

Leaving no child behind

UN HQ-New York – 8 February 2017

Organizers:

International Federation for Family Development
Permanent Mission of Qatar to the United Nations

H. E. Michael Farrugia

Minister of Family and Social Solidarity of Malta

Our children are our future. As legislators we have an obligation towards their wellbeing. We need to keep our children, our future generation, as focal point in our economic, social and educational policies.

Our society consists of haves and have not's. Children depend directly to the wellbeing of their parents. Very often as much as children inherit wealth from their parents they also inherit poverty, is better known as generational poverty. Today, in the European Union and worldwide children at risk of poverty, is a reality.

In the E.U. among households with dependent children, those at the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion are lone parents an average rate of 49.8% and large households (two adults with three or more dependent children, with an average rate of 30.8%, and three adults or more with dependent children) – with an average rate of 28.4 per cent.

After the recession, the European Union with the rest of the world gave more importance to balanced budgets. As a result, unemployment went up and more families especially single parent families found it much harder to make ends meet. As a consequence we ended with more children living at risk of poverty.

Before being elected to government, from the opposition benches we emphasised that austerity is not the answer. We have been proven right.

Before 2013 we were faced with 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 rates and cost of living.

When we took office in March 2013, my Government took immediate steps to turn round the economy. At the moment we are enjoying one of the highest yearly increases in Gross Domestic Product.

Job creation is an all time high, unemployment is amongst the lowest in the EU, deficit and debt levels have been brought down dramatically to a deficit of 0.7% from over 3% of GDP, and a debt level of 60% down from 72%. Reduction of an

average of 25% on energy tariffs and products, and lowering of direct taxation without the introduction of other types of taxation, had a positive effect on families and industry.

A strong economy with an increase of over 6% in 2015 and around 5% in 2016, 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 a major change in the last 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 of 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; first and foremost free Childcare for working couples and single parents. All this led most of all to empower women to enter the economy, invest in their future and improve the income of their family and their children.

We did all this because we strongly believe that the investment in our families will reap the best results for the future of our nation.

We strongly believe that creating the right pathways for a fully inclusive community will create economic growth in our nation which is small in size but big in its intentions and ambitions.

We have just passed a, very long awaited Bill in the Maltese Parliament with regards to children in care. It has been labelled as a milestone with regards to children in care and unaccompanied minors.

A few months ago we published the final document on a holistic approach to Positive Parenting.

At the moment we are concluding on the final document with regards to an updated Children's Policy. A policy which also targets unaccompanied children of migrant children reaching our shores.

Later on this year, after agreement with the Minister for Justice, we are setting the Children's House to modernise children's access to Justice.

A group of lawyers are drafting bills with regards to Rights of the Child and any minor legal changes that might be needed so that our laws are compliant with the Lazarote Convention.

Together with Caritas Malta, my Government is embarking on opening a Centre, one of its kind in Europe, an intensive Rehabilitation Centre for youths who lost their way and started experimenting with heavy drugs.

In Malta the Government provides free education and free health care for all. Besides, post secondary students are given decent stipends to carry on studying because we believe in the human resource.

A recent study by Caritas Malta has set benchmarks for a decent living which includes also families with children. By 2019, it is my Government's target to get all families with children under 16 years of age with one adult working on minimum wage, above the threshold set. The members of such families are small but nothing is going to stop us from succeeding in our target. This year's budget has already targeted hundreds of such families, hundreds considering the small population in Malta of around 430,000 citizens. This year's budget resulted in getting all such families with two children above the threshold.

The next step is to create more mechanisms by which all family members can fully participate in the economic growth in Malta. Our children will be given the right to be children but to also foster skills in making them capable, responsible adults in the future.

I trust that we can all learn from each other to achieve this aim.