

Launch of the CiSoTRA Project

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Peace and Inclusion

Contribution

by

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I feel privileged to be with you for the launch of the CiSoTRA Project, which concerns the education and the social inclusion of, unaccompanied migrant children.

I am pleased to note that you are reflecting on the findings of learned experts, professionals and practitioners from Slovenia, Germany, Italy, Turkey and Greece. This project is undoubtedly very important, as it highlights the invaluable work that civil society organisations do, to help unaccompanied migrant children to transition to adulthood.

Before indulging further into my contribution, I would also like to take the opportunity to commend the tireless work of all the professionals, practitioners and other volunteers who work on the ground with unaccompanied migrant children across the Mediterranean.

Their tireless endeavours, is effectively addressing some of their physical suffering and emotional pain.

On the other hand, I must admit, that the situation today in the area of migration, makes me sad and disappointed. Unfortunately, the

issues of undue suffering due to migration, continues to dominate the discourse of so many of us, in our efforts to influence and advocate for real change.

Why is it so difficult, for many governments across the world, to understand and act, to ensure that every child, is safeguarded, to enjoy their fundamental rights for an equal, equitable and just life, free from conflict, persecution, precarity and poverty?

It is after all the duty of all governments, to create an inclusive and peaceful environment, where all children are nurtured and are able to thrive.

The present situation is highlighting a stark reality, mainly that, what our forefathers and foremothers have strived for, 75 years ago, to bring into being the UN Declaration of Human Rights, is systematically being undone, due to greed, egoism, corruption, and totalitarianism.

Dear Friends do we realise that 75 years after the UN Declaration of Human Rights, we are still trying to convince governments, that wars can only create suffering and misery, and deny dignity to one and all?

It is ironic, that from one decade to another, the International Community continues to commit to the same values, without achieving the necessary transformation and progress in the process.

The latest of such commitments was the adoption of Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals in 2015.

Once again, our governments committed to ensure that every human being should have access to enough resources to lead a dignified life free of violence.

But, I ask, how effective are these commitments, when facts show that in 2016, just after a year to committing to the SDGs, more countries experienced violent conflict than, at any other time, in nearly 30 years?

Facts show that Afghanistan, Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic were the three countries which have seen the worst violent conflicts in the world. (United Nations Article: A New Era of Conflict and Violence)

In these circumstances, the issue of unaccompanied migrant children and their struggle to survive is even more heartbreaking.

It was only for a few days that the world was shocked with the body of the lifeless 3 year old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, who was washed ashore on a beautiful beach in Turkey.

What has changed after that? Nothing!

In 2013 I also had a horrific personal experience, when I was Minister for Family and Social Solidarity, and which I would like to share with you.

In October 2013, a boat with about 500 Syrians left Libya. The boat capsized a few hours after, and only a few of them survived. I went,

together with a team of psychosocial professionals, to give primary support to the survivors, who were brought to Malta.

Whole families drowned.

Amongst the survivors was a young boy of 7 years, Mohammed, who survived thanks to a 30 year old Syrian man, who managed to keep him afloat.

Mohammed was travelling with his father and mother and two other siblings. He saw all his family drown! He survived.

I can never forget the empty look in Mohammed's eyes for days and weeks, and not uttering a word.

It was only after his uncle from Egypt caught a glimpse of him from a picture on facebook, that he made contact and came to Malta.

It was upon seeing his uncle, that Mohammed's eyes came to life again, and words started pouring out from his mouth again.

The despair, the suffering, the pain, of the survivors at the knowledge that they have lost their spouses and children, will stay with me forever.

We all know that unaccompanied migrant children carry the scars of experiencing war all their lives. Some of these children will carry the deep scars of their experience as child soldiers, of sexual, physical and psychological abuse, of forced labour and other forms of exploitation. Their minds, hearts and souls will never be completely healed.

These children will continue to need support, all through their transition to adulthood and probably all through their lives.

The work of civil society organisations is invaluable and indispensable in these circumstances.

On the other hand, it is frustrating to continue to see that governments continue to ignore their responsibility to adhere to the 32 year old UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It is unacceptable and scandalous that unaccompanied migrant children are still not treated equally and equitably in many countries.

