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*Closing Speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at the  
Global IFCO Conference, entitled 'Setting Sail from a Safe Port'*

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4<sup>th</sup> November 2018

**It is my pleasure to share some thoughts at the close of this year's global IFCO conference, and the 3rd National Conference on Child Wellbeing in Malta.**

**I am proud that this conference has welcomed the participation of professionals, academics, practitioners, and, in particular, young people and children from so many countries.**

**I am pleased to note that everybody in this room is united, for one common, important cause.**

**If there is anything that I can vouch for, it is that we are surely united by a shared passion and a steadfast commitment, to ensure that all children, no matter who they are or where they come from, have the opportunity to be raised within loving and nurturing families.**

**So many people have participated in this conference in their different capacities, whether as carers, as policy-makers, and as committed individuals.**

**We are all working in various fields, however, we are all dedicated to continue with our efforts, to give our children the very best, and especially, to accede to their rights, which are, after all, fundamental human rights.**

**After listening to our children and young people in the safe spaces this conference has created, I am even more convinced that we need to ensure that our children have the very best opportunities for care, support, and protection which we, and our authorities, must continue to provide.**

**The collective discussions which have taken place over the last few days are already embedded in our international legal obligations, which are set out by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

**We adults, and our authorities, should know better, because we have known, all along, what needs to be done in order to implement the CRC and its focus on the inherent dignity of each and every child.**

**Let me remind all of us, what the preamble of this essential document says.**

***“The child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding.”***

**I feel so proud that my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society strives to promote and to nurture this sense of full and harmonious development, through its focus on the wellbeing of all citizens, at a familial, communal, and a national level.**

**The wellbeing of children is central to our work.**

**We celebrate their amazing potential, and the extent to which our children are able to thrive when they are rooted in permanent, stable, and nurturing home environments.**

**It is for this reason that our children must be empowered, by processes of meaningful and inclusive participation, by creating safe spaces in which to feel free to share their aspirations.**

**The narratives shared over the past few days, by our children and young people themselves, have convinced me even more, to further commit ourselves to work harder, to convince our authorities that children’s aspirations must be at the heart of all our legislation and policy in this sector.**

**Our children must be our advocates for change.**

**I am so pleased to note that such spaces of safety, and active inclusion, were provided by IFCO and the team of the President's Foundation during this conference.**

**I am so happy to have had the opportunity to visit and meet with the children and young people, who had programmes that ran parallel with the proceedings of this conference.**

**I am even more pleased that I have had the opportunity to hear the feedback, from the children and young people themselves, about their experiences.**

**It has been a learning curve for them, but even more so, for us. They are our guiding light, to further commit ourselves to bring about the much-needed changes in our societies, to ensure that no child or young person is ever left on their own.**

**Now, we must now seriously act upon their contributions.**

**We must learn from their lived experiences of care, and courageously respond to the lacunae and challenges that they have identified.**

**We must acknowledge that children and young people are our best champions for change.**

**During these two days of consultation with children, a series of statements and questions were formulated by the children themselves.**

**The children very clearly said that the love of a family is the most important and fundamental environment in their lives.**

**Children clearly stressed that they feel that they all deserve to have a good and safe home.**

**Children clearly said that they should not be ignored.**

**Children are very much aware that it is their right to be heard, and that they need more protection from the authorities.**

**They asked the question, and I quote, "*How can you help us?*"**

**This conference is posing a very direct question, and we must find the courage to answer it:**

**How are we going to respond to the direct call for action, on behalf of our children?**

**Moreover, during my consultation session earlier today with our young people, I discovered just how powerful their experiences were.**

**Emotionally and intellectually, these young people showed just how courageous they are, by reaching out to make new friends and to learn new things, from their peers and the facilitators from IFCO and my Foundation.**

**One seventeen year old girl said, "*It's not every day that you meet people who share your same experiences.*"**

**This is the sense of solidarity which has come out most strongly, and the life-changing sense of support that these young people have derived, from the friendships and connections that they have made.**

**I believe we must continue to strengthen this sense of connection. Children who have been through challenges in their upbringing must never feel alone or isolated, but must feel able to reach out and make new and permanent relationships with others.**

**It is essential for us to keep providing safe and non-judgemental spaces, such as those that have been created during this conference, where children and young people could speak their minds and freely express the experiences that they have lived or are living, each day of their lives.**

**We must act upon this feedback, and ensure that our children and our young people are flourishing, in the fullness of their dignity.**

**We must ensure that they are developing as active citizens, who know that their voices are valued and respected, and that their contributions will lead to meaningful change in their own lives and the lives of their peers.**

**For this reason, as a response to the consultation session I had with our young people today, I shall be opening San Anton Palace, to create a support group for children and young people living in care, facilitated by my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society.**

**This will ensure that the work we have begun during this conference continues to grow, and the relationships formed during this conference remain connected.**

**The empowerment that our young people have received during this IFCO conference is giving them the strength to reach out and help others, as powerful activists for change in their own right.**

**I must also take some time to echo the statements, which were made by some of the participants during this conference.**

**I am especially pleased with the intervention of the Hon Falzon, Minister for Family, Children's Rights, and Social Solidarity, especially his public commitment to launch a Children's Policy, and a new Children's Act, which will appear early next year.**

**Let me also mention the contributions of Dr Daniela Zerafa, who is a foster carer, a social worker, and Social Work Lecturer at the University Of Malta.**

**Dr Zerafa highlighted the essential need for swifter decision-making, across all processes of care.**

**Legislation and policy must work hand-in-hand, seamlessly woven together to provide the best opportunities for each and every child.**

**This must be upheld, always and in all ways, by our mandate for the protection of children, enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

**Thursday's keynote contribution by Professor Kevin Browne from the University Of Nottingham, also highlighted some essential points, regarding the severe challenges posed by institutional care.**

**Professor Browne explained that young children, who are institutionalised before 6 months, are shown to suffer long term developmental delay, and they are 3 times more likely to be maltreated compared to family based care.**

**On the other hand, those who are placed in a caring family environment, by the age of 24 months, catch up on their physical and intellectual development.**

**We cannot allow our children to be held back, nor can we accept that their essential right, to a loving family environment, is ignored.**

**Research is clear about the difficult realities faced by children whose upbringing is not rooted in environments that are filled with love and stability.**

**Indeed, in instances where systems-of-care break down, or do not meet the child's specific needs, a higher risk of trauma prevails, in an already difficult situation.**

**This is all the more reason for us to keep holding our authorities accountable, to do the very best that is possible, for all of our children and young people.**

**On concluding, let me say that I feel proud that my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has given its support to the International Foster Care Organisation, and the National Foster Care Association in Malta, in order to make this conference a reality.**

**Working also in partnership with Eurochild, and the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, our organisations have become stronger, from being united in our mutual goal of protecting children and promoting child wellbeing.**

**I am convinced that when our strengths meet, we can become a powerful force for social change.**

**Let us therefore continue to incorporate the active voices of our children and young people, in all process of social transformation.**

**As I am sure that all of us here believe, children's rights are human rights.**

**Let me conclude by appealing for more families to come forward, and offer safe and loving environments to children and young people in need of support.**

**Let us also work together to end the cycles of stigma and shame, that children and young people are made to feel, due to closed-mindedness and prejudice.**

**I believe that pursuing justice for our children and young people is a key component, to build societies which truly live up to their obligation, to strive for social justice for the benefit of all.**

**Thank you for your attention.**