

Diversity – a Spotlight on Society
Opening Speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca
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Dear Colleagues and Friends,

Thank you so much May Caruana, and your the team, for organising this interesting symposium.

I must say that the choice of discussing diversity in the wide sense of the word, is very opportune. Our islands today, have changed and are changing rapidly in more ways than one. We are changing in a way where on one hand more awareness is growing in terms of a multi-cultural / multi-faith society, an ageing population, an inclusive community, and on the other hand, the issue of how we perceive diversity, is still for some, quite perplexing. For others it is either too challenging to bother about and decide to ignore., or else object to embrace it, as a positive and meaningful concept.

I therefore commend you May, for bringing this multi-dimensional topic for discussion.

While I was reflecting on the topic and preparing for my contribution, I decided to approach the subject by expressing my innermost feeling about the beauty of diversity.

To me the overarching benefit of acknowledging and celebrating our diversity, is that I can enjoy a sense of fraternity, a sense of being an integral part of one community, of one world.

I also reflected on my belief and decided that I will share with you my personal experience of the beauty of diversity.

I was brought up in a family where diversity was perceived as key to a peaceful, and dignified life for all.

I was the eldest in a family of six siblings. My father and mother worked hard to empower us with a sense of understanding of what makes us unique individuals, with unique personalities and at the same time, realise our different strengths and abilities. We were fortunately empowered to understand, that no one is able to, stand on their own, and therefore we must be aware that we need to be there for one another within the family but also within the wider community.

This perspective gave root to my strong belief that I have a responsibility towards the building of a society where everyone has a right to be supported and to succeed.

My belief of a supporting society whereby individuals are seen for their unique abilities and capabilities, grew stronger, through my life journey.

It was through such embedded perception of life and engagement with so many people and communities, that I took the opportunity when I was President of Malta, to set up both the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society in 2014 and The Malta Trust Foundation in 2015.

I must also state that my engagement with children have given further insight of the beauty of diversity.

Children do not perceive differences as challenging or with prejudice or bias. Children find differences intriguing and exciting.

Children embrace diversity in all its beauty.

Hence the reason why, I have together with my Colleagues within the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, we set up a Children's Council to inform us of how they perceive society and the world out there.

So, while the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society develops our evidence-based concepts on the wellbeing of society, The Malta Trust Foundation provides services to address gaps in the system.

The Malta Trust Foundation who is only 8 years old has grown exponentially and is now strong on mainly disability, mental health and mental wellbeing, non-formal education, child, and youth participation.

During our 8 years in operation, we have seen miracles, we have seen life-changing situations where children and young people with diverse abilities, become unique individuals, who have gained their dignity and quality of life.

I can assure you that this is a daily occurrence and not a one off experience.

As recent as yesterday evening, a father of a 9 year old boy, with autism and who was non-verbal all his life, has just received an assistive device, and sent me

a video of his child telling his parents what he wants to eat and drink. The child was so happy! A new whole world has opened up for him.

I am aware that this afternoon Dr Olivia Galea Seychell, will be addressing you and sharing her beautiful experience of her son, Beppe who is autistic, and how with the right family environment and support, at 10 years old he wrote a book explaining what autism is, all about.

I must admit, that though I read and read about autism, it was through Beppe's book, that I could understand, how a child with autism, feels and thinks.

Beppe is now on to his fourth book. Unbelievable – Remarkable!

What about our work at Villabianca, The Malta Trust Foundation's Centre for Music and the Arts for children with disabilities.

What life changing experiences!

Children with diverse disabilities are playing instruments, singing, dancing, doing art. Others are enjoying music and developing new skills.

What a change in their quality of life!

What a sense of satisfaction and beautiful encounters for their parents!

You will also have Ms Rosetta Debattista today, who is our Creative Consultant at Villabianca who will undoubtedly share together with some of our children and young people the amazing events unfolding at the Centre.

Together with the Paralympic Committee, The Malta Trust Foundation is now on to a wonderful project which is providing sports opportunities for Children and Young People who are severely visually impaired.

We are now seeing Children who are blind, swimming, rowing, doing judo and playing futsal. I can assure you that these remarkable events leave me speechless and continue to strengthen my belief in the beauty of diversity and that everyone is born for a reason .

