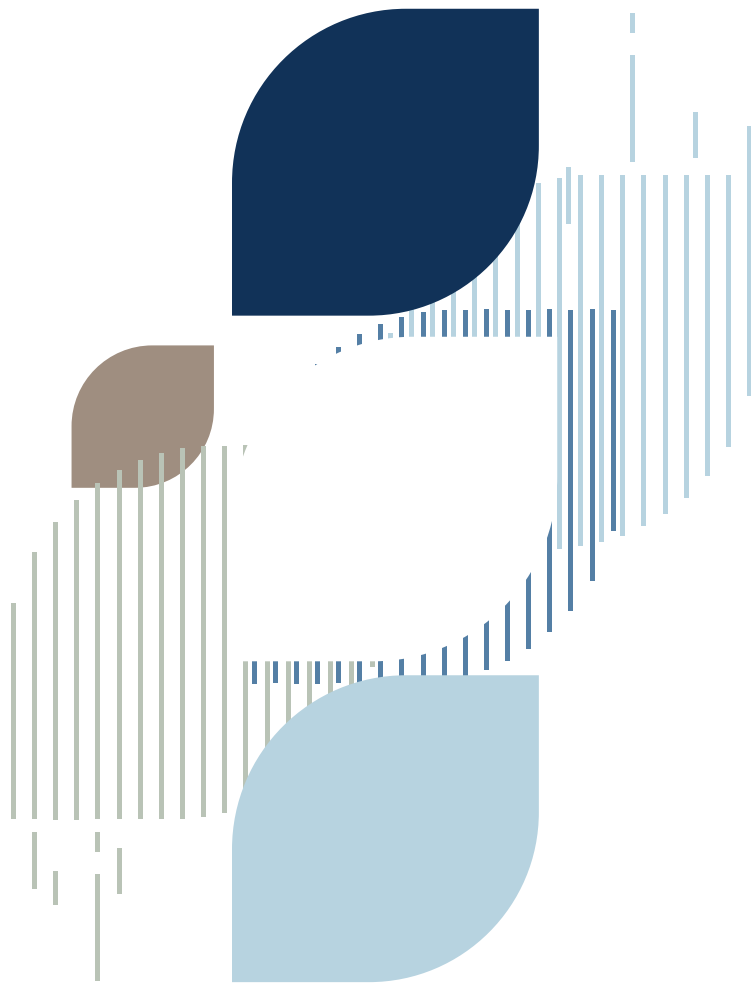




Conference on the Low Birth Rate in Malta

AN EXISTENTIAL CHALLENGE

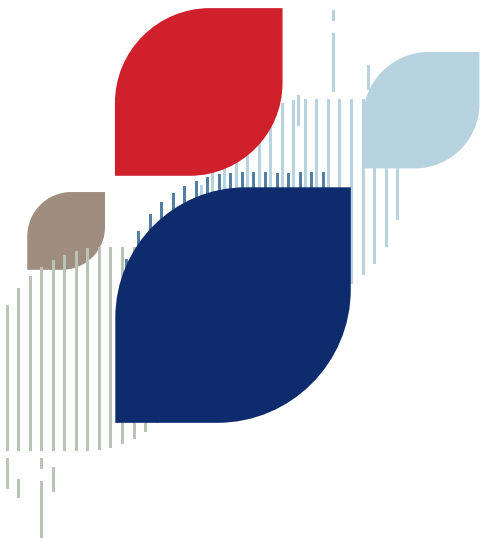


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The Malta Employers' Association (MEA)

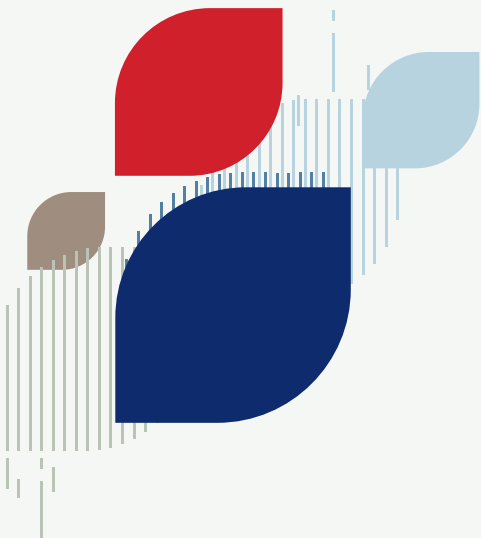
The Malta Employers' Association is a constituted body which brings together employers from all sectors of industry and commerce in Malta. It is, in effect, the "trade union" of employers, formally registered as such under the Employment and Industrial Relations Act (2002). The principal purpose for which the Association is created is the regulation of relations between employers, workers and trade unions.

Whilst taking due regard of the wider interests of the whole community, the Association is bound to endeavour to decisively influence the formation of policies at national level which lead to:

- The development of a culture positively encouraging enterprise;
- The creation of economic and social conditions favourable to the profitable growth and competitiveness of Maltese business and also in the interests of employers in general;
- The development of productive employment.

Continuous economic and social developments in Malta have made the role of the MEA even more relevant than before. The labour market is more regulated, with the transposition of EU directives and other legislation being constantly introduced. The labour market is undergoing a transformation where it is becoming more multicultural, and where there is a scarcity of human resources due to emerging demographic trends and economic expansion. Work organisation is also becoming increasingly challenging due to changing attitudes and social pressures. Therefore, employers – irrespective of size of company or economic sector – stand to gain from access to constant professional advice from an Association that is focused in its mission of being the specialist in employment and social policy matters in Malta.

In this scenario there is a new significance to the obvious benefit which the employer can expect to derive from being a member of the MEA. In the face of the challenges ahead, individual strength can only be achieved through unity – and the Malta Employers' Association provides the platform for the unity of Malta's employers in furthering their common aims. Now, more than ever before, membership numbers are important. By becoming a member of the Malta Employers' Association, you will not only be positioning your business more firmly on the chessboard of employment and industrial relations, but you will also be contributing directly to the enhancement of the employer-worker-union relationship in Malta.



