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*Opening Remarks, delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of  
Malta, at the European Guide Dog Federation's 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Annual General Meeting and Conference*

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1<sup>st</sup> December 2017

**It is my pleasure to share some brief remarks, at the Annual General Meeting of the European Guide Dog Federation. I am very pleased that you have chosen Malta to celebrate your tenth anniversary.**

**Let me take this opportunity to welcome all of the international delegates to our islands. I hope you shall find some time, in your busy schedules, to enjoy the beauty of the Maltese Islands, and our Mediterranean culture.**

**Let also take the opportunity to commend the European Guide Dog Federation, and your collaborators, for your essential work, to advance the needs and rights of guide dog owners at a European level. I am pleased that your work is bringing visibility to this important sphere of inclusion, and, in a more tangible way, you are ensuring accessibility, independent mobility, and employability.**

**I believe that every person in Europe, who is blind or partially sighted, and could benefit from a guide dog, has the right to receive such assistance, along with appropriate training.**

**I am confident that this conference is a valuable, safe space, for guide dog professionals from across Europe, to share their good practices, and also keep informed about the most recent developments in your sector.**

**Furthermore, I am informed that not only is this the largest international gathering of guide dogs and service users, but it is also a groundbreaking conference because of the innovative focus, which the Federation is placing on this sector.**

**I feel very pleased that this conference is highlighting the relevance of the United Nations' Agenda 2030 to your sector.**

**Agenda 2030, which was agreed upon by all the leaders of the world in 2015, is universal in its vision to implement sustainable change, for the benefit of all the communities and societies in the world.**

**Furthermore, Agenda 2030 specifically mentions persons with disabilities, and also underlines the particular challenges faced by persons in vulnerable situations.**

**For this reason, it is clear that the mandate of the United Nations is embracing each and every one of us, not only in abstract terms, but very tangible and practical ways.**

**Agenda 2030 is a structured framework, for all governments, to ensure inclusive and sustainable societies, for the future of our planet and humanity as a whole.**

**For example, SDG Number 4 promotes education, by building inclusive learning environments and providing the much-needed assistance for persons with disabilities. Moreover, it highlights the need for a holistic sense of sensitivity, towards the needs and requirements of others, no matter their status or abilities.**

**Furthermore, SDG Number 8 is invested in promoting inclusive economic growth in order to allow persons with disabilities to productively access the job market, and have opportunities to reach their potential, in dignified and quality employment.**

**While SDG Number 10 emphasises the social, economic and political inclusion of persons with disabilities, SDG Number 11 talks about creating accessible cities and water resources.**

**It goes on to emphasise the need for affordable, accessible, and sustainable transport systems, and to provide universal access to safe, inclusive, accessible public spaces, for the benefit of all citizens.**

**Finally, SDG Number 17 underlines the importance of data collection and the continued monitoring of the SDGs, while emphasising the importance of specific data when it comes to questions of disability.**

**Therefore, it is clear that Agenda 2030, and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, are an essential lifeline for each and every one of us.**

**The responsibility to effectively implement Agenda 2030 does not only rest with our respective governments. We all have a duty to make the SDGs work, for us, for our families, and for our communities.**

**One way we can do that is by making sure that our deliberations keep highlighting the SDGs, so as to hold our authorities accountable for their full implementation.**

**This is why I must commend the European Guide Dog Federation, and your collaborators, for making sure that these Goals have a place in your discussions.**

**Moreover, I am also informed that you shall be holding discussions about the European Accessibility Act, and other legislative frameworks and policy efforts. In this way, you will be helping our authorities to legislate and implement policies, to improve the lives of people with disabilities, across Europe.**

**Most importantly, I hope that this conference shall provide a space for the empowerment of people who work with guide dogs, sharing mutual best practices, to overcome challenges through effective solutions.**

**This conference is also an opportunity to develop new friendships and partnerships, across your organisations.**

**I believe that there are a number of valuable reasons why the collaboration between guide dogs and people with visual, and other, impairments is so essential.**

**First of all, the special relationship that is formed between people and their animals is a source of strength and confidence. Individuals living with various disabilities can, thanks to this relationship, nurture a greater sense of self-esteem and cultivate a feeling of security.**

**Like any other dog companion, guide dogs also help with the reduction of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness through the comfort of their constant companionship.**

**Most importantly of all, guide dogs are a source of improved wellbeing. A dog's companionship promotes opportunities for socialisation and physical exercise, which results in better and improved physical, as well as mental, health.**

**In many cases, guide dogs can offer life changing experiences and loyal friendships that last a lifetime. Perhaps these are the greatest values and examples, of selfless service and friendship, which unites your diverse experiences and organisations.**

**On concluding, I augur that you shall continue working together, campaigning in a united way, for the rights of people with disabilities and the visibility of guide dog users.**

**With your combined clout, I am sure that you shall be better placed to promote and develop much-needed European standards on the vital role of guide dogs, while also working within the mandate of the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals.**

**Thank you for your attention, and I wish you all a successful conference.**