

Opening Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the KNZ National Conference, with the theme 'SDGs and Youth', 13 October 2018

Distinguished guests

And above all, dear young people

I feel proud to welcome committed young people like yourselves, and I also feel honoured to have been invited to share some brief remarks with you regarding such an important topic.

The United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, have been an important focus throughout of my Presidency.

Since the adoption of Agenda 2030, I have promoted, encouraged and advocated for the implementation of such an important global framework in the best interest of our human family, both in Malta and abroad.

For this reason, I was glad to welcome the Maltese National Youth Council, earlier this year, to discuss the ways in which the SDGs, and their implementation, are informing the work that you do as a Council.

I would like to take the opportunity to commend Michael Piccinino, President of the Maltese National Youth Council; Eman Borg, Sustainable Development Goals Officer; and the members of the entire Kunsill Nazzjonali Zgħazagħ team.

I must emphasize that by facilitating this conference, you are showing your commitment to make Agenda 2030 more visible among your young people of our islands.

It is so important to promote and share the essential message, of social justice and personal responsibility, which is very much at the heart of the SDGs.

I am proud of you as you are making a practical contribution towards the sustainable future of our planet.

I believe that if we truly want to live in a world which lives up to the values of social justice, we need to implement the mandate of Agenda 2030.

Young people, such as yourselves, are essential stakeholders and must be collaborators, to make these values a reality for all.

For this reason, I am pleased to note that Malta performs highly in the latest Youth Progress Index of the European Youth Forum, which is a region-wide mapping initiative, directly linked to the Sustainable Development Goals.

In terms of personal rights, Malta is shown to be over-performing, as compared to other countries.

However, the Youth Progress Index also shows that there is still an under-performance in Malta, in the area of Higher Education, particularly when it comes to university level education.

As we all know, education is the key for change.

In this context, I would like to quote the inspiring words of the former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, who said “Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family.”

Therefore, let me encourage you to promote the acquisition of knowledge, access to information, and opportunities for education, among you’re the young people of our islands.

I believe that we cannot allow any young person in our communities to feel excluded, or voiceless, due to lack of education.

The voices of young people were fundamental to shape Agenda 2030.

Therefore, creating safe spaces for young people, such as you are doing today will help to ensure, that the Sustainable Development Goals will respond to your priorities and aspirations.

This is why the United Nations calls the young people of the world as the “critical agents of change.”

I believe that the active participation of young people, to implement the SDGs, must also be a national priority.

The intention is already expressed as the empowerment of the young people of our islands, to be contributors to the holistic wellbeing and inclusive prosperity of our country, is at the heart of the National Youth Policy Towards 2020.

Malta's National Youth Policy is a roadmap of "a shared vision for the future of young people." This vision can only be successful if you are involved in its implementation, across the social and political sectors of our society.

This is why I am convinced that your voices must be heard as activists for positive change.

According to the European Commission's Youth Progress Index, and I quote "countries that offer an environment in which youth organisations can carry out their activities perform better in terms of youth progress."

However, the last study that is available in this area, entitled ‘The Participation of Maltese Young People in the Voluntary Sector’, notes that “the voluntary youth sector in Malta lacks the human resources necessary to see through its plans and seems to be experiencing difficulties in attracting the participation of young people.”

Let me therefore take this opportunity to respectfully recommend that KNZ should pursue a review of the ways in which young people are helping to implementing the SDGs through their participation.

I am convinced such research and the resulting data, both in a quantitative and a qualitative approach, would be so valuable, for us to achieve the goals of Agenda 2030.

Furthermore, I would like to encourage you to participate within civil society, as you would an example of active citizenship. These are the key objectives for the EU Youth Strategy, which will be drawing to an end this year.

Therefore, this is a perfect time for KNZ to take an innovative approach, to encourage young people to participate; to be empowered; and to influence decision-making, while taking the appropriate action, to face contemporary challenges.

Dear young people, you have the right to be heard and respected for your views. It is your fundamental human right.

Moreover, you have the right to be given the opportunity to be contributors to the progress and the development our society.

According to the United Nations' Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development, "young people are key SDG accelerators. Drawing on youth expertise, know-how, networks, and adopting promising practices for youth engagement sets the stage for the discovery of innovative solutions and actions, which can multiply development gains over the lifetime of the 2030 Agenda."

The inclusion of young people in our decision-making and development initiatives, especially the contributions of young women, will enable us, as a nation, to achieve Agenda 2030.

On concluding, let me encourage each and every one of you, to realise that Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals are something which we can make a reality, in our daily lives.

Together, we can achieve social justice and equality in our society.

Unfortunately, stories of inequality flood the media every day.

We are confronted by the experiences of people who are facing discrimination; stories of extreme poverty; and global risks of violent conflict and social unrest.

We must respond to such facts with a strong spirit of solidarity.

Solidarity is at the heart of Agenda 2030 and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals.

Agenda 2030 offers us a global social solidarity approach, which begins with us, as individuals, and grows, to include our families, our communities, our Maltese society, our Mediterranean Region, and ultimately, our entire world.

I augur that you will continue to be today's activists of positive change, by promoting a strong message of equality and inclusion.

In this way, I am certain that you will become the effective leaders of tomorrow, for the benefit of our country, and our world.

Thank you.