

Opening Speech, delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the “3rd National Wellbeing Conference: Food Rights, Privilege and Security: Perception vs Reality”, organized by the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, 16 October 2018

[Salutations]

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends.

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this 3rd National Conference on Wellbeing, facilitated by the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, being held on World Food Day.

I am truly proud of my foundation, for putting wellbeing, in its diverse dimensions, on the national agenda, and also for bringing to light so many issues that, for many years, have been kept under the radar, and away from public discussion.

Today’s presentations and activities will highlight food from an essential perspective. This conference will be discussing, primarily, access to healthy, clean, and sustainable food.

This important subject matter is intrinsically related to human rights, as access to healthy, clean, and sustainable food is also at the heart of Article 25.1, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone has the right to a standard of living, which should be adequate for the health and wellbeing of each and every one of us, and our families, including food.

Therefore, this conference is being organised at a most appropriate time, when we are practically, on the eve of the 70th Anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

To acknowledge and promote the important message that this conference aims to convey, we have included the contributions of various experts, who will explore the subject from diverse areas of specialisation.

Let me then begin by thanking Dr Vandana Shiva, a prominent global activist, and Dr Matthew Camilleri, Head of the Fishing Operations and Technology Branch, from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, for their participation.

Dr Shiva and Dr Camilleri will be contributing, to make this conference a unique space to share good practices and strategies for the future.

We truly appreciate their participation during this conference, as they will also be sharing their experiences and expertise, together with our Maltese experts.

I would also like to commend the Conference Steering Committee, for creating such an enriching programme, and in particular Dr Ruth Farrugia, Director-General of the President's Foundation and her team, for their inspiring work.

I augur that the outcomes we achieve, through this conference, will give an added momentum to our national debate about the importance of food rights, and to encourage, each and every one of us, to keep the concept of health and wellbeing, at the heart of all of our endeavours.

As we know, food justice is a complex issue, and the world of food is constantly changing, from innovations in agriculture, to discussions about public health.

It is therefore the responsibility of all stakeholders to acknowledge the relationship between food and politics.

The values of food justice must continue to remind us that healthy food is a basic human right.

Everyone, regardless of their socio-economic status or background, should have access to healthy, clean and sustainable food.

Ensuring that the values of food justice are accessible to all should be a long-standing commitment by the International Community.

Research shows us that, people practicing the values of food justice, including responsible methods of growing and sharing food, and protecting access to healthy food for all people, will create stronger food systems; more self-reliant, and resilient communities; and a healthier environment.

I believe that we must work together, as an international community, to nurture stronger food systems, to ensure that nobody is excluded or left behind.

In the words of Debra Eschmeyer, co-founder of FoodCorps, “the economic health of our countries is dependent upon the health of the next generation.”

Access to healthy food is definitely key to the present and future prosperity of our countries.

In this context, an exploratory study on access to clean, fair, and healthy food, conducted by the National Centre for Family Research and the National Observatory for Living with Dignity, within my Foundation, was launched earlier this year in Malta.

Under the direction of both Professor Angela Abela and Professor Carmel Borg, this research has helped to highlight the need for greater awareness of the rights to access to healthy food, by all of our communities.

The research revealed that there is an alarming gap between what food professionals promote as healthy and nutritious food, and the perceptions of the general public.

The study also states that more work needs to be done to reconnect consumers with the farmers who produce their food, in order to create mutually beneficial socio-economic relationships.

The research describes healthy food as food which is produced locally, fresh, nutritious, affordable, and culturally-appropriate, with care for the wellbeing of the land, the workers, and the animals.

The issue of the cost of healthy food, to the consumer, has also been highlighted by this research.

If healthy food is expensive, or if vulnerable or precarious groups are restricted from accessing it, then this is proof that injustices and inequalities, prevail within our societies.

Access to food is a basic benchmark, by which we can assess the overall wellbeing of individuals, and entire communities.

A study conducted by Caritas Malta in 2016, entitled "A Minimum Essential Budget for a Decent Living", reported that food constitutes the highest expenditure being incurred by families of 4 members, in Malta and Gozo.

It was found, through this same research, that for the food which such families consume to be considered healthy, they have to spend a high amount of money.

Therefore, we must ensure, one way or the other, that families experiencing vulnerability or precarity, will have access to healthy food, as this is their fundamental right.

As we all know, what we eat has a massive impact on the quality of our lives.

We must take effective action, to ensure that nobody is excluded from access to healthy food.

We must also address alarming indicators from Eurostat, which rate Malta, as among the countries, with the highest incidence of obesity in Europe.

Another alarming indicator, is the fact that, almost half of the deaths in Malta, are a result of cardiovascular diseases, which are directly related to obesity and other related factors.

The link between these worrying indicators, and the need for us to promote healthy lifestyles and access to healthy food, is clear.

By ensuring that each and every family has the ability to make choices which are healthy, we will also be taking practical action, to implement the United Nations' Agenda 2030, in particular, Sustainable Development Goal Number 2.

SDG 2, commits the international community to take action to end hunger, to achieve food security, and to improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture. The implementation of SDG 2, is key to unlock the future development and inclusive prosperity of our planet.

Furthermore, I believe that our conversation about food rights must also address other examples of severe human rights abuses and challenges, including poverty, climate change, and forced migration.

Each one of these phenomena is intrinsically linked to food inequality.

I also believe that, at the heart of all of these issues are the relationships that exist between human beings. As research shows us, time and time again, our relationships with others are crucial for us to achieve physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing.

For this reason, we must nurture our relationships with one another, even across the food chain.

Our relationships must transcend borders, to support local food production.

We must link with other communities, through collaborative networks of food distribution, particularly in cases where nations face risks to their food security.

I believe that we must also consider the ways in which the International Community can do more to protect our biodiversity, which is an essential factor to safeguard food security.

Unfortunately, many people are losing touch with the seasonality of food, and with the people who work so hard to produce and make it available to us.

Educating ourselves and our children about these realities is crucial, and I am confident that today's conference, will make a valuable contribution, to the national debate, about the importance of education for sustainability, food justice, and environmental responsibility.

On concluding, let me quote the inspiring words of Professor Michael Pollan from Harvard, who said that “the shared meal elevates eating from a mechanical process of fueling the body to a ritual of family and community, from animal biology to an act of culture.”

I augur that the people of the Maltese Islands, the people of our Mediterranean Region, and all the peoples of the world, will rediscover a shared culture of respect for our ecosystems, by nurturing a stronger relationship with the planet, through the power of food.

May this conference continue to enlighten our conversation about this important topic, but most of all, may this conference be an eye-opener for our authorities, to take the necessary action, to ensure that no one, in the Maltese Islands, lacks access to healthy, clean and sustainable food.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to the outcomes of this conference.