

**IOM (107th Session) Keynote Address delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca,
President of Malta, on the 7th of December, 2016
Palais des Nations, Geneva**

Your Excellency, Ambassador Lacy Swing, Director General of IOM

Your Excellency, Ambassador John Quinn, Chair of the IOM Council

Your Excellency, Ambassador Laura Thompson, Deputy Director General

Excellences

Distinguished guests

Dear friends

It is truly my pleasure to join you for this 107th session, of the Council of the International Organisation for Migration. I would like to begin my contribution by celebrating the sixty-fifth year of successful leadership, which IOM has brought, and continues to deliver, to the field of migration.

Furthermore, under the sure guidance of Director-General William Lacy Swing, it is exciting and challenging to consider the new opportunities opening to IOM as an allied organisation within the United Nations.

My remarks today shall centre on the importance of peace and wellbeing, with the hope, of stimulating further thought and reflection.

I believe that peace and wellbeing are twin values, of equally vital importance, to our united family of nations.

Our aspirations to secure these values can only become a reality when they are built on a shared commitment among nations, to safeguard our fundamental human rights; the upholding of human dignity; and the promotion of a global social solidarity approach.

This global social solidarity approach, is portrayed in the full implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which were adopted by all countries within the United Nations, last year.

The international community must endeavour to implement these Goals, in all areas of social, economic, environmental, and cultural betterment, to create meaningful wellbeing and sustainable peace, in our world, for the benefit of all humanity.

We must continue to compel our governments and all stakeholders to walk the talk.

All our strategies must recognise the important link that exists between inclusive, democratic societies and the culture of sustainable peace that must be built in our diverse communities and nations.

However, as we all know, the expanding diversity of our global societies is being portrayed, with growing hostility.

This is truly alarming.

Citizens in many countries are anxious about precarious economies and their experiences of growing inequality.

In response, unscrupulous fear-mongers and populists are capitalizing on such unease, pointing the finger of blame at the migrant, who is considered the newcomer; the stranger; the outsider.

The threat of extremism and intolerance, even in what we believed to be the most secure democracies, is breeding a dangerous atmosphere of hatred and suspicion.

In light of these troubling trends, the phenomenon of migration is an increasingly polarised topic in many of our countries and across our world.

Unfortunately, words of reason are being displaced by anger, even at the highest levels of governance.

Complacency, at this critical juncture in human history, is dangerous.

We cannot allow the substance of our human rights, and the mandate of our covenants and conventions, to be diluted.

Governments must ensure that Human Rights are effectively and equitably accessible to each and every member of our societies, so as not to risk even more discontentment among the peoples of the world.

Such an approach would be of long-term benefit, to address discord, exclusion, and the risk of radicalisation.

We cannot allow the phenomenon of migration to continue to be a source of further division.

As I see it, two paths are opening up to us:

- One leads deeper into alienation and despair, back to a past we thought we had outgrown.
- The other leads us forward with a message of hope.

The violence that is becoming more frequent and bolder in our societies is only held back by the hard work of passionate people, like yourselves; individuals and groups who uphold respect and peace.

The international community has had a number of opportunities to come together and develop strategies to move from words to action. However, it seems to me, that still very little is being done.

The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants acknowledges that the multidimensional reality of migration must include collaboration across countries of origin, transit, and destination.

Furthermore, the Declaration explicitly links these concerns with the remit of the 2030 Agenda, and its Sustainable Development Goals.

Other important proposals were agreed upon during the Valletta Summit on Migration, held in Malta last year.

The Summit brought together stakeholders from African and European countries of origin, transit, and destination, present around one table to create a unified roadmap for the future.

Key outcomes included the need to prioritise more investment in highly affected countries, linking the Global North and South, while also creating a holistic, collaborative approach to internal and external migration.

The most recent joint statement from 78 organisations including IOM, entitled 'Children cannot wait: 7 priority actions to protect all refugees and migrant children', urges European Union leadership to act immediately, in cooperation with civil society, in seven priority areas to safeguard refugee and migrant children in their comprehensive needs.

International organisations, like IOM, have the duty to remind, and assert, that governments live up to their responsibilities.

We must work together to advocate for an approach that values the wellbeing of each and every member of our societies and communities.

All the work that IOM has done must serve as an encouragement to move further, to do more, to change this unfolding situation for the better.

I come from Malta, a nation in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea.

I am living proof of the strength that comes from the diversity of cultures and the movement of peoples, connected across regions.

This diversity is a source of my identity and a driving force of resilience and wellbeing in my life.

Each one of us is an example of this precious diversity.

I believe it is this power of connection which encourages us to stand in solidarity with those who, at first glance, appear very different.

All of our economic advances, the innovation of our technologies, the creativity of our inter-dependent societies, are empty if they are not animated by the living spirit of solidarity.

We must work harder to convince the international community that solidarity is the mutual understanding of a very basic reality: Together we stand, divided we fall.

Solidarity is the healing power of our shared humanity.

To secure solidarity, I believe that there is an urgent need in the world for an ethics of wellbeing, which will unite our efforts, shape our thoughts, and direct our actions.

