

81st Session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child
Intervention by the Head of Delegation of the Republic of Malta to the United Nations
Committee on the Rights of the Child

Mr Chairperson,
Distinguished Members of the Committee,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon. We are pleased to be here to share with you Malta's achievements, plans and challenges in the various areas that, directly or indirectly, affect children. We believe that such an event gives us also the opportunity to listen to your views and experiences and to learn from them in the best interest of all children in our country.

Children and adolescents are highly cherished in Maltese society. No effort is spared to ensure that their overall wellbeing is safeguarded and enhanced through service provision, protection and participation. This commitment is reflected in the importance attributed by Government to children by specifically including "Children's Rights" in one of its Ministries' title, as well as, in the various legal provisions, policies, measures and initiatives that are continuously being developed, reviewed and implemented.

To better understand the aims and objectives underpinning the various actions undertaken across Government, I will outline the national scenario that these seek to effectively address in the context of current demographic trends and social realities of children in Malta.

Today, children in Malta are growing up in a society that is characterised by rapid change. Diverse family structures, evolving demographic realities, lifestyle changes, technological advances, along with other shifts in the broader social structure, are putting pressure on society and communities to adapt to changing times. Such transitions present a number of opportunities and challenges across the life-course including childhood.

Malta is witnessing an increase in life expectancy, together with a decline in fertility rate, postponement of marriage, and child-bearing. The country's demographic profile is being further re-shaped by migration flows. Moreover, children are growing up in more diverse

family structures such as single parent households, reconstituted families, inter-cultural, and same-sex marriages.

These changing family formations along with active ageing and increased female labour force participation are reflecting themselves in a decline in informal care provision, giving rise to increased societal investment in family-friendly measures and community based childcare services. Malta recognizes that these emerging socio-demographic realities demand a range of innovative approaches that safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of all children irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds.

In Malta, children have been a national priority for several decades as reflected in various laws including child-related provisions in the areas of education, social security, adoption, and crime victims. The *Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act*, a law which the United Nations' Free and Equal Campaign, and several human rights civil society organisations hailed as a legal benchmark for the rights of trans, gender variant and intersex persons, introduced a right to gender identity to adults and minors alike; as well as, a right to bodily integrity and physical autonomy, protecting minors against unwanted or unnecessary surgical intervention or other medical treatment on their sex characteristics.

Apart from the enactment of various legislative safeguards relating to children, the wellbeing of children features also as an important objective in a number of national policy documents and strategies, primarily within the National Children's Policy. Children also feature prominently in Malta's National Reform Programme (NRP), the National Report on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion (NSR) and the *National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and for Social Inclusion 2014-2024*. Towards this end, Malta is committed towards ascertaining that no child living in a household where at least one of the parents is registered in full-time employment, and earns at least the minimum wage, lives in poverty.

Furthermore, the '*National Strategic Policy for Positive Parenting 2016-2024*', along with other national policies and strategies in various sectors such as health, education, youth, digitalisation, crime and disability, underpin Malta's efforts in promoting children's prospects.

Whereas universal services cater for children across different contexts, targeted services provide specialised focus on those children whose life circumstances place them at increased risk of disadvantage and may thus require additional support and individualised outreach.

In line with these objectives, Malta continues to consolidate its various structures, schemes and initiatives to secure the rights and wellbeing of children and ensure the highest provision of care, protection and participation. While the State assumes responsibility for the promotion of children's wellbeing, it also acknowledges the important role and contribution of other entities such as the Church, voluntary organisations and other autonomous bodies such as the Office of the Commissioner for Children and The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society. Along with the State, these entities endeavour to promote and safeguard children's rights, enhance their present and future life prospects, provide support services and seek to better understand their views, needs and wishes.

Notwithstanding the significant progress achieved to date with the valuable input of committed stakeholders, including civil society organizations, there shall always be room and scope for improvement, in the light of emerging realities and changing trends emanating from Malta's dynamic society, which is increasingly being characterised by multiculturalism.

Against this scenario, we would like to briefly take you through the main recent initiatives undertaken by the Maltese Government in different spheres of child wellbeing, namely in the areas of social benefits and social welfare, health, education, culture and leisure, and justice.

Social Benefits and Social Welfare

Adequate and sustainable income for parents and primary caregivers is essential to ensure that children grow up with enough resources to enjoy a good quality of life. A number of measures and benefits under the Social Security Act, together with the Youth Guarantee and other EU co-financed initiatives, have been introduced.

