

Inclusive Cities for Sustainable Families

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Very often we are faced with statistics. We are faced with terms such as: Poverty, Risk of Poverty, Social Exclusion, Material Deprivation and Severe Material Deprivation. Statisticians try to give a definition to each.

Unfortunately, comparative statistics is a one size fit all. It does not give a real picture of each and every individual country. Main issue is benefits in kind. Different countries provide benefits in kind while others offer partial benefits in kind or the service is provided against payment.

Our society consists of haves and have not's. Children whose way of living is dependent and directly related to the wellbeing of their parent/parents. Very often as much as children inherit wealth from their parents they also inherit poverty or what is better known as generational poverty.

Research based on scientific evidence shows that in developed countries, children from poor households are more likely to grow up in poverty themselves. It is here that concrete measures are needed to rectify our policies and services to help families out of poverty and social exclusion.

Before being elected in 2013 my government faced a scenario where the rate of poverty and social exclusion was on the increase, the economy was increasing at a small rate, deficit and debt level going up, steep increase in energy rate and cost of living.

My Government took immediate steps to turn round the economy. At the moment we are enjoying one of the highest increase in Gross Domestic Product. Job creation is an all time high, unemployment is the second lowest in the EU, deficit and debt levels have been brought down dramatically to a deficit of 0.7% of GDP and debt level of 60%. Reduction of an average of 25% on energy tariffs and

products, lowering of direct taxation without any increase or introduction of other type of taxation.

A strong economy helped my Government to be able to introduce all the changes that Malta has witnessed in less than 4 years.

The Department of Social Services has witnessed two changes in two years. From a department that gives benefits to individuals at a time of vulnerability, two years ago, we provided the same service but in addition we started incentivising individuals to empower themselves. We introduced Tapering of Benefits where one does not lose benefits on day one on entering work, but the benefits tailed down over a 3 year period.

We introduced In-work Benefit where low income workers are given substantial In-work Benefit per child apart from Children's Allowance and other benefits.

We introduced more Family Friendly Measures, foremost free Childcare for working couples and single parents. All this led most of all to empowerment of women to enter the economy, invest in their future and improve the income of their family and their children. As of this year, persons who irrespective of how many incentives, how many job opportunities there are, they are unable to enter work due to high dependency; while fighting benefit fraud we took the second step to increase in a few years, benefits to such individuals up to the National Minimum Wage.

While we give Free Medical Care, free schooling up to tertiary level, give stipends to post secondary students, we have embarked on a pension reform which will increase drastically the National Minimum Pension over a few years. Also the removal of taxation on income from pensions by 2018.

We have embarked on the Anti-Poverty and Social Exclusion Strategy 2014-2024, targeting different areas with greater priority on Education and Employment.

To make our services more accessible we started by opening Community Centres around the island. Regional networks which incorporated main stakeholders operating within the communities (e.g. schools, NGOs, local councils, church organisations, etc.) of these regions were established so as to better the communication between them and also to create a referral system between them and the Community Centres.

A method of profiling and implementation of the services was designed and established through a computerised platform. The first batch of individuals or families deemed to be poor (or at risk of being poor) was based on the register of families which are eligible for the European food parcels. When profiling the members of the household, who are eligible for the food parcel, the social mentor will be establishing a clearer picture of the family's background and current situation.

The aim is for these families to be mentored and trained so as to be included in the labour market with suitable employment which will help them and their family alleviated from poverty. Based on the National Poverty Strategy timeframe mentioned above, targeted a specific number of families are mentored and permanently alleviated from poverty each year.

In parallel to the provision of community services, a holistic project was designed. **Supported Employment** was introduced to monitor vulnerable persons within their employment. The planning of such amalgamation of projects lead to the proper application and maximised its efficiency.

Supported Employment targeted the same vulnerable persons identified during the family evaluation process mentioned earlier and offered professional supported employment services such as, but not limited to; professional assessments, skill building programs, literacy, mechanical knowledge, job coaching and job matching, while offering continuous support when these vulnerable persons found employment.

An aspect of poverty reduction is that of "prevention", rather than "cure" for those who are already in poverty. In view of this, it is also being planned that a series of preventive informative meetings and courses are being provided to the public from the Community centres which inform, teach and help individuals in developing further basic life skills.

Last year the Positive Parenting strategy was launched. Main issues which were targeted through this strategy were related directly to Positive Parenting courses.

Social Mentors (Family Key Workers) and Professionals from the multidisciplinary teams in our Community Centres are already making contact and assisting the vulnerable and will be building upon the strengths of families and addressing the needs of the parents who have children aged between 0 and 16. This will carry the positive effect that each family member becomes a valued contributor within the same local community while assisting the children educationally, emotionally, socially and also on a community level. It is estimated that a considerable proportion of the 7,800 children mentioned earlier, will benefit from such courses in the long run.

I'm proud that in 2016, Malta's Community Centers were recognized as Best Practice from EU member states as stated by Integrated Approaches to Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Closing

In a nutshell these are just a few of the initiatives that my Government has taken to elevate families, especially with emphasis on children. We have now embarked on a target that by 2020 all families with children under 16 years of age with one parent working will have an income above the threshold of a decent living as set out by Caritas Malta; a threshold set out after a thorough study by Caritas Malta for a decent living.