Conference on the Low Birth Rate in Malta

AN EXISTENTIAL CHALLENGE

Organised in collaboration with the Malta
Employers' Association (MEA) at the House of
Representatives, Parliament of Malta
Thursday 13 July 2023



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9yyXwv65MQ&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=MEA

<https://c.connectedviews.com/01/SitePlayer/parliamentmalta?session=120177>

Program

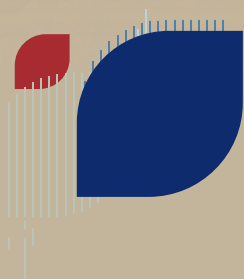
10.00am	Short film about “The Low Birth Rate in Malta”
10.05 am	Speech by Hon. Angelo Farrugia M.P., Speaker of the House of Representatives, Parliament of Malta
10.15am	Ms Joanne Bondin, President, Malta Employers’ Association (MEA)
10.20am	Mr Joseph Farrugia, Director General, Malta Employers’ Association (MEA) (Power-point Presentation)
10.30am	Ms Kirsten M. Cutajar, Consultant (MEA) The Economic Perspective related to Structural Change within the Maltese Population (Power-point Presentation)
10.45am	Dr Patricia Bonello, Official, Research Institute, Discern, about “Family Values and the Birth Rate” (Power-point Presentation)
10.55am	Dr Marie Briguglio, Economist (Power-point Presentation)
11.05am	Rev. Fr Charles Tabone O.P., Academic, University of Malta, “New Socio-Economic Dynamics and Recommendations”
11.15am	Mr Kevin J. Borg, Consultant MEA
11.25am	H.E. Marie Louise Coleiro Preca, President Emeritus of Malta
11.35am	Mr Karl Paul Coleiro, CEO, National School Support Services

11.40am	Dr Anna Borg, Chairperson, Malta Women's Lobby
11.45am	Ms Karen Buttigieg, Chairperson, emPOWer
11.50am	Dr Christine Schembri Deguara, Chairperson, Hope Fertility, Malta
11.55am	Ms Ruth Rose Sciberras, Chairperson, Committee for Positive Parenting and Strengthening of the Family
12.00pm	Mr Ben Rizzo, Chairperson, Civil Society, MCESD
12.05pm	Mr Josef Vella, Secretary General, Union Haddiema Magħqudin – Voice of the Workers
12.10pm	Mr Josef Bugeja, Secretary General, General Workers' Union (GWU)
12.15pm	Mr William Portelli, President, Malta Union of Bank Employees (MUBE)
12.20pm	Ms Renee Laiveira, Commissioner, National Commission for the Promotion of Equality
12.25pm	Mr Paul Abela, President, Chamber of SMEs
12.30pm	Dr Marthese Portelli, CEO, The Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise & Industry
12.35pm	Mr Chris Attard, Vice President, Malta Unions Forum
12.40pm	Mr Matthias Azzopardi, Social Policy Officer, Kunsill Studenti Univesitarji (KSU)

12.45pm	Ms Cherise Sultana, Vice President, Kunsill Nazzjonali taż-Żgħażaġħ (KNŻ)
12.50pm	Ms Miriam Teuma, CEO, Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ
12.55pm	Mr Justin Facciol, Director for Research & Evaluation, Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights
13.00pm	Short 3-minute submissions by other speakers attending the event
13.20pm	Hon. Claudette Buttigieg M.P., Speaker for the Opposition, Civil Rights, Social Dialogue & the Fight against Diabetes
13.25pm	Hon. Alex Muscat M.P.
13.30pm	Hon. Bernard Grech M.P., Leader of the Opposition
13.37pm	Hon. Andy Ellul M.P., Parliamentary Secretary for Social Dialogue within the OPM
13.44pm	Final remarks, Director General MEA
13.50pm	Closing comments by Hon. David Agius M.P., Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, Parliament of Malta
	Video about "The Birth Rate in Malta"
	Commemorative Photo
	Reception







It is clear that the Maltese population is not being renewed because even where we have a family with children, the number of children, one child, as indicated by the birth rate in our country, is not sufficient.



HON. ANGELO FARRUGIA

The Speaker

Good morning everyone, Hon. Members of Parliament, President Emeritus, Distinguished Guests. It is my pleasure to welcome you to this Conference in the House of Representatives on the low birth rate in Malta – An existential challenge, organised together with the Malta Employers' Association (MEA). This is the second conference that the Malta Employers' Association is organising together with the Parliament of Malta. Last year's conference was about the labour market, with the theme "Ensuring skills and trades needed for our country's future competitiveness."

Today we are here in the House of Deputies to share ideas and discuss another important theme for our country; the impact of the low birth rate in Malta. It seems to me that this subject fairly complements the theme that was discussed a year ago in Parliament on the labour market and the dignified livelihoods of the Maltese and Gozitan people.

In the 1990s Malta's population was 365,392, in 2000 it was 399,212, in 2010 it was 418,755 and in 2020 the population in Malta rose to 515,358. Today the number of people living in our country has risen to 535,064. The annual rate of population growth was slightly below 1 % in the 1990s to almost 2.5 % in the first 20 years of the 21st century.¹

In world population density statistics, Malta is found in eighth place of countries with the highest population density per square kilometre or the size of a territory. The average rate for world population density is 16 persons per square kilometre.

¹ See Malta Population Growth Rate 1950 to 2023 (<http://www.macrotrends.net>).

In 2000, Malta's population density was 1,267 people per square kilometre and today it is close to 1,700 people per square kilometre. The size of our country is not going to increase, that is it is going to remain 315 the square kilometres. If the population continues to increase at this rate, this could have a negative impact on the dignified standard of living of the person as well as the environmental, cultural, economic, social sustainability of the Maltese islands.²

Now we come to the birth rate in Malta. Eurostat, the Statistical Office in the European Union, shows that while the birth rate (fertility rate) in the Member States in the European Union over recent years (between 2012 and 2021) has been slightly below 1.55 %, the rate in Malta in 2019 fell to 1.15 % with the possibility of this rate falling even lower or remaining so low.

It is clear that the Maltese population is not being renewed because even where we have a family with children, the number of children, one child, as indicated by the birth rate in our country, is not sufficient, because it is lower than the replacement rate of two, the mother and father. That is why our country needs to recognize the importance of increasing the number of children to more than two, three or more per family. This is the only way of maintaining the renewal of the Maltese population.

