of added values and opportunities that migrants bring to our societies.

To achieve this vision of a new world, rooted in equal opportunities, there must be a strong consensus and a strong commitment from the global community. Change must take place on all fronts, a concerted effort enacted on national and international levels.

Appropriate policy and legal frameworks that protect the interests of all, including the most vulnerable, must be set up for this transformation to be realistically achieved. And ultimately, these frameworks must be accompanied by a change in social attitudes, a reorientation that embraces the centrality of human rights.

It is only within this context that inequality can be reduced and eliminated. By proxy, it is the only way our Sustainable Development Goals can become a reality. It shall be no easy task, because our work presents a challenge to the status quo. It is a challenge to those in power, a demand that they take into consideration the position of others who are denied the privileges they take for granted. Yet it is only in issuing this challenge, and standing firm, that we may ever achieve true sustainable development.

The fact that reducing inequalities has become an integral part of the SGDs is already a step in the right direction. Furthermore, the goals' numerous targets provide practical guidance on how inequalities can be addressed. These include clear information on the indicators that will be used to measure our success. These targets must be fully endorsed by all member states, if we are to stand a better chance of successfully reaching our goals on a global scale.

It is time for states to take concrete and comprehensive action, within a rights-based approach that tackles economic, social, cultural, political and environmental considerations. In this way, legislators and diverse actors shall ensure that equality and intersectionally sensitive non-discrimination are entrenched in law, led by the framework of human rights and implemented through policy.

Appropriate action is necessary to protect people from discrimination, violence, exploitation, and harm. Essential safeguards need to be in place to counteract threats of violence and unfair economic and financial activities that are especially detrimental to certain communities and groups of people.

We must undertake measures to support individuals and groups whose capabilities have been diminished or constrained by the crushing weight of inequalities. Furthermore, states must strengthen the capacity of rights-holders to make valid claims, so that inequalities and violations are seriously addressed. The role of such mechanisms is essential.

We must call on states to enact macroeconomic policies that create appropriate employment opportunities. This is central, so as to ensure that new entrants in the labour force are afforded adequate opportunities. It will also provide jobs for the unemployed, and move the employment market away from those vulnerable forms of employment dominated by exploitation and degradation.

In mitigating the risks of inequalities, states must guarantee basic services. Quality education, healthcare, food, sanitation, and social security that are accessible to all, and without which inequalities will persist and inevitably worsen.

The guarantee of basic services goes hand in hand with the provisions of social welfare systems that cater for unexpected adverse situations. These include declines in income due to illness, old age, and other factors. The effective implementation of these measures will ensure that affected persons will not be automatically relegated to a compromised situation due to conditions often out of their direct control. Such measures will in fact empower and assist them, extending a hand of care when it is needed the most.

In order to reduce inequalities, states must facilitate free and quality access to information and knowledge so that everyone may actively participate in their respective political processes. There is an alarming tendency for those suffering inequalities to be unrepresented in political processes that could potentially address and alleviate their oppression. As a result, their concerns are not given the importance they deserve.

This ties in with the importance of decentralised governance. Strengthening the capacity of local governments will facilitate the provision of policies that apply to local and regional situations in a direct and concentrated manner. This will help alleviate area-specific situations of concern, with the added value of provide local solutions that foster local participation. This encourages participation by all groups, including those affected by inequalities, presenting platforms from which they may speak their truth in a place of mutual respect. This is an excellent way in which we may make the post-2015 framework relevant at all levels.

Special consideration needs to be given to those countries where governance has been weakened. These include conflict and post-conflict countries where the building of government capacity at all levels needs to be prioritised, in extended programmes of peacebuilding and recovery. Inequalities are very real in such contexts, and as such need to be highlighted because of the increased precariousness faced by vulnerable groups and communities.

An overarching dimension that connects these remarks is the need for accountability. Namely, the ways in which policy makers and governments are held to account for the design, monitoring, and implementation of policies. Accountability is essential if we are to ensure that adequate action is taken by those who have a duty to implement functioning frameworks that protect and defend the rights of all.

In essence, the onus falls on states endorsing these goals, in a shared commitment to reduce inequalities. States have the capacity to do so, and also have the obligation to do so. By implementing carefully orchestrated constellations of policy and reform, states will be fulfilling their mandate in providing the best for all their people, while also acting in accordance with their international legal obligations.