We need a mandate focused on socio-economic, environmental, and cultural wellbeing, underpinning the work of IOM and other organisations, and serving as the guide and the measure of our success.

In order to understand the meaning of this wellbeing, we must nurture inclusive encounters with individuals and communities from across society.

We must include the direct experiences of refugees and migrants, working hand-in-hand with our policy-makers, to produce serious and credible action.

We must work together to achieve a sustainable and participatory peace.

Human migration is a global phenomenon that no organisation or nation is equipped to deal with alone. In particular, the Mediterranean remains the primary access path for migrants coming from various areas of the African continent.

According to recent data presented by Federico Soda, Director of the IOM Coordination Office for the Mediterranean, some 90% of migrants attempting to traverse the sea leave from Libya.

Moreover, at the Valletta Summit, former President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz said, and I quote, “the Mediterranean is the most dangerous route.”

It is heart-breaking to recognise that this route is also responsible for the largest number of reported fatalities.

UNHCR reports that over 347,000 people have already crossed the Mediterranean this year. Of these arrivals, 58% come from the world's top ten refugee countries of origin.

According to data from IOM for 2016, over 4,600 people have been reported dead or missing in the region.

In light of these facts we must respond, even more passionately, to the arguments of those individuals who profess that walls and fences are the only way to deal with growing numbers of vulnerable people.

It is with the goal of finding sustainable responses that my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, in Malta, has facilitated a Refugee-Led NGO Platform.

It has created a space of empowerment for asylum-seeking groups and communities across Malta.

Through this platform, we are better able to address issues of wellbeing within these communities, and bring their concerns to the attention of the relevant authorities and the public at large.

My Foundation also assisted in the launch, last year, of a publication produced by the Jesuit Refugee Services of Malta.

The book recounts the experiences of six Somali women who are seeking asylum in Malta.

They shared their fears and dreams, calling for solidarity, for freedom, and for dignity.

One Somali refugee said, and I quote, "In my country my rights were violated. My life was not mine but dictated by someone else. If I am to be respected, first I need to be free, free from the bars surrounding me, free from being controlled by someone else, free to run my life." (End quote).

Earlier this year, I was also invited to launch the autobiography of a young Somali transgender woman.

This unaccompanied child had fled, in fear for her life, due to the discrimination and threats of violence she faced as a result of her gender identity.

Her book describes a difficult journey across the desert, alongside her companions, and at the mercy of smugglers. She recounts her experiences in a Libyan town. I would like to share a quote from her book about this experience:

"Little did I know that the gates of hell were now wide open... We parted ways with the smugglers from the desert, who handed us over to Libyan smugglers, who now would help

us to get to the Libyan capital of Tripoli. They were more ruthless than their counterparts. This became evident when they showed us a torture chamber where people who refused to pay them would be served their punishment.” (End quote).

Her story is both a harrowing reminder of the struggles faced by minority groups around the world, and a testament to the courage of the human spirit.

I am pleased that, in Malta, she was able to publicly celebrate the fullness of her identity, in recognition of her fundamental right to self-determination.

The resilience of such individuals is an encouragement for us to keep pushing against the agendas of rabble-rousers, who are riding waves of hostile populism.

Furthermore, the suffering of refugee women is inevitably connected to the suffering of children, who are often at greatest risk of social exclusion.

During my time as Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity, I worked to ensure that the detention of unaccompanied asylum seeking children was ended and that families were kept together.

IOM, working hand-in-hand with UNHCR, were essential collaborators in making these changes possible.

A technical report, facilitated by my Foundation, made it clear that, united in purpose, your organisations have the power to create meaningful improvements in policies, protocols, and services which directly affect people’s lives.

Earlier this year, I was confronted by the massive need for essential services on a recent visit to Al Zaatari Refugee Camp, in Jordan. As you all probably know, Al Zaatari Camp has a population of over 80,000 refugees, which, is predominantly made up of children and young people.

Indeed, some 57% of the camp’s population is under 18 years of age. Families in the camp are struggling to achieve some semblance of normality.

While these families are living under the burden of uncertainty, even though Jordan as the host country goes out of its way to support, the international community can do much more to make real progress to better the lives of all the innocent victims of war.

I saw with my own eyes the lack of even the most basic resources.

If food, water, and appropriate sanitation are lacking, what does that say about access to education and processes of justice?

The international community must not allow a generation of children to be abandoned, lost in an environment of unrest and open to the threat of radicalisation.

The sense of exclusion being created in Europe, and the suffering being created in these camps, will result in a lost generation of children and young people.

I fear that their disillusionment will leave them particularly vulnerable, with potentially devastating repercussions.

Therefore, the international community must be compelled to act now. We must create spaces of safety and respect, where entire families are nurtured. I would like to reiterate the need for governments and authorities, and international organisations to assert the importance of Human Rights, at every opportunity.

It is by witnessing the struggles of such families, risking all to cross the Mediterranean in search of a better life for themselves, that I was, myself, changed.

Allow me to share another of my experiences with you.

When I was Minister, I met a seven-year-old Syrian boy named Mohammed. He was a survivor who had seen his entire family drown in the Mediterranean in October 2013. The child was saved by a thirty-year-old Syrian man, who might have drowned himself but did all he could to save Mohammed's life.

