

## **2nd National Conference on Wellbeing, Opening Speech, 2017**

**[Salutations]**

**It is my pleasure to open this second edition of the National Conference on Wellbeing, facilitated by the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, in collaboration with the Australian High Commission in Malta.**

**It is becoming increasingly clear, thanks to research conducted both locally and internationally, that the quality of the environment is a key determinant of people's wellbeing, and that living in environments which are compromised by pollution can reduce our standards of wellbeing.**

**Last year's National Conference on Wellbeing highlighted this alarming reality, as has the work of the the Community Forum chaired by Dr Marie Briguglio, within the President's Foundation.**

**Over the past 2 years, through a series of consultations, the forum raised awareness about the importance of safe, healthy public spaces, and the important role that such spaces play, in the lives of diverse communities across Malta and Gozo.**

**Such a focus on the need for green spaces is a prominent topic of discussion in my own meetings with children and young people, from schools across our islands.**

**It is clear to me that our younger generations are deeply aware of the need for greater emphasis to be placed on securing environmental health, and that they are very vocal about their concerns.**

**Moreover, thanks to the Foundation's research, it has become clear that pollution and traffic density are among the key factors which**

**suppress wellbeing in the Maltese Islands. Today's conference is part of the fruits that the Community Forum has borne, encouraging us to place a critical and proactive focus on the questions at hand.**

**The loss of our open spaces, in both rural and urban areas, is a social as well as an environmental challenge. It poses the very real risk that we could lose those precious places where we can come together to form strong communities, to build relationships, and to be connected to our environmental heritage, and to one another.**

**The loss of green spaces because of construction, over-development, and traffic implies that we must do more to ensure that the long-term health and sustainable wellbeing of the individual, the family, and the community are kept at the heart of our national agenda.**

**How, then, can we achieve a mutually satisfying balance between the need to expand our economic and infrastructural horizons, while still prioritising the dignity of our citizens and the integrity of our environment?**

**According to indicators from the European Environmental Agency, Malta is one of the most noise polluted places in the European Union. However, there is, until now, little investment in research which raises awareness and promotes responses to this issue and its implications on human health.**

**Traffic, construction, and certain high-powered industries are all contributing to a situation which, according to the Noise Abatement Society of Malta, creates adverse effects to health and wellbeing in Malta.**

**On other fronts, our country remains dependent on fossil fuels, and greenhouse gas emissions have not declined in any significant**

**way. The implications this has on our climate, and adaptability to extreme weather events, merits immediate attention.**

**For this reason, I am pleased that our keynote speaker, Professor Bambrick, will share her knowledge and experiences in this essential area.**

**Malta is rightly proud of having successfully attracted foreign workers, tourists, and visitors to our shores. We also have growing proportions of elderly people living longer, more fulfilled lives, thanks to improvements in health care.**

**However, this also means that more people, and indeed, more vulnerable people, are being exposed to increasing levels pollution. Very young children, and even unborn babies, are particularly sensitive to air pollutants.**

**According to data from a recent report published by the World Health Organisation, entitled *“Inheriting a Sustainable World: Atlas on Children’s Health and the Environment”*, a large portion of the most common causes of death among children between 1 month to 5 years of age are preventable, by interventions known to reduce environmental risks.**

**According to Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General, and I quote, “A polluted environment is a deadly one, particularly for young children. Their developing organs and immune systems, and smaller bodies and airways, make them especially vulnerable to dirty air and water.” End quote.**

**Indeed, the World Health Organisation reports that a quarter of deaths of young children are in fact due to pollution. We cannot allow this situation to continue, and I urge our national authorities to recognise that issues of environmental health affect Malta, our**

**Mediterranean Region, and the European Union, just as much as they affect developing parts of the world.**

**Furthermore, we cannot forget the increased vulnerability of people living in poverty, for whom it is often impossible to escape congested and unhealthy environments. We cannot forget those individuals and families experiencing precarity, not only socially and economically, but also environmentally, and the massive impact this can have on their lives.**

**I am informed that an increased perception of air pollution exposure is reported by persons with lower educational level and increasing age, which indicates elevated risk levels among these populations. Moreover, spatial issues regarding the location of neighbourhoods in dense or high traffic neighbourhoods play a significant role, which indicates that living in more affluent, residential areas makes one less vulnerable to the full force of air pollution exposure.**

**Environmental health inequalities are a reality in Malta, as attested to by the latest report on *“Environmental Health Inequalities”* released by the Maltese Ministry for Health, in collaboration with the Environmental Health Directorate, and European office of the World Health Organisation.**

**More detailed information is still needed to enable more in depth assessments with respect to environmental exposure data, such as indicators for injury and air pollution, and certain at-risk groups, such as the elderly, the young, and those living at risk of poverty.**

**Such efforts would directly assist in creating targeted and powerful interventions, of clear benefit to vulnerable groups and communities.**

**There is a growing need for specific studies, which explore the effects of traffic and construction, as causes of air pollution and resultant risks of respiratory illness. Such studies must be paralleled by research on the availability of urban green spaces, safe walkways, and how best to promote sustainable wellbeing for all members of our society.**

**Encouraging greater synergies between different areas of focus, including the economy, the environment, wellbeing, and the health sector, we shall be better placed to create forward-looking policies.**

**By 2050, the European Commission estimates that 80% of the European Union's population will live in urban areas. Furthermore, 30% will be over the age of 65.**

**We must therefore be more mindful of the complex choices that we make today and the effects they will have on tomorrow's world.**

**I believe we must ask ourselves how large, elderly, urban populations can best be served, in terms of environmental wellbeing, while also taking into consideration the effects of climate change which are transforming the world for future generations.**

**We can no longer afford to treat environmental issues as isolated concerns, presuming that they always have clear causes and can be fixed with an immediate, one-off response.**

**Diverse risks are experienced differently within our ecosystems. They have complex sources and interact in multi-dimensional ways. The work of academics and practitioners, working in increasingly trans-disciplinary approaches, is essential if we are to effectively address these complex issues.**

**I am confident that your deliberations during today's conference will make a much-needed contribution to the conversations currently underway, on issues of environmental wellbeing and environmental justice in Malta and further afield.**

**We must continue to prioritise the work of scientists, researchers, and people on the ground, who are collaborating to give us a clearer picture of the world's interconnected social and ecological systems.**

**Let us also remember the impact of globalisation, which has accelerated the reach and the intensity of today's environmental concerns. We cannot allow politically motivated rhetoric to hide the realities of climate change, which is a powerful example of a global concern that has universal causes and repercussions.**

**Not only are individual countries and entire regions affected, but the phenomenon of migration is itself motivated, in no small way, by the catastrophic effects of climate change on crop yields and the habitability of some of the most impoverished parts of the world.**

**In conclusion, we must remember that each one of us has responsibility to ensure that the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals find full and effective implementation across our lives and in our nations. This must include the area of environmental health, particularly in line with SDG 3, which aims to ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all.**

**Let us keep investing in preventative strategies that keep us ahead of the curve, applying foresight and the lessons of resilience to all our efforts. We owe it to ourselves, to our children, and to all future generations to have a long-term view. We must hold ourselves and our authorities accountable to this far-reaching vision, for the sustainability of all life on our planet.**

**I am very pleased to welcome today's panel of national experts and researchers, who will share their expertise and findings with us. Your contributions shall continue to deepen the discussion we began last year, about the role of wellbeing in the Maltese Islands.**

**I am confident that, thanks to your efforts and the combined efforts of all of us, we shall continue to promote awareness of wellbeing as an essential guide in our national journey, to ensure healthier and more dignified lives for every member of our society.**

**Thank you.**