However, it also leaves me, even more resolute to work harder together with my Colleagues and all other stakeholders, not only to create further opportunities but also to inform and disseminate the message out there, that each, and every one of us, whatever our ability is, and however diverse we might be, we all have been endowed with abilities that need to be developed into skills that will contribute to the quality of life and dignity for the individual, but also to the whole of society.

Let me share another different experience of diversity.

One of the issues that soon emerged through the Children's and Young People's Council within the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, was the issue of the diverse faith traditions and culture that are subsisting on our Islands. The children suggested the setting up of an Interfaith Children's Council, whereby children from diverse faith traditions can meet and exchange about their colours, their costumes, their food, their cultures, their rituals, and their prayers.

They wanted to know about each other and the composition of our multi-cultural society today.

I can assure you that whenever this diverse group of children come together, it is an amazing experience.

They share the differences, they understand each other, they discuss and unearth similarities and enjoy the information.

They pray together!

They celebrate their diversity!

By respecting each other and acknowledging they are equal rights holders. e

Children flourish when they can enjoy their rightful space, with their deserved support.

Children do not mind the differences, they are not prejudiced, they are not biased.

Hence the reason that today, more than ever before, I focus my voluntary work on investing in children.

Children teach us adults, to see the world from a different lense, from the correct and appropriate perspective.

Diversity encompasses the rich tapestry of human experiences, encompassing various dimensions such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, and socio-economic background.

It is through embracing and nurturing diversity that we can create a society that truly thrives.

To acknowledge and truly celebrate diversity now and in the future, we need to invest and empower our children with the ethical values, of respect, equality, equity, and love.

Diversity is not simply a buzzword or a checkbox to be filled.

It is a fundamental aspect of who we are, as individuals, and as a collective.

It is a recognition that each person brings a unique set of perspectives, talents, and contributions that enriches our society in immeasurable ways.

When we celebrate diversity, we are putting to life the enjoyment of Universal Human Rights.

When we embrace diversity, we open the doors to innovation and creativity. Different perspectives challenge the status quo, encourage us to think outside the box, and lead to ground-breaking ideas and solutions.

In diverse teams and communities, we tap into a wealth of knowledge and experiences that can lead to transformative change.

More than anything, diversity fosters social cohesion and understanding.

By embracing individuals from different backgrounds, diversity promotes empathy, compassion, and respect.

Diversity facilitates the breakdown of barriers, dismantles stereotypes, and builds bridges of understanding and solidarity.

Diversity encourages dialogue, promoting the exchange of ideas and fostering a culture of inclusivity and acceptance.

In embracing diversity, we also recognize the inherent value and worth of every individual.

We create a society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of our backgrounds or circumstances. It is through the celebration of diversity that we can address systemic inequalities and ensure equal access to education, employment, healthcare, and all basic and essential needs.

Furthermore, diversity brings also economic benefits.

A diverse workforce drives innovation, productivity, and competitiveness.

It allows for the harnessing of a wide range of skills and talents, leading to better problem-solving and decision-making. Inclusive businesses and organizations not only reflect the diverse communities they serve but also gain a competitive edge in the market.

However, embracing diversity is not without its challenges.

It requires a collective effort to dismantle biases, prejudices, and discrimination that hinder the full participation and inclusion of all individuals.

Diversity calls for creating safe spaces, policies, and practices that value it and promote equity.

It demands ongoing education, awareness, and open dialogue to foster an inclusive culture.

Today, as we come together to celebrate diversity, let us reaffirm our commitment to creating a society that embraces and cherishes the beauty of our differences.

Let us work towards building a world where everyone feels valued, respected, and empowered. Through our collective efforts, we can create a society that truly reflects the principles of justice, equality, and compassion.

Let us all strive to ensure that wherever we are in our respective areas of work and responsibility, we foster, we nourish, we celebrate our differences, our diversity.

It is through this celebration of differences and diversity that we can create the whole, that we can feel united, that we can enjoy our families, our community, our society as one human family.

Finally, I would like to conclude with an inspiring quote by Kofi Annan, a former Secretary General of the United Nations, whereby he said, and I quote:

“we may have different religions, different languages, different coloured skin, but we all belong to one human race.”

Let's disseminate this philosophy of life to everyone out there!

Let's work to educate and inform that diversity will bring to each and every one of us, as families, as communities, as the wider society a sustainable, meaningful and peaceful way of living.

