

Keynote speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, president of Malta at the International Conference '*Citizens are Speaking*'

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Honourable Members of Parliament
Ladies and gentlemen

Good morning. I extend a warm welcome to you on the second day of the *Citizens are Speaking* conference being held here in Malta. To the foreign delegates, I hope you have some time to see our beautiful country and enjoy its historical and natural sites.

I am so pleased that Cross Culture International Foundation, Malta, in partnership with non-government organisations from all countries represented here, have engaged on a project to encourage European Union citizens to speak on the issue of migration, thereby also encouraging civic participation.

I trust you had lively discussions yesterday on a subject that is very dear to me.

Unfortunately, we often hear negative and misguided comments and arguments on the issue of migration, overlooking both the humane aspects and the inherent complexity of the phenomenon, which impacts society in many different ways and calls for a variety of responses, including a coherent and comprehensive approach in order to reap the benefits and address the challenges deriving from migration.

Over the past decade, the Mediterranean and European regions have experienced a growing influx of migrants.

The plight of thousands of migrants putting their lives in peril to cross the Mediterranean has shocked us all. At this very moment, the biblical numbers of people crossing on land through Europe has stunned politicians into promising action, and has certainly caught the attention of the media, and of everyone with a heart to care.

Some migrants are seeking asylum from political oppression, violence and unrest, or poverty; or as a result of climate change.

Some come from countries where the ravages of war make it imperative for people to seek safety and flee for their lives. Yet others are economic migrants looking for a better future for themselves and their children.

There are many different aspects of migration that need not only to be brought to the fore, but also that require action. And action needs to be taken now!

We need to strengthen operations to save lives at sea by stepping up search and rescue operations.

At the same time, we need to work by addressing the root causes of migration in closer cooperation with countries of origin and transit in the Mediterranean and in Africa.

I also believe that immediate action needs to be taken against criminal people smuggling networks. I believe that an international anti-human smuggling coalition, mandated by the United Nations, should be set up and given a mandate to intervene to disrupt smugglers of persons who are making a profit from their plight.

We need to think about ways how people in peril are protected and their human rights upheld. We need to think in the longer term so that future generations are spared these tragedies and the loss of life is transformed into respect for diversity and inclusion at all levels.

There are many push and pull factors that influence 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.

The underlying opportunities in the West include strong economies that generate jobs and create prosperity. 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.

Education is one asset we need to use and fully exploit in our favour. We can facilitate education about the different cultures that exist beyond our borders.

The more we know about each other's traditions, customs, culture, religions and more, the more we can understand each other and live in harmony.

This effort at education can have a double effect. Migrants need the opportunities to educate themselves about the customs of their new location and learn to appreciate what is considered as acceptable or not.

In this sense, specific training and language training can be facilitated so to foster interaction and inclusion with the greater community. Education can also be used to empower migrants.

In consultation with migrants themselves, training can be provided in a variety of languages, professions and skills that will ultimately translate into more control of their future.

If education in specific skills is facilitated, migrants can become more employable and as a result more empowered.

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.

Furthermore, by becoming employed, pressure on the host states' financial assistance will be relieved and transformed into an asset.

Hence, migrants will not be considered a burden sharing but as an opportunity sharing that will impact positively on our depleting workforce in Europe and subsequently, our concerns regarding the sustainability of our welfare and pension systems.

Education also needs to reach our children. Children today are already benefiting from having migrant schoolmates. They can understand, in perhaps the most innocent and honest of ways, that their migrant companions are children like them.

This instilled sense of inclusion needs to be highlighted and celebrated throughout the education systems so that future generations see diversity as an asset that adds value to the society we live in.

I see potential in migrants' skills and in their diversity which I believe will strengthen the societies we belong to. I see a future where we live and prosper side by side.

So 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 United Nations Covenants.

Last month, I addressed the United Nations Summit in New York, where the Sustainable Development Goals were adopted and agreed upon by all the countries represented. If we truly want to attain these goals by 2030, we need to work towards the inclusion of all people, including migrants, if no one is to be left behind.

In actual fact, 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 has to always include migration.

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.

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.

We need to be engaged in promoting a policy of integration towards migrants with the purpose of securing greater social cohesion and a better quality of life.

I reiterate Malta's stance to voice and manifest its concerns with Europe and beyond that unless a concrete, realistic and lasting solution is urgently found to contain the present state-of affairs, the problem will stay with us. Unless the matter is treated as a priority, I am very much afraid that the human tragedy unfolding before us, will continue for a long time to come.

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.

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.

I augur that you continue your deliberations enthusiastically and with all the energy you can muster. I encourage you to make your voices heard in order to bring about a difference in people's lives.

Enjoy the rest of the conference.