

Opening Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at “Lost in Migration III” co-organised by the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, and Missing Children Europe, 20 February 2019

Distinguished delegates and guests,

Dear friends,

I would like to welcome each and every one of you to the Maltese Islands for the third edition of the Lost in Migration conference.

Let me begin by commending the teams from Missing Children Europe and the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, in collaboration with members of my Secretariat, for facilitating this important conference.

The Lost in Migration conference has, over the last three years, become an established and trusted forum, providing a unique focus on the wellbeing of children in migration.

I am confident that, over the next few days, we will continue to build upon the experience and the concerns, which have been highlighted by participants over the last two editions of this conference.

Each of these conferences has brought together diverse stakeholders from civil society, and from national and European-level institutions, who are working on the ground together with others professionals who are working in the field.

These conferences have created an effective platform for dialogue, and each time, we have managed to highlight the gaps in the system, and drawn from expert perspectives, recommendations to address the needs for effective child protection.

I hope that this year's conference is also providing us with the opportunity to put up pressure, for a proactive response, from the relevant authorities ... the European and international community, ... so as to address the horrendous situation where thousands of children go missing on European soil.

I am convinced that this year's conference is bringing added value to our deliberations, by having our colleagues from civil society in Africa alongside European and international civil society.

The need for the views of our colleagues from civil society in Africa, to be included in this conference, was clearly identified during the second Lost in Migration conference.

Therefore, I am sure that the diversity of experiences, which will be shared during this conference, will provide further impetus to take our dialogue to the next level of effectiveness.

I truly believe that we can make a real difference.

We need to share the experiences, and explore what is happening to our children before they arrive in Europe, and the dangers that they are facing during their journeys, and after their arrival.

The commitment of all of you, to the goals of this conference, gives me hope, that we can work in synergy to make a difference in the lives of these vulnerable children.

I am truly convinced that, together, we can make a positive transformation.

We need to explore what is happening to our children ... because they are our children too.

We need to explore their journey within the African continent, across the Mediterranean Sea, and also, if they manage to arrive, as some, unfortunately, definitely don't ... their experiences on European soil.

Furthermore, I hope that we will continue to emphasise the need to have holistic policies and strategies in place, within all of our countries, to protect the legal, mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing of unaccompanied migrant children.

In particular, we must address the unacceptable lack of efficient national protection systems, and the ineffective solidarity being shown amongst EU Member States, when it comes to the protection of migrating children.

This situation is having the direct consequence of leaving our children more vulnerable to violence, exploitation, trafficking, and abuse.

Furthermore, we know that strategies for social inclusion for refugee and migrant children must be prioritised, as part of their effective integration into our communities and societies.

More welcoming and more inclusive communities and societies, will lead to a conducive environment that supports children and young people to flourish, and become enriching contributors, within our communities.

The second edition of the Lost in Migration conference, in April 2018, also gave us an opportunity take stock of the progress that has been achieved, since the adoption of the European Commission Communication on the Protection of Children in Migration on the 12 April 2017.

I am proud to say that the Communication was a direct result of the first Lost in Migration conference, and had the aim to take forward the focus which we placed, to create targeted actions which protect unaccompanied children in migration.

However, participants during last year's conference also highlighted the need for more awareness about the European Commission Communication, which is still being under-utilised and under-implemented.

Instruments like the EU Communication, and our outcomes from these conferences, must be given the necessary visibility in order to have the most far-reaching effects.

This is essential because, according to data from Missing Children Europe, 95 per cent of children in migration who are reported missing are unaccompanied.

Furthermore, the number of cases of missing children in migration that are being solved is actually decreasing, rather than increasing, over the years.

This fact is evidence of the need to work much further, and in synergy, ... and how much our deliberations during this conference is needed, ... and how important the outcomes of this conference will be.

We must act upon the outcomes of our discussions over these next few days, with our colleagues from Africa.

African organisations have the essential information about real time developments in countries of origin and transit ... they have the experience of good practices, which they have developed to support and monitor displaced children.

Their experiences will provide crucial data for all of us in Europe.

I am convinced that we all believe that prevention of unsafe migration and the subsequent horrendous trafficking of children is the first step, to effectively tackle the issue of unaccompanied migrant children.

To achieve this goal, the involvement of countries of origin and of transit is fundamental.

This is why the participation of our colleagues from Africa, during this conference, is a ground-breaking opportunity to include their concerns and aspirations in our vision for the future of children, who are migrating to Europe.

During this conference, we will also have the opportunity to explore the root causes of migration and how these causes have a devastating effect on children.

Authorities have the responsibility to create an environment which allows children to grow up in their home countries.

Children must have good prospects of personal development, a dignified standard of living, and their rightful connection to the heritage and culture of their communities.

I believe that it is also important to involve the diaspora communities in the European Union in this process.

For this reason, I was very pleased to have discussions with representatives from the African Diaspora Network in Europe and other NGOs, some weeks ago. During our meetings, we discussed the important role of the diaspora, to address the challenges and opportunities of migration.

I am convinced that diaspora organisations are essential stakeholders in awareness-raising activities, in their countries of origin, to empower people who are considering migration with the necessary information.

Children can learn so much from other young people who are already in Europe, to have a more realistic perspective of what it means to arrive on the shores of Europe.

This is why I also believe that the role of the media, in countries of origin and transit, should be considered as an important stakeholder in our efforts to support these vulnerable children.