While Childhood should be a time of discovery, adventure and happiness, and all about love and dignified nurture, the lives of unaccompanied migrant children is all about being left behind and forgotten.

Over the years it has become, more and more difficult for me to understand how the men and women responsible for governments in the world, cannot see in the faces of unaccompanied migrant children, their own daughters, sons, nieces and nephews.

I cannot accept that people in responsible roles cannot be moved by the plight of these children.

I cannot comprehend the lack of empathy, solidarity and action from many governments towards these most vulnerable children.

I am convinced that they would do anything for their own children to be out of harm and protected.

I am convinced that they would do everything to ensure that their children are out of danger and safe.

Why is it so difficult for some not to feel for those mothers and fathers who have had to let go of their children, risking not seeing them ever again, simply to give them an opportunity to survive the war, the conflict, the persecution and the poverty in their own country?

Why is empathy so difficult in our world, when it is a moral obligation after all?

Why is it so acceptable to break international conventions without repercussions?

How can we live at peace with ourselves, when we know of so many unaccompanied migrant children who are losing their lives, and many others are living a life of total exclusion and hardship?

Why does the terrifying statistics that we have, do not compel governments to carry their responsibilities and uphold children's rights to provide adequately for all children?

The vulnerability of these children is further compounded due to being on their own!

We can see this clearly by the number of unaccompanied migrant children that go missing on European soil!

When any one of our children goes missing, we leave no stone unturned to find them.

We report. We investigate. We co-operate. We have protocols in place for intercountry collaboration.

But I ask, what happens when an unaccompanied migrant child goes missing?

Indicators from 25 countries in Europe for 2019, which was compiled by Missing Children Europe, report that **8427** unaccompanied migrant children have gone missing on European soil. I am told that this is simply the tip of the iceberg!

We know that this is an underestimation due to lack of reporting, unregistered births and most often unaccompanied migrant children do not register anywhere on entry to Europe.

Another statistic that needs analysing due to its impact on unaccompanied migrant children coming to Europe, is the lack of registered live births in Africa. The United Nations reports that between 2003- 2007, less than 10 % of African countries reported the total number of live births. In Somalia alone for example, only 3 % of children under 5 years of age were registered at birth.

The European Asylum Support Office, emphasis that the absence of documentation that proves that the child is under 18 years of age, have a direct effect on their recognition as child rights holders.

Protecting and safeguarding all children is fundamental to peace and inclusion.

How can a child suffering from diverse trauma and neglect feel safe?

How can such children ever believe that peace is the way forward for their wellbeing, when living in Europe is so discriminating?

And here other questions very often perplex me:

Are we truly, as Europeans, upholding the legacy of our foremothers and forefathers to strive for a Europe that stands for peace, solidarity, equality, equity and inclusion?

How can we, as Europeans promote ourselves as Promoters and Champions of Human Rights, when we disregard the very essence of inclusion?

Undoubtedly, Europe needs to go from words to action!

Today, let us not only launch the findings of this important project, but let us also identify other ways, to concretely reach out to these most vulnerable children of the world.

On the other hand, Europe and the International Community, must do more to explore the complex causes of migration and to effectively respond to the factors that are driving it.

Political turmoil, globalization, poverty, and the effects of climate change are real push factors that are driving tens of thousands of people away from their homes and countries.

There are solutions.

One very obvious solution is the much-needed change in attitudes, mentality and discourse, about migration.

Migrants cannot continue to be perceived as the curse of our present societies.

Migrants are in fact contributing to our societies.

If Europe had no migrants, who would operate most of our health services?

Most of Europe has an ageing population and most of us speak and discuss the unsustainability of welfare and pension systems.

We need to increase our workforce and it is through migrants that we can manage that.

How can we therefore ignore the plight of unaccompanied migrant children, when they can be the solution in the long term of our complex socio-economic situation?

How can the African continent achieve peace?

If Europe and the international community truly stand for peace, then they cannot continue to fuel conflicts.

They cannot continue to wage proxy wars.

They cannot continue their economic growth by selling armaments and war facilities to terrorists groups.

