

Summer School 360-Health: Where Nature and Health Rhyme

GoGreenRoutes: A visionary solution to improve urban health and wellbeing.

Keynote by HE Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca

29 June 2022 09:00 hrs

The theme of this three day in-person Summer School is **360-Health: Where Nature and Health Rhyme**. In the European context health for urban communities is increasingly prioritised and how we achieve the ambition of the Green Deal, EU Biodiversity Strategy and ensuring our cities are at the nexus of sustainable actions requires cutting edge research and innovation, from GoGreenRoutes and other projects.

The GoGreenRoutes intergenerational 360-Health approach is a multi-dimensional concept aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 3 - Good Health and Well-being.

Ensuring biological, psychological, social and environmental health, for all generations, is key to sustainable development.

Among our VIP's to provide a welcome address are the Mayor of Gzira Local Council, Conrad Borg, who leads the municipality which is committed to nature based solutions, and the Irish Ambassador to Malta, Patrick Duffy, as a guest of the Irish partner, Maynooth University who coordinate the Horizon 2020 funded project.

Your Excellency Patrick Duffy, Irish Ambassador to Malta
Dr Mario Balzan NATURA Planning Committee Member
Dear friends

The loss of green spaces because of urbanisation, construction, over-development, and traffic, implies that we must do more to ensure that the long-term health and sustainable wellbeing of the individual, the family, and the community, are kept at the heart of our national and international agenda.

The loss of our open spaces, in both rural and urban areas, is a social as well as an environmental challenge and I would dare to say that it will hinder in the long run, potential sustainable economic growth.

This loss poses the very real risk that we could lose those precious places where we should be forming strong and resilient communities, build relationships, and feel connected to our environmental heritage, and to one another.

The European Commission estimates that, by 2050, 80% of the population in the European Union, will live in urban areas.

During my contribution today, I will discuss the major concern of children and young people on the environment.

Children and Young People I meet, through my continuous engagement with them, constantly raise the issues of climate change, the environment, and the need for more green, safe and inclusive spaces in the heart of their respective communities. These are issues that are continuously highlighted as being major concerns for their present and their future.

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, which I founded and now Chair, focuses on the wellbeing of children within the family and the wider

community, promoting Children's Human Rights and creating opportunities for child's participation.

From this 8 year long experience, with a regular and substantial group of motivated and talented Children and Young Persons, whom I consider as my experts on many issues, it has become very clear to me that our younger generations are deeply aware of the need for greater emphasis to be placed on saving the environment in its most holistic of ways, and also to address effectively, the imminent effects of climate change.

According to data from a recent report published by the World Health Organisation, entitled "*Inheriting a Sustainable World: Atlas on Children's Health and the Environment*", a large portion of the most common causes of death among children between 1 month to 5 years of age are preventable through interventions known to reduce environmental risks.

Children are particularly vulnerable to environmental risks, including pollution, hazardous chemicals and waste, radiation, climate change, as well as emerging threats like e-waste.¹

This poses to me and others, some pertinent questions:

What is actually being done, to tangibly address the concerns of our children and our young people with regards to climate change and the deteriorating environment, for their wellbeing?

Are we doing enough?

Are we expedient enough?

¹ <https://www.who.int/health-topics/children-environmental-health>

Is there enough political will?

Are our authorities brave enough to choose the environment and the wellbeing of our Children, Young People, and our Communities before economic gain and profit?

Various international instruments have been put in place to safeguard us all with some also focusing on children in particular.

Safeguarding our environment, in its multidimensional sense, is not simply a political whim or promise, it is a Child Human right as much as it is a Human Right for all.

In Malta, there seems to be the political will in the right direction, with an electoral proposal spending €700 million over seven years in what is being termed “green lungs” for urban spaces that would ensure residents would not need to drive their car to spend time in an open public space.

The proposal involves the creation of a network of gardens and open spaces, including parks, urban green reclamation projects, urban greening initiatives, underground parking were possible, green areas spread out over car tunnels and car-free areas in different localities at the end of the week.

