

**Opening Speech “Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat”,
25 May 2017**

[Salutations]

It is my pleasure to open this policy discussion organised by the University of Warwick, in collaboration with the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, and the University of Malta.

I am informed that this research, which has been carried out across key Mediterranean island points of arrival, and migration routes, has been launched in Brussels, in order to stimulate discussion with European Union policymakers and civil society.

I am pleased to note that, not only is this research keeping us updated about recent developments in policy, but I am sure that your research recommendations are proposing a way forward to improve our policy responses.

My contribution today shall therefore focus on two themes, which have been essential to the successful outcomes of the “Crossing the Mediterranean” project.

Firstly, the importance of listening and acting upon the shared experiences and narratives of migrants themselves, respected in their dignity, as collaborators in the process of policy review and improvement.

Secondly, the need for us to use these narratives as an opportunity to ask deeper and more critical questions about our contemporary status quo.

In so doing, we will be replacing systems of exclusion and precarity with a more inclusive and participatory society.

For example, I recently launched a report published by the Migrant Women Association of Malta, which highlights the importance of participative approaches to research.

This report directly engaged with migrant women in Malta, and showed that 85 percent of female asylum seekers are unemployed, even though nearly half of them have been actively looking for employment for over a year.

The report presented by the Migrant Women Association of Malta clearly reflects the multiple levels of discrimination migrant women often face.

Such discrimination is not only on the basis of their gender but also because of their ethnicity and cultural background. This report clearly states that these multiple factors are locking migrant women out of the job market.

Despite half of the women participants having completed secondary schooling, and 20 percent having a university education, nearly three-quarters of migrant women currently in employment in Malta are working without a contract and legal protections.

Listening to the experiences of these women has, therefore, been crucial.

We must continue to ensure that the narratives of all migrants are heard and that they have a place at our discussion table. The experiences of migrants must influence the development of sensitive and relevant policies in this sector.

In so doing, we shall be creating an inclusive and participative approach to policy-making, in this country, across the European Union, and beyond.

Let me draw your attention to another report, published earlier this year by the Jesuit Refugee Service and Aditus Foundation.

The report found that 80 percent of asylum seekers, who were surveyed, are living at risk of poverty, which is more than five times the rate in the general Maltese population.

Meanwhile, 2015 indicators from Eurostat reveal that migrants, in general, continue to face high levels of discrimination even in regular employment areas.

According to the study, a shocking 38 percent of Maltese people said that they would be uncomfortable working with a Muslim person, while 38 percent would not accept a black working colleague.

The findings of such reports, from a local context, show just how much more work needs to be done to improve the situation faced by migrants who find themselves in countries of transit or arrival.

The multiple destinations along these journeys, analysed in “Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat”, are places of potential welcome and safety.

However, we must ask ourselves, how many of the interviewed participants felt welcomed, respected, and safe during their difficult journeys?

What more must be done to ensure that our policies are focused on the dignity and the wellbeing of the individuals and their families who are crossing the Mediterranean Sea for safety?

How can we create safe spaces for migrants, not only while people are on the move, but also when they attempt to lay down roots in a new society?

Understanding the economic, social, but also the psychological reasons why people feel compelled to make dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean will shed more light on the struggles currently being faced by migrants.

Today's research opens a new perspective, on the effects that our policy frameworks are having on the lives of migrants, including their expectations and their concerns.

This research puts a human face and tells a human story, replacing the all-too-often anonymous statistics.

It is these human narratives which should determine the direction and implementation of our legislative actions and policies.

The experiences of migrants remind us of the need to challenge the status quo, and dig deeper into the diverse and complex drivers of the phenomenon of migration.

The first-hand narratives of migrants also remind us of the need to review and to revise the ways we engage with the different communities, who undertake perilous journeys in search of a better life.

Furthermore, I believe we must continue to work together, to urge our national and international authorities to ensure that safe and legal routes into countries of safety are made available.

Such availability for safe and legal routes will prevent people from endangering their lives, during perilous journeys which, all too often, end in tragedies.

Taking a long term perspective, we must also do more to ensure that access to necessary information is made available to migrants, at each step of their journey, about their legal rights in particular.

We must also remember that certain migrants are more vulnerable than others. These include unaccompanied children, who often face greater risks, as was explored during a recent conference organised by Missing Children Europe, in collaboration with the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, entitled "Lost in Migration."

At this conference, we heard the first-hand experiences of migrant children who had made unaccompanied journeys across the Mediterranean. The conference outcomes were presented to European authorities, and these outcomes are already making an impact on policy directions in this sector.

In this way, we are emphasising the need for the rights of migrant children to be respected and taken seriously.

As citizens of democratic countries, we must always, and in all ways, emphasise the effective implementation of the universality of our Human Rights, to safeguard the basic dignity of all.

Ultimately, each and every one of us must recognise and promote a culture of positive peace, whether as academics, as policymakers, or as civil society activists, but most of all, as the active citizens of our nations.

Positive peace means that we must continue to promote a systemic, structural, and cultural transformation of our status quo.

Positive peace means we must develop a culture of wellbeing, which nurtures dignified and respectful relationships within oneself, with other persons, and with other groups within society.

We must not see ourselves from an isolated and fragmented perspectives.

We integrate our own experiences within the larger whole.

We must all connected together, in one resilient, prosperous, and inclusive community of life.

This research gives us the opportunity to do just that, with the narratives of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Thanks to this opportunity, we are capable of building more empathy with others, and I hope that we can reach out to take more practical actions.

I augur that such a spirit of solidarity will touch the hearts and minds of policymakers and authorities across the European Union.

I hope that policymakers and authorities will read “Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat”, and be compelled to take direct and effective action, for the lasting benefit not only of all people in migration, but also all the members of our societies.

Thank you for your attention.