The international community and civil society have a role to play in highlighting developments that aggravate inequalities. For example, by actively participating in the Universal Periodic Review process, the international community and civil society can both

play key roles in making sure that we all progress along one path, united towards achieving our SDGs.

When focusing on the symptom rather than the cause, states often adopt policies that address immediate situations through short-term objectives rather than developing long-term strategies to address underlying inequality. Policy makers are thus called to keep mindful of the economic, social and cultural aspects of inequality that impede lasting progress.

We must remember that many people affected most keenly from inequality also suffer from highly disadvantaged starting points in life. This is a barrier to the development of their full potential and their ability to access and harness opportunities. It is therefore crucial that the states endorsing the SDGs take adequate action to acknowledge and address these compounded difficulties.

In my work within the community, I am in constant contact with the lived experience of inequality. This is a reality of global proportions, and no country is spared. Situations might change from one nation to the next or from one continent to the other, but the bottom line remains the same. Inequality continues to exist at the expense of the many who are directly affected, and to the detriment of the whole community.

One of the major forms of inequality that has huge impact on our societies is without doubt income inequality, and the resulting risk of poverty. As economies emerge from a particularly difficult period, we must take this opportunity to reflect on the measures adopted by governments and their effects on people.

In Europe, one in four Europeans is at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This translates into millions of people struggling to make ends meet. This is particularly worrying because inequalities in income and the radically asymmetric distribution of wealth and resources often leads to other, sometimes more subtle, inequalities. Indeed, inequalities in income may also themselves be a consequence of other inequalities and experiences of oppression.

In this respect, poverty and inequality are intimately correlated. Oftentimes, poverty is common among people who belong to communities and groups that are subject to discrimination and prejudice. Furthermore, the effects of poverty, like homelessness, are shown to lead to compounded forms of discrimination.

Fortunately, there is a growing recognition that the current scale of inequality is simply unsustainable. Long term unemployment rates and the rise in poverty, linked with austerity measures, are being replaced by a recognition that strategic social investment must be made. To reduce this kind of inequality, investment must safeguard the future of citizens worldwide, an investment in the social realities of each and every community.

We must also focus on related matters, such as the Gender Pay Gap. This difference in salary for the same kind of job is a reflection of ongoing discrimination and inequalities in the labour market, which manifest disturbing and deeply embedded cultural prejudices. It affects a huge number of women worldwide, and is a problem that afflicts even our most advanced economies.

It must be remembered that women play a vital role in employment and economic growth. We bring talents and a set of skills that are necessary for the provision of the sustainable development under discussion today. By undervaluing women's work and the contributions of women, the whole economy loses out. Closing the gender gap will also help women enjoy better pensions, an important factor to keep in mind especially when discussing the likelihood of elderly women experiencing poverty in old age.

By closing the gender gap we shall send a strong message, a hopefully call for social justice. The "Feminization of Poverty" is reflects a huge injustice, one of most worrying forms of inequality faced today.

Policy makers must keep in mind that these women, caught in the cycle of poverty, often lack the necessary access to change their situation. Their efforts to provide for their families and communities go unrewarded and unrecognised. Their situation is further compounded by limited or no access to resources such as credit, land, or inheritance. The empowerment of these women is therefore a priority that the international community cannot ignore if it is serious about achieving a sustainable future for all.

Gender equality, in all its forms, is a fundamental goal of development. This must also include the equality of gender minorities, shifting the power of gender self-determination into the hands of the individual. However, in many places around the world, these various targets are yet to be achieved. We must recognise that issues of gender are strongly linked with other goals, and will have tremendous effects on the overall success of the SDGs.

Even if some progress has been made, the fact is that women and girls continue to occupy a disadvantaged position throughout the world. This inequality is not limited to location, or to whether the situation occurs in poor households or in developing countries. Discrimination occurs in situations of conflict, and places of ostensible peace.

Reports continuously show that a large inequality trend persists worldwide. It affects a wide range of rights including health, education, employment, and access to justice. In practical terms this means that half of the world's population suffers from a diminished social status, and does not enjoy all its rights. Half of the world's population suffers reduced freedom, and diminished dignity.

