

Public Lecture with the theme “Tourism for Peace”, delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at Bethlehem University, 31 January 2019

Hon Deputy Prime Minister

Hon Ministers

Members of the Faculty,

Distinguished guests,

Dear students,

I feel so honoured to be at Bethlehem University. I have come here to share some reflections on the importance of tourism as a source of connecting people and of developing friendships.

Since an effective tourism industry brings prosperity, down to communities, one could say that, a sustainable tourism industry, addresses inequalities.

Through this approach, local communities will also benefit from the prosperity created by the industry.

As I see it, it is only in this way that the tourism industry can serve to create inclusive prosperity, social cohesion and peace, for all humanity.

This can be ensured by developing, and by giving the visibility that is needed, for example, to the cultural and traditional heritage of all communities within our societies.

As we all know, tourism is a job-generating industry due to its labour-intensive character. Therefore, if the tourism industry reaches out to local communities it can also help to develop dignified job opportunities for diversely-skilled, and qualified people, on a community level.

When we manage to address inequalities, we are effectively addressing subsequent social tensions, and unrest. Therefore, through tourism we can build a culture of positive peace.

When we manage to address inequalities, we are also upholding the much-needed principles of social justice, and therefore, we can make peace a reality.

Moreover, tourism is a catalyst for diplomacy.

Tourism diplomacy is a way of opening up to tourists visiting our respective countries, to understand, acknowledge, and respect each other's diverse cultures.

Tourism diplomacy is so much needed in today's uncertain world, where unfortunately, we are becoming more and more suspicious of one another.

Tourism, in synergy with culture, has the potential to generate economic growth not only at a national and regional level, but also it can create direct and immediate socio-economic gains for local communities.

When speaking of the interconnection between the tourism industry and culture - we are also speaking of community-level tourism. We are also essentially promoting the much-needed dialogue among diverse cultures, in today's world.

The Mediterranean is renowned for its diversity and cultural richness, however, we must acknowledge that, unfortunately, conflicts are a cause for concern in too many areas of our region.

I am pleased to say that Malta, some years ago, set up the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation, of which I am a proud patron, to implement this vision of prosperity and peace through tourism.

The Mediterranean Tourism Foundation is promoting initiatives within and among the countries of the Mediterranean, for the benefit of all of our communities and societies.

The Mediterranean Tourism Foundation seeks to promote peace through inter-cultural connections by taking initiatives for the development of sustainable tourism in our region.

Moreover, tourism is an essential contributor for stronger socio-economic growth, sustainable job creation, and the safeguarding of our global historical heritage.

Tourism has the ability to unite diverse stakeholders to work together for shared prosperity, rather than compete with one another.

This is because every stakeholder brings their own unique contribution to the industry. Every country and community has its own particular culture and identity, which offers an inspiring experience to visitors and benefits for native populations.

In this context, let me draw your attention to a recent report published by Harvard University, entitled ‘The Role of the Tourism Sector in Expanding Economic Opportunity’.

This report clearly states that tourism creates opportunities for communities to work alongside national and international authorities, to generate shared prosperity.

As tourism grows, the potential of our people expands, thereby developing a nation's workforce to be more competent, diversified, and competitive.

Increased investment in tourism will improve the lives of countless women, men, and children, while also empowering their businesses and communities.

Let me use my own country as an example of how political will and community involvement have come together in a successful way, over the past decades, to strengthen our tourism industry.

According to the latest indicators for Malta, from the World Travel and Tourism Council, the tourism sector represents 11.2 per cent of total investment in the Maltese economy, and 28.3 per cent of total employment.

Such positive developments are also reflected in the international context.

According to the 2018 UNWTO World Tourism Barometer, Southern Europe and North Africa both saw an increase of 13 per cent in tourist arrivals.

This means that the Euro-Mediterranean region, on both shores of the Mediterranean Sea, is benefitting from a more resilient tourism industry.

Furthermore, last year's World Travel and Tourism Council Economic Impact Report states that, with the right regulatory conditions and political will, nearly 100 million new jobs could be created over the decade ahead.

The report goes on to say that travel and tourism generates 10.4 per cent of global GDP and 9.9 per cent of total global employment.

The sector's direct growth, of 4.6 per cent, is outpacing the global economy for the seventh successive year.

A cross-country study by the International Monetary Fund has shown that there is a direct link between tourism development and economic growth.