Parents also benefit from family-related allowances such as Children's Allowance, both universal and means-tested whilst additional assistance is also provided to families taking care of disadvantaged children such as through the 'Child in Care Benefit' provided to foster parents, the 'Disabled Child Allowance' and the Adoption Grant. Other assistance to families is also provided through in-kind benefits that address such requirements as housing and utilities.

Various family-friendly-measures such as parental leave and adoption leave have been designed and implemented to promote the reconciliation between family and working life thus contributing to the availability of more quality time between parents and their children.

Malta also upholds a comprehensive programme of prevention, support and treatment services for children and families, particularly those in need.

To better promote, enhance and monitor standards in service provision in the best interest of children, the Social Care Standards Authority was set up, substituting the former Department for Social Welfare Standards.

Moreover, in collaboration with the Council of Europe, work is currently ongoing on the adoption of a Child Participation Assessment Tool which aims to facilitate and promote increased representation and participation of children in the development of policies and implementation of services, thus empowering them to assert their rights and freedoms.

Health

In Malta, the healthcare system offers free universal coverage at all levels. In addition, scheduled medications are provided free of charge to all eligible persons, including children.

Malta has a comprehensive paediatric service including an outpatients Clinic, Child Development Assessment Unit, and a Paediatric Accident and Emergency Department within the main state general hospital.

Measures have been taken to: optimise child development services in collaboration with the education department; address social determinants of health particularly to combat the intergenerational transmission of poverty and social exclusion; and address childhood obesity, tobacco, and alcohol consumption.

Moreover, work is underway towards the development of a national vaccination strategy, and the finalisation of a national Mental Health Strategy which gives particular attention to the wellbeing of children and young people.

Education, Culture and Leisure

Besides the provision of free education, various measures have been endorsed to improve children's personal development and prospects for educational attainment through the modernisation of the education system, participation in early childhood education, work related to vocational education, reforming work-based learning and apprenticeships, and steps taken to make education more inclusive.

The Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024, aligns all sectoral education strategies and policies, and has four broad but measurable targets in line with European and world benchmarks that set the education agenda in Malta.

In this regard, Malta provides various avenues for encouraging children's participation in social, cultural, recreational, sporting and civic activities. Various schemes including tax deductions, and incentives for children to attend and participate in cultural activities and courses are being provided. Malta is also committed to provide safe places for all children, including migrants, children with challenging behaviour, physical disability, and students from socially challenging backgrounds to learn and recreate and to continue its work on inclusion.

Migration, Juvenile Justice and Human Trafficking

Malta is experiencing a diverse influx of migrant children. In the best interest of such children, the Office of the Commissioner for Children recently published the findings of a study which it undertook to understand the challenges, needs, and wishes, of foreign children in Malta.

Malta has a number of legal safeguards for further securing the wellbeing of children experiencing different challenging realities such as unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, young people who come in contact with the criminal justice system both as victims and as perpetrators of crime, and victims of human trafficking.

With a view to address specific attention to minors and young offenders, Malta launched a Crime Prevention Strategy which addresses a range of proposals particularly on youth justice, policing for crime prevention, crime families, recidivism and victim support.

As regards migration, detention and asylum legislation was reviewed through amendments to related laws, and by means of the *Strategy for the Reception on Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants*. It should also be noted that vulnerable persons, including children, are not being subject to migration detention.

Although most cases of human trafficking involve adults rather than minors, yet Government takes the possibility of child trafficking seriously. The Police and other government stakeholders continue to be trained on the subject to be able to deal, in a professional manner, with minor victims of human trafficking.

Challenges

Despite the substantial developments made throughout these last years, child wellbeing remains one of the key national priorities. The Maltese Government is committed to secure further progress in this area by strengthening efforts towards empowering children and ensuring that they have access to the highest level of services and opportunities to enable them to fulfil their utmost potential. Thus, Government is persevering in its commitment to address such outstanding challenges as: the availability, affordability and adequacy of housing; reducing early school leaving and promoting inclusive education; making work pay and reforming social benefit systems; the integration of migrant children; and a more restorative justice approach to criminal offences.

I hope that through this introduction, we have provided you with some more insight into how Malta's society is evolving, what Malta has actually managed to achieve as well as the pending challenges that it acknowledges and is determined to address. We therefore now look forward to a fruitful dialogue that can help us improve on our achievements and devise effective approaches that can help us overcome the outstanding challenges, and all this in the best interest of all children in Malta.

Thank you.