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*Speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at a Side-Event organised in the margins of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting entitled, “Children and Community: Why are we here and why now?”, London, 17 April 2018*

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Distinguished guests,  
Dear friends,  
But above all, dear children.

It is truly my pleasure to address this event, which is bringing children together from the various countries of the Commonwealth.

I am pleased that this event is promoting children’s empowerment, and also creating a space for their effective inclusion within this year’s Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

Let me begin by commending the work of my Foundation, that is, the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society; EkoSkola; the British Council; the Commonwealth Businesswomen’s Network; the TX Foundation; the Amersi Foundation; Microsoft; and the Demajo Group, who have collaborated to make today’s event a reality.

We are all here to celebrate, to validate, and to share the voices of over 600 million children, who call the Commonwealth their home.

Knowing that children make up 30% of the Commonwealth’s thriving population, I believe that all of our countries must be fully committed to the active inclusion and meaningful participation of our children, at every level of society.

I also believe that the Commonwealth brings together a multicultural family of nations, that has the potential to be a model for the whole world.

We can be an effective example of what it means to respect one another.

Our Commonwealth Family of Nations gives us the ability to communicate a most powerful message, about the strength of our diversity, and the enrichment that it brings to our peoples.

The Commonwealth gives us the unique opportunity to create new and mutually enriching connections, and also helps to sustain healthy friendships, which are most needed in an increasingly globalised world .... where suspicion, uncertainty, and fear are, unfortunately, dominating most of our nations and regions.

As leaders and adults, we have a huge and direct responsibility, to facilitate the aspirations of our children.

We must listen to our children, by creating opportunities for them, where they can participate and share ideas and aspirations; to encourage active citizenship among all the young people of our nations; to build long-lasting friendships; and to nurture sustainable peace.

Let me, therefore, take this opportunity to mention the work being done by the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, to promote national and regional consultations with children, in the Maltese Islands and beyond.

We know, with certainty, that children want a peaceful world, in which they can flourish and feel supported to pursue their aspirations.

In fact, I believe we owe it to them.

These are some of the thoughts expressed by the Children's Council, within my Foundation .... a Council which is diverse in nature, and includes children of different ethnicities, cultural traditions, gender identities, and socio-economic backgrounds.

I am confident that the sentiments expressed by the children of the Maltese Islands are the same, as those of children across our Commonwealth of Nations.

We are here today to make this event an opportunity for us to listen to children, and then, to highlight their concerns and recommendations ... we must make it clear that the voices of our younger generations matter ... we must ensure that their voices are being taken seriously by the Commonwealth .... and that their aspirations for the future are being acted upon.

It is a source of great concern to me, and to all people of goodwill, that the voices and experiences of many children in the Commonwealth, particularly those who are living in precarity, in exclusion, and with injustice, are not being effectively heard.

For people living in situations of vulnerability, human rights are a crucial lifeline, and we must never forget that children's rights are human rights.

We, as leaders and adults, must live up to our responsibility.

We must endeavour to ensure that the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child is effectively implemented.

This means that we must not only create safe spaces to listen to our children, but also, we must take action on their recommendations, and respond to their concerns.

This is why, during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2015, which took place in Malta, my Foundation and EkoSkola, our collaborators, created a pilot project.

A Children's Forum was set up, as part of the Commonwealth's agenda of activities.

We not only consulted with children, but also provided the space for children to speak to world leaders, directly, to share their thoughts and aspirations.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Prime Minister of Malta, Joseph Muscat, and the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, for their active participation at this groundbreaking Children's Forum in 2015.

I am pleased to note that, this year, we are taking our efforts a step further.

We are connecting a group of children from various regions of the Commonwealth, to engage and to dialogue about the importance of inclusion, the celebration of diversity, and the ways in which the Commonwealth can be a leader in materialising such endeavours and initiatives.

Therefore, I would like to encourage us all, to take the thoughts and the words of our children to heart.

As the leaders and policy-makers within the Commonwealth, it is our responsibility to recognise that the participation of children is intrinsically their right.

Today's initiative is another way for us, as stakeholders concerned with the future of our children, to raise the profile, and give appropriate visibility, to children within our Commonwealth of Nations.

Most of all, I hope that this event shall create a sense of connection and friendship, among the children of the Commonwealth.

I hope that today will be an expression of our united commitment, to ensure that the holistic wellbeing of all children, around the Commonwealth, is respected, given full dignity, and that their voices are heard.

I hope that the aspirations of our Children of the Commonwealth will be taken up by us, as leaders, and by our policy-makers, as our future framework.

The Commonwealth owes all this to our children.

I would like to encourage our children, across the Commonwealth, to be our present activists for respect, dignity, and friendship, so as to ensure that tomorrow, when they become our leaders, our nations will enjoy sustainable peace and holistic wellbeing for all.

Finally, I am truly excited to hear the contributions of our children, both those who are present with us in the room, and also those who have joined us through the live link.