This is why an investment in the tourism industry is also, clearly, a powerful means to stimulate stability and growth over the long term in a sustainable and responsible manner.

This fact is also made clear in the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals. Agenda 2030 is a roadmap for the sustainable

future of our world, and it is the responsibility of all of our countries to implement its objectives.

In particular, SDG Number 8 focuses on the importance of sustainable economies. SDG 8, Target 9 states that "by 2030, we must devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products."

SDG 8 is putting pressure on all of us, to be innovative in our endeavours. There is so much expertise that Malta can share in this regard.

Such expertise includes opportunities for education and training at Maltese institutions, as well as business-to-business connections, which link Palestinian stakeholders with their Maltese counterparts.

Malta is a leader in the Euro-Mediterranean Region, with our focus on developing the potential of the tourism and travel sector.

All of this is possible because of the close synergies we have promoted between our authorities, private sector, academia, and other stakeholders.

Moreover, Maltese investment in travel and tourism has been paralleled by increasing interest in the importance of sustainability, to ensure that future generations will also benefit from present day prosperity.

According to the ‘Tourism Trends and Policies’ Report, published last year by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, there are various strategies that our policy-makers and authorities should consider, to invest in more sustainable and long-term approaches.

Such strategies include promoting access to financial support for sustainable tourism projects; encouraging the transition towards low-carbon and climate resilient investments; and encouraging a culture of environmental responsibility, through stronger legislation.

A practical initiative which I would like to share from my own country, is the work being done, by the authorities and civil society activists, to free Maltese beaches and coastline from plastics.

We are endeavouring to become the world's leading destination for environmental ocean tourism, and to fulfil Malta's aspirations to become a plastic-free ocean area.

Such an initiative will contribute not only to address some of the concerns created by climate change, but also to a healthier and sustainable tourism industry.

I believe that the tourism industry must be open to the needs of local communities, alongside the requirements of visitors. Tourism is most successful when it takes place in a respectful context, and an environment of collaboration.

This is why the policies in the tourism sector must be connected to the grass-roots realities of our communities.

I am convinced that respectful, responsible, and sustainable tourism will also do so much, by involving local people and civil society organisations, to be active participants in the decisions that are affecting their lives and livelihoods.

Let me also draw your attention to the latest report from the World Travel and Tourism Council, entitled "World Transformed: Megatrends and their Implications for Travel and Tourism," which was published earlier this month.

This report states that today's tourism is driven by the desire for new experiences and creating a sense of community and connection.

The report goes on to say that, as demographic shifts move our attention from the global West to the East, our international markets are being rapidly reshaped.

In order to thrive, the tourism sector in our Mediterranean Region must be open to these changes.

In fact, we must be the pioneers.

I believe that, if we work together, the people of the Mediterranean will be global leaders, thanks to our heritage of hospitality and the breathtaking richness of our cultural diversity.

If all of the countries of the Mediterranean Region came together, to focus on the potential of the tourism industry, we would also be better equipped to provide an essential focus on another issue of global concern, namely, environmental sustainability.

We can save our precious ecosystems, address current environmental instabilities, and promote the sustainable preservation of our planet, through the social and economic opportunities which tourism makes possible.

This is emphasised by the latest Green Economy Report, which is published by the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations World Tourism Organisation.

The report emphasises that further investment is urgently needed, to keep the international community on track, to make the tourism industry greener, more environmentally responsible, and more responsive to the expectations of contemporary consumers.

In order to be effective leaders, our innovations in the tourism industry cannot be motivated by short-term objectives, or exclusively economic gain. They must also take into account the importance of environmental conservation and social development.

In this context, let me highlight the essential contributions of women, to maximise social development and in the process, to build stronger and more resilient communities.

Evidence shows us that an investment in sustainable tourism is also an investment in the empowerment of women.

According to data from the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, women are more likely to be effective leaders in tourism businesses, associations, and tourism governance.

Furthermore, tourism includes more women in the position of employers and business owners. Women, working alongside men, can be catalysts to improve the lives of their families, communities, and society as a whole.

I am convinced that, the travel and tourism industry is making it possible for us to do so much, to achieve global peace.

We must lead by example, to encourage dialogue; to nurture opportunities for friendship; to celebrate diversity; and to promote positive investments in peace, around our world.

Let us continue to endeavour to make the tourism industry a model industry for the promotion of sustainability, peace, and prosperity, to ensure the best possible future for our Mediterranean Region, and all of our human family.

Thank you for your attention.