A Maltese scholar made the following remarks in an article in a local newspaper:

"Having children has become a luxury that not everyone can afford."

"No household I know can afford for a mother to stay at even when she should probably should."

A country, a people and a nation without children is dead and with no future. The small size of our country, and with so many limitations, both in terms of territory and natural resources, every person has a higher value dimension in Malta, because intellectual faculties, wisdom and rich values, educational skills, professions, crafts and other physical abilities, not only decorate the individual but give Malta and Gozo everything that is necessary, as a nation and a people, to aspire for a dignified and truly sustainable living.

2 See Population Density., Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

3 See Times of Malta, Malta still with lowest Fertility rate in Europe: Eurostat – Malta's Fertility rate has been on a downward trend since 2012.

4 See an article in The Times of Malta entitled "Why our birth rate has gone down" by Anne Marie Galea dated 19th March 2023.

I remind you that for the colonial rulers of the past, the Maltese islands were only useful in having military control over the Mediterranean areas. We hear the adjective Mare Nostrum or Our Sea.

Our ancestors were endowed with extraordinary wisdom and when inspired by a patriotic spirit they emphasized the recognition of their fundamental rights by the colonial forces and first reiterated the cry for their responsible leadership, which led them, over time, to obtain the independence and full freedom of Malta; Malta no longer as an element of division and violence between peoples but with an economy and with a dignified livelihood from sources of fair economic gain and peaceful commercial work.

This was only achieved when the Maltese, despite every difficulty, were endowed with human values, good and just, with purposeful work, extraordinary wisdom and decorated with professions and crafts that made them flexible under all circumstances.

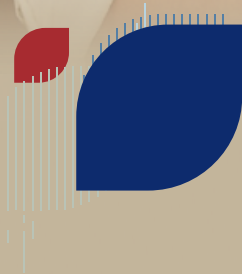
These are the rich and sound principles that make us Maltese and Gozitans and we should never forget that the Maltese and Gozitan people love the family, the crux of every people and nation, the foundation of every society that is aspiring for a better future for its children.

Today the Maltese and Gozitan people have an existential challenge before them. At such a moment, we all need to discuss as individuals and as a people who loves their own country, who loves their children, while putting aside all temptation of self-prosperity and selfishness, and truly appreciate the national interest and the common good.

My hope for you, dear participants, who have accepted this invitation, is that we express our views together and in an objective manner, putting forward our proposals on this matter which is so important for the present and future of our people and our home country.

I would like to thank you and in particular the Malta Employers' Association (MEA) who, as social partners with an economic interest, joined the Parliament of Malta in an open and objective dialogue, bringing together some of the experts in this subject and stakeholders in various fields, including Members of Parliament, with the aim of acknowledging this challenge and taking all necessary action for a better future of the Maltese and Gozitan people.

Again, thank you.



Although we tend to measure social success using economic parameters – undoubtedly very important – it is becoming increasingly necessary to look at other aspects of our lives which also determine how successful and sustainable our society is.



MS JOANNE BONDIN

President, Malta Employers' Association

It is a great pleasure for me today that we have gathered here as social partners and experts from various fields to deal with a theme that is fundamental to every society, that is fertility or birth rate. This is because the renewal of national identity, culture and everything that makes us Maltese is determined by population growth. I thank the Speaker of Parliament, Hon. Angelo Farrugia, for hosting us here.

Although we tend to measure social success using economic parameters – undoubtedly very important – it is becoming increasingly necessary to look at other aspects of our lives which also determine how successful and sustainable our society is.

Today's session is one of a string of activities that the Malta Employers' Association has organised over the last few years so that the efforts we all make to produce, through investment, the work as well as all the activities launched by civil society in its diversity, lead to a good quality of life for all. An example of this is the document issued by MEA in 2017 called Malta's Demographic Challenges which had led to discussions with political and social forces also within the MCESD on the need for a strategic plan to map demographic trends in our country, while raising awareness about the increase in population in Malta and the implications – both immediate and future – on our country. Today, six years after we presented that document, we see that much of what was predicted is actually happening.

Last year MEA organised a conference “Balancing Sustainable Economic Growth with Quality of Life – A National Challenge” which opened up a discussion on the importance of parameters that look at the quality of life and that these parameters are measured in the same way that we measure productivity in order to determine the well-being of our people. These efforts clearly show that although MEA continues to allocate due importance to work, investment, production and competitiveness, we believe that ultimately, the fundamental purpose of our work is to live better. This principle ties in with the theme we will discuss today.

Demographic challenges in a broad sense deal with multiculturalism, the number of tourists, physical and social infrastructure capable of population growth and many others. But I appeal to focus today on a particular aspect which is a part, and to some extent determines the other aspects of demography. I refer to the birth rate.

We know, and we will see in the presentations that we are going to have during this activity, that Malta has a low fertility rate both compared to that of many other countries as well as when we compare it with the rate that has changed over the past years. We also know that this is not a situation faced by Malta alone. The fertility rate is dropping worldwide, mainly among industrialised countries. But what I would like to emerge from today’s discussion is whether we are satisfied with these changes, whether we should remain passive when facing these trends, whether there is a need to reverse this trend, and if so, how, to some extent, we can be considered like a family planning its future: Will we have children? Few or many? Or maybe we won’t have any and we’ll adopt instead? The happy family is one which makes such decisions, rather than having them imposed by external circumstances.

The worst thing that can happen to us as a society is that we get dragged along with the currents, over which we have lost control. The easiest thing is to say that this is a phenomenon that is happening in many countries and so there is not much to do. I reiterate that if we conclude that nothing should be done, this should be the result of a conscious decision and not simply because we settle. On the other hand, if we think that it is better for our country to increase the fertility rate, we need a serious analysis of what is causing low fertility and what measures can be taken to reverse the current trend. This issue cannot be addressed by employers alone, politicians, or civil society. Its complexity and implications are such that different perspectives are needed to address it constructively. There is no one measure that will turn the rudder, but everyone has their part to play. We therefore have a wide

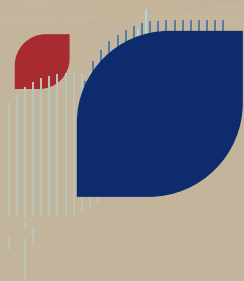
range of entities, including young people, the Church, political parties and experts who certainly have to contribute to the discussion.