In looking at a more equal future, free from inequalities, we must all recognise that gender inequality negatively affects those who identify as men as well as women. The road toward gender equality needs to be viewed not merely as a transfer of opportunities from one group to another but as an opportunity for all to enjoy their rights. In this respect, the role of men and boys is important in promoting true gender equality.

As some of you know, I have been chosen by UN Women to convey this message through the HeForShe campaign, as one of ten heads of states that have endorsed this campaign and are determined to make a difference.

Together with other global leaders, I have joined the HeForShe solidarity movement for gender equality. In essence we shall engage men and boys as agents for change, motivated to become advocates for gender equality. The campaign encourages men and boys to speak out and take appropriate action against inequalities faced by women and girls, with a concurrent awareness of the struggles faced by gender minorities.

I am happy to announce here that the HeForShe Malta campaign will be officially launched in the beginning of October. Community leaders, representatives from the business sector, academics, sportsmen and men from different walks of life have joined our campaign to deliver a message of equality. I hereby commend UN Women for this powerful initiative, and congratulate all those who have joined this campaign worldwide. Together, we can reduce inequalities and create a world that reflects our hard won values.

A key messages of the campaign is that gender equality is not an issue faced by women or gender minorities alone. It is a human rights issue that affects us all, from which we all stand to benefit. Gender equality liberates us from the dual chains of privilege and oppression, from prescribed social roles and the gender stereotypes of a binary system that must be interrogated, and transformed.

These are days of great importance, not only for us here in New York, close to the action, but also for the rest of the seven billion people that make up our human family. In the decades to come, we will be judged by future generations on the eventful choices we make together today, and on the commitments we undertake.

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

These goals will continue building on what has been achieved by the Millennium Development Goals. They will focus more energy and more resources on the needs of the most vulnerable. They will help us move forward, kindling 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, particularly asylum seeking migrants. When comparing the goals we agree to against the main push and pull of migration factors, it is evident that the two are strongly linked.

Migration is fuelled by inequality and poverty; lack of food and water security; economic factors such as employment; lack of sustainable practices; climate change; conflict and war. These are all reflected in our work, and it is indeed a special moment to see all stakeholders join together to care for the most vulnerable among us, especially migrants.

Migration is 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 must include migration as a cornerstone. It is with great satisfaction that I see this concern included in the development, goals and I commend everyone involved for having the courage and vision to acknowledge this from the standpoint of human rights.

The adoption of the Post-2015 Agenda will undoubtedly make headlines throughout the world. Nonetheless, those same headlines will also include grim stories about migrants and their often thwarted journey in search of better lives. News bulletins in Europe report on

the horrific loss of human life, on a near daily basis. Human rights are all too often sidelined and ignored. Something must 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 factors that influence these migration flows, but the bottom line remains the same. The opportunities that exist in Western societies 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 it is imperative that barriers between one other are eliminated, and that policies which encourage collaboration and an unhindered flow of trade are accepted 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 hopes of freedom.

This is an 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 instance, 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 key that these intersectional 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 us during any debate or policy formulation.

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 and academic partners, 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.

Dear Friends,

As you have surely gathered by now, I am truly concerned about the effects of inequality and about how we may further the wellbeing of every one of us, especially those who are most marginalised and most vulnerable.

I am concerned that the rights of the few often impinge on the rights of the many. I am concerned about the vicious circles of oppression produced by inequality, and how those already at a disadvantage seem trapped, with no hope of freedom.

As a leader, it is not acceptable for me to do nothing in the face of these problems. We cannot ignore this loss of human potential, this loss of opportunities, this loss of dignity and even of life.

We cannot ignore the plight of individuals and families as they migrate, in search of a better life. We cannot ignore the cries of those victims of gender inequality, as they continue to suffer injustices. We cannot continue to push already marginalised groups further away, and ignore the shared humanity that binds us. That is why we must have strong hopes for the future of these sustainable development goals.

We have come together to endorse a collective vision for a world that promises transformation and renewal. Today, we all share a vision of a future that is inclusive, a vision of the future that restores hope and offers the promise of fulfilment.

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 by our collective efforts, we will produce a sustainable peace and substantive wellbeing in our nations, our communities, and for each and every one of us.

Thank you for your attention.