But this proposal when put into effect, will be a damage limitation exercise. We will need to be stricter and bolder in our way of thinking. We need to be insightful and realise that we cannot continue to miss the wood for the trees.

Quick gains will not get us far!

We need a holistic inter-disciplinary approach for the much needed sustainable long term change.

We need a mentality and culture shift.

Children and Young People are speaking out loud and clear and we need to listen and act, as our countries belong to them and not to us adults.

A number of resolutions by the Human Rights Council specifically address the rights of children and young people with respect to environmental harm and climate change, and clearly state that a safe climate is a vital element of the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment and is essential to human life and well-being.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children's participation in issues that affect them, is part of their fundamental rights. This means that children and young people have a right to be involved in changing the future of our earth, which is theirs by right.

Furthermore, this same UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, also gives importance to the: "Environments in which play, and recreational opportunities are available to all children. These environments should provide the conditions for creativity; for opportunities to exercise competence through self-initiated play, to enhance motivation, physical activity and skills development; to immerse in cultural life to enrich playful interactions; to ensure that children have the necessary energy and motivation to participate in play and creative engagement". This is what Article 31 of the UNCRC, is all about!

It has been therefore very clear, even since 1989, when the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child came into being, that Climate change and environmental degradation undermine the rights of every child.

In this regard, UNICEF does a lot of work with young people to have their voices heard on climate change through creative platforms, advocacy and participation at major United Nations summits.

UNICEF also works with governments and partners globally to ensure children are an essential part of climate change strategies and disaster response plans.

As I am sure you are aware, Article 2 of the Paris Agreement sets the limits in the increase of global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursues efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

In my country, a study published by the National Statistics Office, states that Malta's annual mean ambient temperature has risen by around 1.5 °C since 1952. Furthermore, it is forecasted that the Maltese Islands will suffer an average increase of 1°C by 2030.

Concurrently, the Paris Agreement commits the States to respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, including the rights of children, and intergenerational equity, when taking action to address climate change.

There is also the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals. Goal No 13, of this Agenda, specifically states that we need to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact.

We appreciate that children yearn to be in a natural environment, if given the choice. They want to be outdoors, in the fresh air and sunlight, by the sea and

surrounded by grass, trees, and flowers, hearing the birds and the wind, playing in water with sticks and rocks.²

This also reminds me of the contrasting situation created by the COVID pandemic. Children have lived through two years of mostly being locked down, and therefore they have missed out on being able to enjoy nature. On the other hand, the last two years should undoubtedly not be a mirror to the future for our children.

UNICEF states that a child born today has a much better chance of reaching her fifth birthday than ever before. But climate change and environmental degradation threaten to reverse progress on child and adolescent survival, health and well-being.³

The irony is that children are not responsible for the climate change brought about by human actions, yet they bear the greatest burden of its impact.

Our children will be the first global generation of children to grow up in a world made far more dangerous and uncertain as a result of climate change, and of environmental degradation.

This is truly worrying!

Without action now, climate change will exacerbate the inequalities that children already face, and future generations will suffer.

During the last two years, the global community has shown that it can act to address a crisis, with governments, businesses and individuals taking measures and changing behaviours in response to the pandemic.

² https://www.naturalchild.org/articles/guest/pam_leo3.html

³ <https://www.unicef.org/health/healthy-environments>

This is the most recent proof that when we work together, we can overcome huge challenges.

I believe that through the action of each and every one of us, together with brave and meaningful authorities, we can make a difference to damage limit but also to rebuild.

So what can we all do to make a difference?

We need to create more nurturing spaces, for our children and for ourselves.

We need to protect the most vulnerable.

In the last few years, we have seen an unprecedented movement of children and young people around the world raising their voices on a worldwide scale, asking and demanding from us adults and world leaders to do our duty to protect them from the dire effects of climate change.

We must firstly acknowledge Children as agents of change.

We need to put the wellbeing of our children and young people at the heart of climate change strategies and response plans.

The participation of children and young people is necessary if the interests of future generations are to be safeguarded.

We need to listen to them and act to materialise their rightful aspirations for a better world.