That is why we felt the need to bring you together today, as experts from various fields, in order to share views and thoughts to better understand the situation and its implications holistically.

I assure you that this activity will not be the end of the discussion. I hope that this will serve as a basis, depending on the points which will be raised, where these recommendations could be part of a more comprehensive project on this theme. I thank you for coming and I am convinced that we will have an interesting and productive session.



Building
STRENGTH
UNIT



Today we have an almost paradoxical situation where the birth rate is falling but the population is growing.



MR JOSEPH FARRUGIA

Director General, Malta Employers' Association

President of the House, Members of Parliament, guests and friends, when I started thinking about this theme at the beginning, I started to say: Is there an existential challenge? One of the first thoughts that came to mind was the Maltese gendus (bull). I asked myself: Why should we be concerned? As we know, the Maltese gendus almost disappeared. They are actually trying to reintroduce it. Why talk about the Maltese gendus? The Maltese gendus is different from other types of bulls. This has particular characteristics which make it in some way different from others, i.e. there is a sense of identity. The Maltese gendus species had a sense of identity that is distinct from other bulls. Perhaps this is what presents an existential challenge, even for us as a people. Here we are not just talking about a group of people, but we are also talking about what makes us Maltese. After all we can say that the number of people is decreasing, we do not have sufficient workers, and so attract foreign workers, not a problem. If so, we don't have to worry, absolutely, as the country will go on regardless. But perhaps here we are reflecting on how our identity as Maltese will be renewed from one generation to the next. Will it be renewed through birth or will it be renewed through immigration? Will our identity be renewed through immigration? This may happen due to integration. These are questions that arise. However, I think that the fear of many people is actually the fact that we might lose our identity and what makes us Maltese.

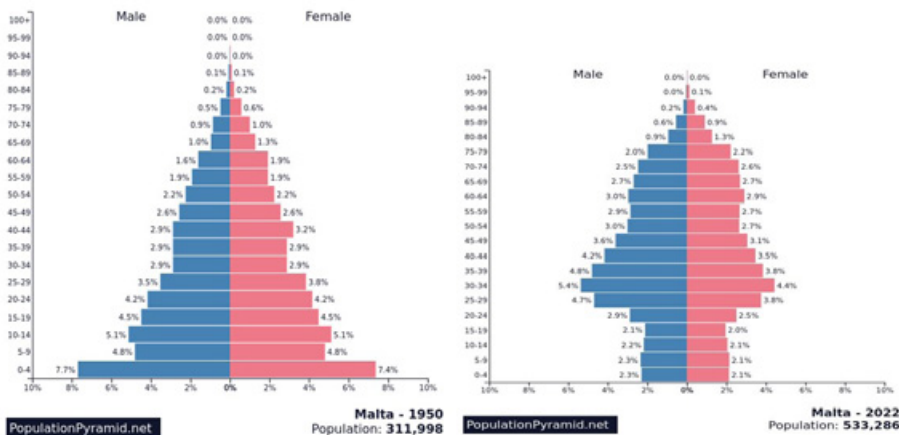
A quick look at the phone directory will demonstrate that although we are Maltese and have our identity, our surnames come from a range of countries. There are Arabic surnames, English surnames, Italian surnames and surnames that have

descended from the Knights. So we as a people do not have a Maltese pedigree as such. I sometimes look at people, even at the Maltese, and say that if we were dogs, there would be people with the feet of a poodle and the head of German Shepherd, for example. I have been told that I'm half Pitbull and half Rottweiler! We have always been a mixed people. Our culture also reflects this; our language, what we eat and cook, the clothes we wear, and all our activities are linked to this. Although we are a small people, we have a distinct identity. Maltese exists. We are not too many, but Maltese exists and as I said, I think the directory is an indication of this. I think there has always been this mix in Maltese society. Perhaps today we are faced with the fear that the transition is happening too fast. Perhaps we haven't had too many periods where we saw such a radical change in the composition of the population. Today we have an almost paradoxical situation where the birth rate is falling but the population is growing. So how is this happening? We must see the implications of this and look at the example of the population pyramid as it was in 1950 and as it was last year. At first glance, from that graph, we see what radical changes have occurred in the structure of our population. While originally it was literally a pyramid, or triangle, one can now see a drastic change in the age range. The implications on social policy and on our identity as Maltese are clear.

For example, as we have heard before, the trend is that the proportion of people approaching retirement age is continually growing as a proportion of the population. We are an ageing population. I reiterate that this is not only happening in Malta but is happening in many countries, however we need to look closely at ours. We want to see whether this is ideal, whether we are ready to live with it or whether we can find another way to change direction.

A document that I have referenced which contains a very interesting study while highlighting various factors that affect the birth rate, is that of the United Nations Population Fund which addresses this situation and sets out a list of issues – here I will only mention them but maybe there are those who want to go into more detail – which affect fertility. One of these is economic uncertainty. I am not saying that all these elements apply to Malta but rather they are discussing a global dimension. It is observed that economic uncertainty has a negative effect on fertility because families debating whether to have children or not, and when is the right time for them, will postpone the first-birth intentions. Moreover, job insecurity and low-value jobs engender lower wages.

Another aspect is the conflict between career and family. In Malta we are experiencing this because the participation rate of women in the workplace has increased, almost reaching the European average. Today we have a young



Link għall-prezentazzjoni viżwali tas-Sur Joseph Farrugia

<https://www.maltaemployers.com/wp-content/uploads/power-point-JOSEPH-FARRUGIA.pdf>

generation of Maltese women who are mostly employed, I say even due to necessity, however this results in a lot of working hours for the couple, affecting the fertility rate.

Another element is mentioned in this report, namely the division of housework between husband and wife, in particular childcare within the family. It cannot be expected that the female participation rate continues to be increased while at the same time housework seems to remain the domain of the woman. Maybe we have families who are so but at the same time it will be difficult for them, for both wife and husband, to say: Let's have a multi-child family.

