
*Closing Speech, delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of
Malta at the International Social Service Conference, 24 May 2018*

[Salutations]

Distinguished guests,
Dear friends.

Good afternoon. After days of constructive presentations and, hopefully, fruitful discussions, it is probably difficult not to repeat.

However, I hope I will touch upon a subject which, to my knowledge, is at the heart of the mission of the International Social Service, and yet, through what I have followed in the media, it has either not been discussed, or not been given the visibility it deserves.

First of all, it is my pleasure to join you at the close of this conference, which, I am pleased to note, has been facilitated by a collaborative effort among Malta's Foundation for Social Welfare Services; the Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights, and Social Solidarity; and the International Social Service.

Let me begin by commending the important work that has been done, and continues to be done, by the Maltese authorities, to provide care and support for children and families in the Maltese Islands.

In this context, let me draw your attention to indicators from the latest European Commission country report for Malta, which state that poverty and social exclusion risks have declined to their lowest rates in a decade.

Furthermore, over the past five years, Malta has built upon its existing social benefits structures, to include free childcare services; increased paternity leave; increased weekly disability allowance for children; and the introduction of financial aid for families in the process of inter-country adoption.

Let me also take this opportunity to commend the impressive work of the International Social Service, which is working closely with our national authorities in a variety of areas, particularly training opportunities on issues of migration.

I am pleased to note that the ISS has created a network of support and care, which exists around the world, to assist children and families who are facing social difficulties as a result of the phenomenon of migration.

Being present in 120 countries, the ISS has positioned itself as a global actor, promoting the protection and wellbeing of children, not only in real time, but also through capacity-building projects and advocacy work.

I am informed that the ISS supports and helps approximately 75,000 families all over the world, each year.

The mission of the ISS, to unite families across borders, is especially dear to my heart, throughout my work as the President of Malta; as patron of Missing Children Europe; and also as former Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity.

I believe that all stakeholders must continue working together, to create the necessary synergy between our authorities and civil society organisations, in order to effectively address the great uncertainty, which is currently being faced by huge thousands of children, especially those who are unaccompanied during their difficult journeys.

In fact, according to indicators from the Italian Ministry of the Interior, by 1 December 2017, there were 15,540 unaccompanied children who had arrived, only in Italy.

In total, this marks a 4% increase compared to the same period in 2016, according to the 2017 report on international protection in Italy.

In Greece, as of 30 November, according to the National Centre for Social Solidarity, some 3,300 unaccompanied children were estimated to be in the country.

Furthermore, a total of 2,201 were on waiting lists for appropriate shelter, including 425 in Reception Identification Centres and 80 in protective custody – which are not considered to be adequate accommodation for children.

These figures demonstrate a protection gap, which has been growing over the past years, and which demands an immediate and effective response on behalf of our governments and authorities.

Moreover, it is reported that some 32,300 unaccompanied children were under the protection of the youth welfare offices in Germany.

As we all know, this is merely the tip of the iceberg.

Europol estimates that 27% of last year's arrivals, fleeing situations of war, of environmental devastation, and extreme poverty, were children.

According to the UN Office of the Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, children are particularly affected by a rise in human trafficking across Europe.

In order to more effectively address the dangers and challenges faced by unaccompanied children and vulnerable families, we must speak up strongly, with one voice, and continue to endeavour to end, once and for all, such dehumanising situations.

These dehumanising situations include the harsh realities, which are created by the policies of detention that exist in too many of our countries.

Detention is especially traumatic for children, and creates added tensions for families who are already struggling with substantial psych-social difficulties.

Therefore, addressing leaders in social protection, like yourselves, I believe that you must stand together, to help shift the prevailing mentalities, to focus on offering shelter and protection not detention, for children and families in particular.

I am proud to say that, during my term as Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity, and also at the beginning of my term as President, we have managed to bring the International Organisation for Migration and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees together. They provided technical advice on ending child detention, to create a dignified centre for reception in Malta.

Let me note, with satisfaction, that Malta provides protection for children, and not detention.

I strongly believe that all stakeholders have a duty to create a spirit of solidarity and dignity, that responds to the traumatic and often life-threatening journeys endured by such individuals.

Such an approach must be rooted in our commitment to the values of universal human rights and fundamental freedoms.

I am firmly in agreement with many of my colleagues, and experts in the field, who emphasise the benefits of creating systems of guardianship, where migrating children are immediately provided with adequate and consistent care.

Rather than creating ghettos of exclusion, you, as first-line social service providers, must encourage all of our authorities, and support civil society activists, to cultivate innovative pathways for inclusion within our communities.

In this regard, I augur that the recently launched Migrant Integration Strategy in Malta will create opportunities for connection between the people of Malta and other communities, and be a practical example to other countries.

I am pleased to note that Malta is endeavouring to build a society that prioritises the values of inclusion, respect, dignity, and solidarity.

I am looking forward to the successful implementation of the Migrant Integration Strategy. We must ensure that this strategy will move from words to effective action.

It is in this way that we can work to achieve the realisation of the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals. Inclusion, equity, and equality are at the heart of the system of values, which is presented to us by Agenda 2030.

To achieve this necessary realisation, I believe that each and every one of us, regardless of our age or ethnicity, our gender or cultural backgrounds, must be encouraged, to be a valuable contributor to the wellbeing and the prosperity of our nations.

The ISS has a very important global role, to ensure that individual citizens, civil society activists, and our authorities are responding to the UN Agenda 2030, by celebrating the full potential of diversity, including migration, which is at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The UN Agenda 2030 is a source of strength, for all peoples of goodwill, as it provides an effective pathway towards sustainable peace and inclusive prosperity.

When it comes to the specific ways in which our authorities respond to the needs of unaccompanied children and families, I believe you, as professionals and practitioners in the field of protection, must be courageous, to stand up for universal human rights and fundamental freedoms.

To stand up and speak out in an effective manner, we must listen to the first-hand experiences of unaccompanied children and vulnerable families, and ensure that their narratives will inform our thoughts and actions, and lead to more meaningful legislation and policies.

It is our responsibility, as people who are responsible for the respect and dignity which must be given to every human being, to work for a positive change.

I would like to encourage you to be courageous, even in the face of increasingly aggressive anti-migration rhetoric, which, unfortunately, is becoming stronger in many countries around the world.

We must be firm in our convictions, and stand up for the positive change that is so deeply needed, across our world, in the best interests of all humanity.

We must ensure that the dignity of each and every family, and each and every child, regardless of who they are or where they come from, is effectively promoted and protected.

Thank you for your attention, and I augur that the International Social Service shall continue its excellent work, for many decades to come.