We need to promote the Intergovernmental Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action drafted during the COP 25 in Madrid, and act on its proposals.

We need to ACT.

Greta Thunberg's call in Scotland last year, to stop the blah, blah, blah is very correct.

The declaration from COP 25 in Madrid is a commitment to accelerate inclusive, child and youth-centered climate policies and action at national and global levels. It is one of the many important steps towards developing global principles on children's human rights and the environment.⁴

The declaration is actually a pledge drafted by children and youth and aligned to, by champion governments willing to uphold priorities identified by children and youth throughout the world.

It acknowledges the global leadership and calls of children and young people for urgent and immediate climate action, as well as their critical role as agents of change.

I will just mention a few points that I consider most relevant, and I will give a concrete example from Malta.

Up to a few years ago, Maltese villages had a strong sense of community life centred on the village "pjazza", the village square. Although community life is different from one locality to another, communities had a high level of active participation among residents including children.

Today, the spirit of the village "pjazza" vanished, leaving little or no physical spaces in which to celebrate the feeling of connection among the community and the development of positive relationships which is central to wellbeing.

⁴ <https://www.childenvironment.org/declaration-children-youth-climate-action>

In order to address this gap, a process of child participation and consultations carried out by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society created *Progett Komunitarja*.

Progett Komunitarja aims to create an open, safe, inclusive, and environmentally friendly space, primarily with children, for children and the wider community.

The project aims to give children and young people the opportunity to play, exercise, and share and learn through a programme of non-formal education, which is being developed by the Malta Trust Foundation as a partner to the project in collaboration with the Faculty of Education of The University of Malta.

Another real life example, also from Malta, of the quest by children for a better environment, were laid out by a widespread process of child participation, led by The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, where more than 20,000 children from across Malta and Gozo took part. The children presented a Manifesto to aspiring politicians, with no less than twenty proposals on the environment.

I will mention just a few of these proposals:

- *Proposal 1. Put in place new rules for buildings to have more green areas such as, dedicate a portion of their front or surrounding area as a green space, with flowers and plants, as well as roof gardens.*
- *Proposal 2. Develop initiatives for the beautification of local communities, such as plantation of more trees, flowers, wall gardens, and use of art and colours.*

- *Proposal 3. Strengthen and enforce community upkeep to achieve a cleaner environment in every locality, and push for a culture discipline regarding littering.*
- *Proposal 4. Carry out regular maintenance of playgrounds, gardens, and public spaces.*
- *Proposal 5. Address the pressing issue of climate change, such as, by introducing initiatives to reduce the use of plastic use, have cleaner seas and increase recycling.*

Let us listen to what the children are telling us, and waste no more time and ACT.

At the COP26 in Glasgow, thousands of children protested outside the confines of the Conference, demanding action to save their world.

However, inside the conference, very few children and young people were given the opportunity to make their voices heard.

- Why were Children and Young People not invited to participate fully at COP 26?
- Are we so short of the necessary global political will to listen to children and young people?
- Why are our global leaders not taking Children's Human Rights seriously and in particular regarding environmental and climate change essential issues?

I therefore encourage you to join the call to continue to advocate for global recognition and fulfilment of children's inalienable human right to a healthy environment.

Let us continue to work to create opportunities for children to have their voices heard on climate change. They are the most vociferous and resolute on this issue, as they know, that it is their future and that of future generations.

Let us enhance efforts to respect, promote and consider the human rights of children and young people in the implementation of the Paris Agreement at all levels

Let's work together to advocate for the acceleration of the needed investment in child and youth-responsive adaptation, disaster risk reduction and mitigation measures, realising full well the urgent need to focus on reaching children most at risk, and advocate for child-sensitive criteria to be mainstreamed in multilateral funds.

As I mentioned earlier, I stress again the need to enhance the meaningful participation of children and youth in climate change processes.

I would like to end my contribution by congratulating Dr Mario Balzan for hosting this summer school here in Malta, and, on a personal note, for leading a European Union-funded research involving multiple stakeholders in Malta to assess the links between access to nature and human well-being.

My heartfelt congratulations, and I wish you all a positive learning experience.