In Malta we no longer raise children as they were raised 30 years ago. Raising children today takes a lot of time. For example, one of the problems is traffic. While before, once school was finished children went home to do their homework, today children have a lot of afterschool activities, such as piano lessons, revision lessons, or various other activities. Every day they have some different activity. This hectic lifestyle can cause people to think whether they should have children or not. One can argue that having children practically destroys their private life. One might ask:

How will I manage to balance raising children and relaxing? I think that before, despite having many children, parents were more relaxed than they are today.

Other aspects are the rapid family changes and unaffordable housing. The price of housing, both for buying property and for renting, is creating undue stress and burden on young couples. The report stops here but I have added two other aspects that I believe are applicable. One of them is the existential spiritual crisis. If man believes that he has come into the world in vain, and that there is nothing after this life, there is no purpose for life; thus he will ask: Why should I bring others here after all? I think that is a factor that also has an impact. There is also a general attitude towards pregnant women. For example, I am offended by the traditional phrase “inqabdet tqila” (she has fallen pregnant). Pregnancy is not a disgrace, neither should it be considered a trap. A pregnant woman should be glorified and celebrated.

I hope that these points will lead to a more in-depth discussion. Thank you.



MS KIRSTEN CUTAJAR

Consultant, Malta Employers' Association

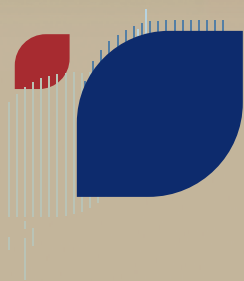
Good morning Honor. Members of the House, President of the House.

Today's presentation will focus specifically on numbers and statistics, so as to take a detailed look at the importance of what we call our country's only resource. My presentation is called "The Changing Structure of the Maltese Population."

What terminologies we are looking at today? There is the fertility rate that we have already mentioned but this is calculated in a specific way. Present at this conference are women from the NSO who might be able to contribute as well. The fertility rate is calculated by adding the age specific fertility rate for women in a given year. Some fertility rates are different according to ages. This can be interpreted as "the mean number of children that would be born alive to a woman during her lifetime if she were to pass through her childbearing years." There are certain assumptions to be made. Here we are talking about how many livebirths can be attributed to every woman who lived in Malta at the time.

The replacement level was also mentioned. This is a standard of 2.1 children that every woman must technically have in order to keep the population constant.

We will look at the historical data, where we were and where we are today, and then get to a few projections as well. We heard that in 2010 we were at 1.36 fertility rate, while at the time the rate in the European Union was 1.57. In 2021 this data was based on the census made and I know that there is still a lot of information being



Malta remains one of the most densely populated countries in the world and the most densely populated country in Europe.

collected and continuously being published to refine it. However, for 2021 the latest available data is that of 1.13. The European average has also decreased but as we have started from a lower rate of 1.13 compared to 1.36, this has a major effect on the country.

There is also age, the main age of women at childbirth. It is not surprising that it has increased from 29 years to 31 years, and this is also closer to the European average. There has been an increase in the last ten years because women are taking longer to have children.

Then we have the red line that shows babies born to foreign citizens and babies born to those who have Maltese citizenship. In 2010 the number of babies born to Maltese citizens amounted to 3,600 and the number of babies born to foreigners amounted to around 260. In the year 2021 foreigners had 1,300 babies while the Maltese had around 3,000. This shows that foreigners had many more children in the last decade while the Maltese had less.

We also have live births and deaths. Maybe one might ask: How is this related to the fertility rate and how will it affect our population? Obviously, the more deaths we have, the more births are required to keep the population number stable, unless we have an influx of people in other ways. In 2010 we had 3,800 live births and 3,000 deaths. In 2021 live births increased to 4,400 while deaths increased to 4,200. There has been some impact due to COVID-19 but this is the trend we are currently witnessing.

There are also the crude births and the crude deaths. The crude birth rate is the ratio of the number of live births compared on about 1,000 people. We can compare this with that of the European Union, as in this case, or with that of other countries. Obviously if we take absolute numbers we cannot compare it with that of other countries. There we are seeing that the gap between crude birth rate and crude death rate is continuously decreasing for Malta. At European level, deaths far exceeded the crude births. Here we have a slightly better situation than the European level.

This is the graphical situation of the population as it stands. On Tuesday there was a small update regarding the population however at the moment we are approximately around 520,000 people. Since the last census the population has increased by 25 % and this is a radical leap. As you have heard, Malta remains one of the most densely populated countries in the world and the most densely populated country in Europe.

Then we have distribution by age. Mr Farrugia before me mentioned the population patterns, so I don't have to delve so much into this aspect due to time constraints, but I would like to mention that for the first time ever we have more men than women. This in itself is not so bad, but if we are discussing a decreasing fertility rate, obviously having fewer women will continue to worsen the situation.

I will now say something about the dependency ratios i.e. how many children under 15 years of age and how many older people over 64 are dependent on people who work. Thankfully, our working age population is large and can sustain this variety of ages. The dependency ratio for Malta increased from 45.2 to 46.7. Obviously the lower the dependency ratio, the better. The less people depend on the working population, the better. At European Union level the ratio is at 56, so we are still in a better situation. We also have the old age dependency where we focus only on the elderly, removing children. In 2021 this ratio was at 27.6 compared to 32.5 at European Union level, and this is positive.

What are we forecasting for the future? Eurostat has different models. Here our baseline is the scenario that the decisions being taken by the country today will remain in the future. We will also see other slides that will refer to high migration and lower fertility rate because Eurostat also makes certain simulations. If nothing is changed from the baseline, our fertility rate is predicted to rise very slowly and reach the rate of the European Union as it has been in recent years and as it is today; 1.55 in 2090. This is the estimated time we need to recover.

We also have net migration. It is very interesting that the baseline projection of the net migration in the coming years will take a shock and then begin to fall sharply by 2090. Therefore the fact that the fertility rate will rise very slowly and net migration will be decreasing will have an effect on the population as well. Here we have what would happen if we have less migration. In this case we will reduce the amounts that will migrate to the country. Obviously we will have a bigger drop and in 2090 the immigrants will drop from 3,000, as projected, to 2,300.