Due to the severity of his trauma, the little boy was unable to speak. After an intensive social media campaign the boy was identified by his paternal uncle, thanks to the assistance of the Red Cross Malta and IOM Malta.

The smile on little Mohammed's face, when he was reconnected with his uncle, stays with me to this day.

We can only be influential partners in a culture of solidarity if we are willing to work for the wellbeing of all people. We cannot wait for somebody else to do it for us.

We must promote peace-building and respect in our societies, and across nations.

We must ensure that all people, no matter their differences, feel included in society. Each person must have the opportunity to become a valued collaborator in our communities.

To achieve our goals, we must foster synergies between all stakeholders; between actors working locally, on a national and regional platform, and actors on the global level, working in the common pursuit of peace and wellbeing.

There are many worthy initiatives, led by different groups, NGOs, and international organisations.

However, I believe that now is the time for a more holistic and collaborative approach; an approach which facilitates one united vision of global social solidarity, through the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

I believe that we must work from one platform, with one voice, to share one mandate to safeguard human dignity.

We must move beyond sporadic and fragmented efforts, into a new phase where synergies between our efforts result in accumulated and dynamic progress.

Just as the work of IOM and UNHCR, working shoulder-to-shoulder with civil society and all stakeholders, produced meaningful changes in Malta, so too can the united strength of our different groups produce effective improvements on the international stage.

The international community cannot afford to be small minded in its endeavours, ignoring the long-term implications of the choices we make now.

The international community cannot allow itself to forget that each person has the potential to be an active social, cultural, and economic contributor to our societies.

Processes of economic globalisation have made us more inter-dependent than ever, but I believe we must reflect these processes in an equally strong decision to pursue global social solidarity, as mandated by the Sustainable Development Goals.

As committed stakeholders, we must continue to push the international community to educate our children and young people to end cycles of suspicion and fear.

We need to nurture children and young people of the world to become strong activists for peace and wellbeing.

In this way, our children and young people shall surely become the active and effective leaders of tomorrow's world.

I would like to once again offer my congratulations to IOM on its achievements, but we are all aware that there is always more to be done.

Much of IOM's work focuses on reunification, and I am glad to note that representatives from IOM shall be present at the upcoming international conference, entitled "Lost in Migration – Working together to protect children from disappearance" to be held in Malta next month.

According to UNHCR data, more than a third of migrants who have arrived in Europe since January 2016 have been children.

These include unaccompanied children, whose first-hand experiences shall be shared by young people during the conference.

We cannot allow the abuse and exploitation of children to continue, due to poorly functioning systems of protection.

Missing Children Europe, alongside my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, will bring together key stakeholders with the hope to develop a forward looking action plan, which shall protect children in migration and improve coordination among stakeholders.

We must continue to act, to end the humanitarian catastrophe currently underway, in my own region of the Mediterranean and beyond.

In Malta, we have experienced the fruits of IOM's hard work. Let us now work together, to be stronger than ever, in response to an increasingly aggressive and hostile politics of populist division.

The fundamental wellbeing of our peoples must be a top-priority for policy-makers around the world.

If all of our communities feel secure, are listened to, and are respected, then we shall reduce the unhappiness, anxiety and tension, which are being manipulated by demagogues.

This is the way to address the roots of political extremism.

This is the way we prevent extremism from spreading throughout communities and nations.

If we do not prevent political extremism from spreading, I fear there shall be terrible and far-reaching effects, with refugees and migrants bearing the brunt of this growing anger and disillusionment.

We all know that international migration will only increase in scale and complexity over the next decades. Therefore, collaboration between governments, international organisations, and civil society must take a more active role to address the challenges, and explore the opportunities, proposed by migration.

Malta's upcoming Presidency of the Council of the European Union will highlight, with a special focus, these challenges and opportunities within Europe and further afield.

Malta recognises that we must act to implement effective and efficient measures, which acknowledge the concerns of individuals and communities in Europe, and uphold the human dignity of migrants and refugees.

Malta's upcoming Presidency of the Council also presents an opportunity to practically implement the outcomes of the Valletta Summit, which include tackling public perceptions, effective investment in countries of origins, and attitudes in transit and destination countries.

We must come together to improve public communication about socio-cultural inclusion, while mainstreaming diversity in national policies. We must provide incentives for an increasingly inclusive workforce, which will stimulate the private sector in our nations and our economic growth.

Alongside these efforts, social inclusion must encompass a strong cultural dimension. It must involve a genuine investment in, and celebration of, peoples' religious, cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds. These must be recognised as assets, which enrich and strengthen civic life.

In conclusion, let us recognise that empowerment at community level sows the seeds for a transformation that shall embrace entire nations.

Let us strive together to build a democratic culture of solidarity which we shall be proud to hand down to our future generations.

I refuse to accept that this period of anxious uncertainty will define our future. I have too much faith in humanity.

However, the international community needs to move from words to action.

It is up to each and every one of us too, to walk this journey together, united in pursuit of peace, and led by our ethical commitment to the wellbeing of all humanity.

Thank you.