So often, it is our media outlets that shape the narratives which control how, and why, many people choose to undertake often dangerous journeys in search of a better life.

As we all know, migrating children are a particularly vulnerable group, targeted by traffickers who prey on the precarity of their situation.

Specific attention must therefore be given to the needs of girls and boys, who have been victims of all sorts of violence, both before and during their departure from countries of origin.

Unfortunately, we are still a long way from effectively addressing these concerns.

I am sad to note that the necessary referrals to national child protection systems are not always implemented, nor are they treated with the necessary urgency.

Delays in determining the status of children who arrive in Europe and are considered “stateless” is another challenge, which further compounds the difficulty of assuring their rightful protection.

Therefore, it is crucial that our authorities pin-point appropriate persons who are responsible for child protection, at every stage of the identification and registration process.

On the other hand, frontline Member States in Europe must be supported by our entire family of European countries, to ensure that the necessary expertise is being provided in a consistent and sustainable manner.

This spirit of solidarity is what the European Union should be all about.

There is an urgent need to integrate child protection, and the presence of child protection officers and guardians, who can act as focal points and provide the necessary safeguards for all the issues that relate to migrating children in our countries.

In this context, let me refer to a positive step forward, by the establishment of a European guardianship network, which is working in cooperation with the European Network of Guardianship Institutions.

This Network aims to improve services for unaccompanied migrating children in the Member States of the European Union through guardianship development and assistance to professionals.

However, there is still much more that needs to be done to ensure that this guardianship network for unaccompanied migrating children, is delivering, and that the necessary guardians are being promptly identified and appointed.

Even though this guardianship network is very important, however, on its own, it is not sufficient.

Such efforts must also be supported by providing effective family tracing, to reunite children who have become separated from their families.

This issue is also a top-priority, and most urgent.

The security and stability which comes with a family can never be completely replaced. It is the right of each and every child to feel safe and protected by their families.

I still remember one particular experience, which will always be with me.

I will always remember Mohammed, a seven year old Syrian boy who was the only member of his family saved from the sea, by a 30 year old young Syrian man making the same voyage in 2013.

I will always remember the smile on Mohammed's face, when he was finally reunited with his uncle and paternal family.

In view of the European elections, which will take place this year, I strongly augur that this conference will be an opportunity for our politicians to make more explicit and long-term commitments, to ensure that the protection of children in migration, and their reunification with their families, will be on the agenda.

I hope that our politicians will work in synergy with civil society activists and professionals, to give visibility to the recommendations of this conference and, hopefully, to translate it into the necessary political will to make a positive change.

I am pleased to note that this conference will also launch a communication campaign, to provide a platform for youth participants, who have first-hand experiences of migration, to highlight their concerns and recommendations and to influence policy decisions.

We hope that, in this way, during this campaigning period by candidates for the European Parliament, they will have the opportunity to be aware of the narratives

of these children and young people, whose lives will be most directly affected by European policy.

By sharing one another's experiences and by working together, I believe that we can strengthen our endeavours to safeguard the rights of children in migration.

We cannot forget that, according to the latest data from Eurostat, there were 31.8 thousand applications in the EU Member States from unaccompanied migrant and asylum seeking children.

We are all aware that this number is just the tip of the iceberg, and that the challenges being faced by unaccompanied migrant children are growing.

Therefore, it is even more essential for us to use this space, to promote and prioritise an EU-wide approach.

We must uphold the respect for the rights of the child, as enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This year, we will be commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the CRC, which is the most widely approved convention, by the international community.

I am sorry to say that even though most of the world has committed itself to this important document, we are still far off from achieving its full and effective implementation, especially in regards to migrating children.

We must ensure that every child who needs protection can feel secure in the knowledge that she or he will receive the rightful protection, ... and that all of our children are being treated equally and with care.

To do so, we must continue to strengthen cooperation between our authorities and civil society organisations, because it is so often that civil society activists have the necessary first-hand experience.

Finally, I believe that the EU must keep promoting the development of child protection systems, together with an effective guardianship network, which links their services across all social sectors and amongst diverse countries.

In this way, we will be able to do more, to prevent and to respond to the risks of violence, abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and the neglect of children.

Children attempting to find safety in Europe have repeatedly stated that they lack access to basic needs and vital information about their rights. However, many children in migration have access to a smartphone, which is their only point of contact with their families and the rest of the world.

Let me therefore take this opportunity to commend Missing Children Europe for launching the Miniila app, which was developed in cooperation with children, and made available in April 2018.

The Miniila app is providing real-time and regionally specific information, which allows children to find out about essential services, in their own language.

I am particularly pleased that child participation was a fundamental feature, in the development of this app. The full participation of children remains largely absent from the work being done in this sector, in terms of policy-making and services.

Let me also encourage Missing Children Europe, of which I am a proud patron, to continue to endeavour for the Miniila app to become available in more European countries.

We definitely need a united European strategy that listens to the concerns of unaccompanied migrant children, and can produce a sustainable, consistent, and harmonised response across all of our nations.

Let me reiterate, that our main objective as participants in this conference is the protection of our children, whoever they might be and from wherever they come from.

We must be the champions of their dignity and the guardians of their wellbeing.

The fundamental principle of ensuring the best interests of each and every child must be our guide, to formulate effective actions and to make respectful decisions concerning the future of children in migration.

This is because ... every child matters ... no matter what.

Thank you for your attention.