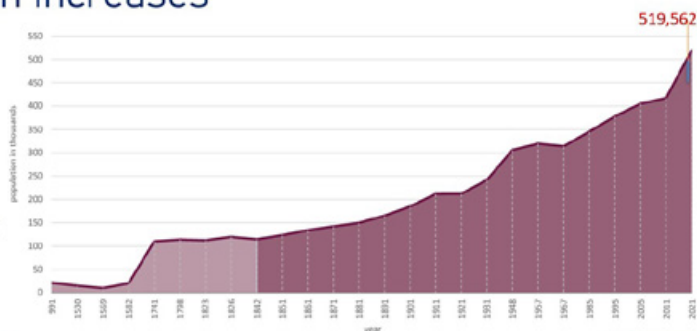
The baseline population projection is that in 2070 we reach a peak of 810,000 people, as a population, living on this island. This of course means we will have about 2,565 residents per square kilometre. In the no migration scenario we see a drastic decrease and in 2090 the population falls back to 311,000. Now if we say we need more migration, in 2070 we will reach a peak of 932,000 as a population.



Population increases

Population has increased by 25% since last census.

Malta remains the most densely populated country in the Eu with 1,649 residents per km² vs 109 per km² at EU.



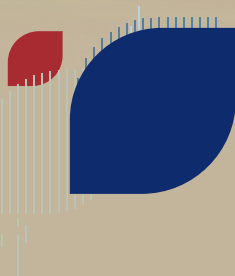
MALTA EMPLOYERS' ASSOCIATION

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Regarding the old age dependency ratio, you can see that the green parts are Malta, and the blue parts are the European Union. As we have said, the lower the dependency ratio the better, but this will begin to rise, i.e. we will have an ageing population with less people working. This will reach the intersection in 2064 and will well exceed 53 %. In case of no migration the pattern of dependency ratio will rise at a much slower rate.

If there are further questions, we will be able to address them afterwards.



For the couple to make the decision to have children, in addition to having hope, there must be a legal framework, social services and informal support, which protect families and provide the necessary help.



DR PATRICIA BONELLO

Official, Discern Research Institute on Family Values and Birth Rate

Good morning everyone. During this parliamentary session, the low birth rate in Malta is being presented as an existential challenge, as it really is, and the various speakers have taken, or are going to take, their perspective on this challenge. In my contribution I have been asked to look at this challenge from the perspective of family values and I will follow the example of Pope Francis and focus on hope, which is so important because without it no one will make a decision to bring children to the world, particularly today. In fact, Paul Chetcuti, the Jesuit priest, explained in an article he wrote in a local newspaper last month that hope is that which makes life possible and beautiful and gives it meaning. He sees hope as a life-giving reality. In the post synodal apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), a document so important for the Church that raises several points that can be applied to the challenge of the low birth rate, Pope Francis speaks of hope and says:

“Hope is that which has the power of yeast to raise our dough, that which helps us to look beyond the contrary, from fighting, from the last minute things that arise, that which helps us to look further. It is what always fills us with the desire to continue growing. The same hope invites us to live the present in its fullness and to give ourselves wholeheartedly to family life, because the best way to prepare for a concrete future is to live well in the present.”

He applied these words to betrothal and the first years of marriage but what he said about hope will certainly help every period of family life including the period in which the couple is taking the decision to bring the children into the world.

Having hope does not mean rejecting problems or challenges, including the challenges of raising children in today's world, the reduction of parental authority over children and the low birth rate. It is only if you have hope, at individual, community and societal level, can you face these challenges. For the couple to make the decision to have children, in addition to having hope, there must be a legal framework, social services and informal support, which protect families and provide the necessary help, something the other speakers will certainly talk about. The Church, too, must be part of this support, particularly so that the possibility of having children does not become a privilege that can only be enjoyed by those who have the means.

Pope Francis, in his address in May 2021, at an annual conference organised in Italy on the low birth rate, spoke about children as the hope of a people and as a gift, while reiterating in *Amoris L. titia* that every child has a place in God's heart since the beginning of time. In this address he mentioned the importance of considering sustainability also from the point of view of the generations' continuation, the need for solidarity and the fact that young people mature when they have as an example people who have the courage to follow their great dreams and do good in the world. In other words, people who can give them hope!

The following year, in 2022, at the same conference, the Pope spoke about the low birth rate as a new poverty, saying that families and young people should be given real answers to help them face this form of poverty. He insisted that hope cannot and should not die because of too much waiting. Couples making the decision to have children should have the hope that this will be a beautiful event, that they may continue to view the child as a gift even when challenges arise. To do so, as I said earlier, there must be a supportive framework.

This year, then, at the same conference, the Pope explained that the birth of children is the most likely yardstick with which to measure the hope of a people and that a low birth rate reduces confidence in the future. The Pope mentioned the "demographic winter" that Europe is facing today and in which, starting a family becomes a titanic effort instead of being a common value that everyone acknowledges and supports. In the Pope's interventions on this challenge, the need for solidarity with families in order to have hope and be able to view children as a gift rather than as a demanding burden is highlighted. In *Amoris L. titia*, Pope Francis explained that the Church should provide comfort, support and hope in situations where families are disadvantaged in some way, rather than being judgemental and applying strict rules. In this way the Church will be

helping families to reach the level of tranquillity required for the decision to have children.

The same *Amoris L. titia* raises the point that, in today's world, marriage and its related characteristics, including openness to life, can be portrayed as an outdated thing. This perspective, unfortunately, also applies to values such as solidarity and the common good, which have been replaced by values such as individualism.

In his first encyclical of his Pontificate, *Evangelii Gaudium*, which means “the joy of the Gospel”, Pope Francis speaks of this situation and says:

“The great risk of today's world, with its abundant and deceitful offer of consumption, is that it suffers an individualist sadness that leaks from the comfortable hearts and ghosts, from the desperate search for superficial pleasures, from isolated conscience. When interior life is closed in its interests, there is no room for others, it no longer enjoys the sweet joy of his love, its heart no longer struggles with the eagerness to do good. This risk, concrete and lasting, is there even for believers. Many fall in it and turn into people full of anger within themselves, annoyed, lifeless. This is not the choice of a proper and complete life, it is not God's desire for us.”

The Pope speaks of the need to move away from individualism to live a more suitable and complete life. Sometimes this speech is interpreted as a cry against progress. It is not the case. We need to protect the achievements we have made in human rights, employment and so many other areas that others will talk about. But being able to leave the confines of our needs to consider the needs of others and society is a great gift, which we must also cherish.