We need to stand up for sustainable peace.

We need to effectively work for peace.

We need to ensure that equality, equity, inclusion and wellbeing are at the heart of all global policies and multilateral actions.

We need urgently a change of mentality and attitudes.

We need to believe in one human family.

We need to act on the lessons learnt even from the pandemic.

The pandemic has shown that borders are simply human made.

The pandemic has shown that no country can stand alone.

The world now, more than ever before, needs unity, needs collaboration, needs coordination.

This is the only way for humankind to thrive and live in sustainable peace, by ensuring a peaceful co-existence for all.

We need to fight precarity, poverty and conflict together.

The need for a unified approach is most essential.

We must find have a shared vision. Cohesive efforts are crucial and any attempts towards a viable solution should therefore be global.

Lack of constructive communication between communities is often at the root of so much conflict and distrust.

A strong commitment to long lasting dialogue, partnerships and connection is essential to shape the fate of both continents and our peoples.

We should engage seriously and vigorously in addressing basic issues such as education, access to basic medical assistance, the setting up of firmer legal institutions and better governance.

Money needs to be invested to create an appropriate environment for free quality education, dignified job opportunities and facilities to adapt to climate change in line with the 2015 Paris Agreement.

Solidarity by all European States as well as the international community is key to fight the scourge of whole communities being driven out of their homes and countries.

The world should not remain complacent at the exodus of peoples fleeing their own countries.

We must build stronger alliances and networks between our different nations that safeguard human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Education is vital as it will equip and prepare children to become active citizens.

The 1999 United Nations General Assembly Declaration and Programme of Action on a culture of peace indicates that education is key in building such a culture that embraces and puts human dignity at the forefront.

By developing and implementing an innovative methodology to foster social inclusion of unaccompanied migrant children, CiSoTRA has found a practical way of empowering communities so that they can become proactive contributors to their community.

Educating Children will lead to a respectful multicultural perspective.

Empowering Children will lead to a world of active citizenship.

Child participation is crucial and will lead to the necessary dignified leadership skills in our countries.

Humanity must not forget the lessons learnt from history.

We must acknowledge that migration is part of our past, and our present, and it will definitely continue to be part of our future.

We must recognize the essential value of migrants' participation within our communities.

We need to invest in their potential.

The world cannot afford to ignore the incredible potential of their contributions to our societies.

Encouraging migrant participation in the workforce to support our economies and welfare systems is the smart thing to do.

We cannot allow the discourse around migration to be hi-jacked by a short-sighted perspective.

Migrants are essential collaborators to maintaining a healthy and sustainable workforce especially in a shrinking European working age population.

EuroStat indicators for 28 countries have clearly shown that, *'The proportion of people of working age in the EU-28 is shrinking while*

the relative number of those retiring is expanding.' It further stated that, *'the share of older persons in the total population will increase significantly in the coming decades.'*

A study entitled *The Impact of Migration* released by the *International Monetary Fund* in 2016, clearly shows that over the longer-term migratory workers of diverse skill sets are bringing substantial benefits to high level economies.

The world urgently needs a culture of peace where dialogue between people, respect, solidarity, negotiation and ultimately human rights take priority over everything else.

Peace requires more than just the involvement of governments.

Peace must be founded on the intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind.

The empowerment of all children is crucial.

It is only by investing in children that we can ensure that the value of peace will be second to nature to all humankind.

On concluding, there is no justification for human suffering, violence, exploitation and unfair treatment.

Peace and development can only come about if people are led not only by economic growth of whatever sort, but also by a deep sense of solidarity and respect which is inherent to good governance.

In a globalized world where interdependencies are essential to bridge differences, I strongly believe that the countries of the Mediterranean should continue to engage with European partners.

I appeal to all the peoples of the Mediterranean and Europe to cherish and work for peace, as we know that violence will only take away the better of kindness and reason.

There cannot be any compromise where human life is concerned.

Finally, I would like to call on all governments to:

Spread love instead of hatred;

Unite and not divide;

Build and not destroy;

Celebrate our differences rather than let differences continue to tear us apart.