The very value of the family requires individuals not to remain in the centre but to leave a place for unity with others. *Amoris L. titia* explains that it is only from this love between the couple, which translates into a gift, that a child can be conceived. (80) The family can be a place where giving oneself to each other is stronger than individualism, where good prevails over evil, and where children can benefit from the excitement of this good. (77) In a context where nothing is certain, the family, according to the Pope, can be a place where children, and I quote, “can put their roots on the soil of a collective history” (193). In the various ways in which families pass on values to their members, they can become a nest of hope and the Pope calls the family “the first school of human values where we learn the wise use of freedom” (274).

Among the values that are being lost in today's world is the spirituality and practice of religion, not necessarily the Catholic one, which can lead families to feel isolated in their difficulties, as the Pope says in *Amoris L. titia*. (43) It may be that one of the reasons for this is that spirituality, and more so religion, are presented in a negative way, forgetting that spirituality should be something that gives you joy and hope. We must also find every means of keeping this spirit alive. Indeed, in *Amoris L. titia*, the Pope speaks of the importance of celebrating special occasions in families, and I quote:

“When one knows how to celebrate, this ability renews the enthusiasm of love, frees it of monotony and imbues daily habits with colour and hope”.

Such an environment certainly helps to motivate couples to consider having children! In *Amoris L. titia* Pope Francis also spoke about the fact that every family, with all its shortcomings, can become a light for the dark world. In this document, the Pope expresses his appreciation to both mothers and fathers for their part in raising children, and therefore for what they are giving to the Church and the world. They are helping to alleviate the challenge of the low birth rate.

Spirituality can help to increase appreciation of the beauty of the family and of the love between its members. Spiritual couples can also recognise that, by deciding to become parents, they are becoming God's partners by assuming the responsibility he has awarded them to transmit life, while a pregnant woman can view pregnancy as a period in which she is working with God to accomplish the miracle of a new life. As the Pope continues, the experience of love in families is also a way of strengthening the Church. If we look at it from this perspective, a strong Church can then be a Church that hears, welcomes, accompanies and emerges, as stated in the document of the local Church *One Church, One Journey* that presents a process of ecclesial renewal for the years 2020-2024. The final phase of this process, which emerges, speaks of “concrete works of service” (p. 19), which include the support that the Church and its members can give to families to encourage hope in them.

The Church recognises that, in shaping the family, parents have to make responsible decisions in which, as stated in Saint Paul VI's encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*, they take account of their duties to God, to themselves, to their families and to society. Saint John Paul II emphasises that this does not mean that there are no limits in the number of children or a lack of knowledge about what it means to bring up children but that parents use their freedom wisely. He includes the couple's situation and their wishes as elements which are to be taken into account when

deciding to have children. If a couple can look at the world and the future with more hope, this can help them to be more willing to make this decision.

One of the theories that help us understand how parents make the decision to have children is that of the Value of Children (Luck et al., 2021), which states that this decision is based on the goals parents want to achieve by having children. From this perspective, if there is a sense of hope attached to the birth of a child, it is more likely that parents will engage in this commitment. In fact, Mencarini et al. (2018) talk about an “affective forecasting theory” which explains that when people decide to have a baby, they expect that this will be a positive event that will increase their life satisfaction. But, as I was saying, to have this hope and this positivity, parents need to know that they will not be bearing this burden alone but that they will find support, both formal and informal, which will help them. We need to recognise that, as the other speakers certainly explain, the goal of having children today is competing with various other goals.

In this birth rate speech we must also keep in mind those couples or individuals who, for one reason or another, do not have children. We must be sensitive to their situation, which might or might not come from a choice. They can also contribute to a more humane society, showing solidarity, and thus, even indirectly, contribute to meeting the challenge of the low birth rate.

I would like to close by quoting again from *Amoris L. titia*, where Pope Francis tells us:

“Let us not lose our hope because of our limits but neither refrain from seeking the fullness of love.”

Part of this fullness of love can be the birth of a child. May we all do everything we can to foster this environment of hope that welcomes all children wholeheartedly, giving them and their parents everything they need.

Il-Valuri tal-Familja u r-Rata tat-Twelid

Dr Pat Bonello
Sessjoni Parlamentari
13 ta' Lulju 2023



Presentation by Dr Patricia Bonello

Link għall-prezentazzjoni viżwali ta' Dr Patricia Bonello

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DR MARIE BRIGUGLIO

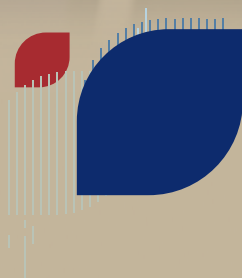
Economist, Department of Economics at the University of Malta

I start by thanking the Malta Employers' Association for once again taking it upon themselves to present a subject for discussion on the national agenda. In ten minutes I will share with you three pertinent and perhaps even some impertinent questions.

First, is it true that we have a low fertility rate?

Here we are talking about the average number of children that a woman has during her lifetime; in reality this is somewhat a more technical calculation but can be explained in this way in a few words. If compared with the rate we had, yes, because since the 1960s, the average rate has fallen from 2.55 to 1.13. If one compares with the rate required for the population to remain stable, i.e. 2.1, yes, because if it were not for immigration, Malta's population would have started to shrink. If one compares with several other countries, we will also find that their rates are low. But in Africa there are countries that have around four times our rates.

But if we compare with similar countries, with modern urban areas, we are not so far away; moreover there are countries who have a much lower rate than ours. In fact, if we compare with that rate we are not too low because there is still leeway for the rate remains to decrease if the cost of living continues to rise, if more women go to work, if we postpone the birth of the first child and if more people decide to have only one child. But this rate can also be increased thanks to the birth of more children among foreigners who came to live in Malta. Thus the answer to the question whether the fertility rate is low is: It depends!



The aim of policy and governance in Malta should be to help those who are suffering mainly because of a low quality of life and not to grow the population and the material economy ever more without seeing the consequences.

Second question: But is a low fertility rate a real socio-economic problem?

In the economic sphere we often take into account the fact that if a population continues to shrink, it would be a challenge to have workers who sustain the economy. To this we add that fact that there will not be enough people to pay pensions. This problem will be alleviated if people migrate to this country and will become worse if they leave. The solution of immigration naturally poses other challenges such as integration, infrastructure and instability among employers.

On the other hand, a low birth rate, on its own, could also bring advantages, lower density, lower environmental pressures, less spending in the country and more expenditure per capita. It also allows more women to participate in the labour market – cause, effect, effect and cause. Thus, in this case the answer to whether the low fertility rate is a problem is: It depends!

Third question: Is a low fertility rate a problem for well-being?

On this question research is interesting. It seems true that children strengthen family bonds and might “imbue” life with new activities related to their upbringing, which perhaps was more important in the past than in today’s already fast and full life. They are also an investment in the future. Previously children were seen as an investment offering working hours to the family and a guarantee of help going forward.

But – and maybe this might be a surprise for many – research shows, repeatedly, that those raising children – on average – have less satisfaction with their life than those who do not have children at home. And the more children in the family, for example two, three or more, the lower the number of people who describe life satisfaction. In fact, while average wellbeing decreases, there is an increase in variation and the extremes. Why? Among other reasons, children bring economic pressure on the family, more needs – a bigger car, a larger house, schools, clothes etc. – while the time to make money is reduced. With children the relationship between the couple suffers new pressures because young children are associated with sleeplessness, illnesses and lack of time for activities such as art, culture, sport, volunteering and studying. As they grow, the challenges change into psychological ones and surely those who have raised or are raising young people know what this means!

Many studies have been carried out about this subject, but it is sufficient to mention a study from the World Values Survey data from 86 countries which clearly shows that happiness decreases the more children one has, both for men and women, both among single parents and married couples, but worst among the poor and

in countries where there is no state aid. And what about Malta? Here we have the same challenges. Moreover, children are slow to leave home and we have higher levels of anxiety than many other countries. Of course there is also support, for example, free childcare, children's clubs, free education, maternity leave and parental leave etc. From the limited research carried out in Malta it appears that the worst levels of well-being are among single parents. Therefore the question of whether children improve life is also: It depends!

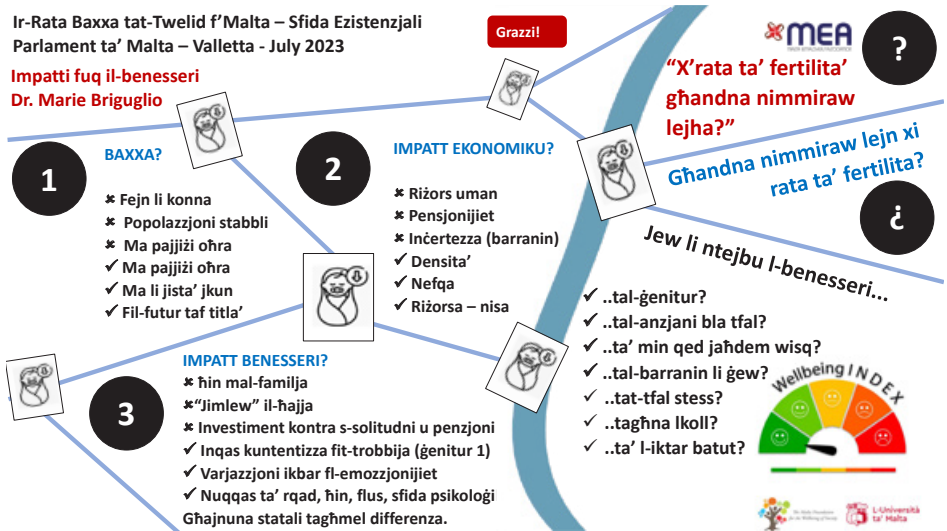
So?

I asked three questions; whether the fertility rate is really low, whether it is a real problem for the economy and whether it is a real problem for wellbeing. None of these offer a clear answer telling us that we should interfere with the choice of whether and how many children one should have or in other words how to increase the fertility rate. Therefore, instead of asking how to increase the fertility rate I ask whether we should raise it. Should we let everyone decide when and how many children they should have so that we might be able to focus on the challenges facing the current demographics, relating to socioeconomic issues and wellbeing? It is enough to take into account the wellbeing of single parents, the loneliness among the elderly, the use and lack of time among those who work long hours, the integration of foreigners who come and sustain the economy, the children themselves and their mental health and wellbeing and that of the parents. This is what we are trying to do in the Wellbeing INDEX project run by the Malta Foundation on the Wealth of Society and University of Malta (www.wellbeingindex.mt).

In short, the aim of policy and governance in Malta should be to help those who are suffering mainly because of a low quality of life and not to grow the population and the material economy ever more without seeing the consequences. Thank you for your attention.

Ir-Rata Baxxa tat-Twelid f'Malta – Sfida Ezistenzjali
Parlament ta' Malta – Valletta - July 2023

Impatti fuq il-benesseri
Dr. Marie Briguglio

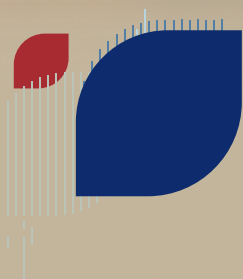


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<https://www.maltaemployers.com/wp-content/uploads/Power-point-BRIGUGLIO.pdf>

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The factor that is mainly affecting the low birth rate in Malta is the housing problem. We need to address this problem seriously because it cannot be that the price of property continues to rise unbridled with all the consequences that this is entailing.



REV. FR CHARLES TABONE O.P.

Academic, University of Malta

First of all I want to thank the Employers' Association. Mr. President, Members of Parliament, Her Excellency, President Emeritus, ladies and gentlemen, I have been asked to talk about the cause of the low birth rate in Malta. I tell you at once that the main case for this is one of a socio-economic nature.

Malta is considered a highly developed country by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022). This Maltese are not willing to give up on this high level of life for any reason. This means that the economy may be dominating more than other social values.

Culture and Tradition

Culturally and traditionally social life functioned alongside social and non-economic values.

The Maltese people believed that the family was the crux of everything, the fulcrum of social life, so that no one and nothing could replace it. The children were seen as a fundamental social value and a large family was one of the glories of Maltese culture (C. Tabone, 1987). Therefore a large family was a value and a social honour. The expression for a large family was "God bless!".

The Church has played an important role in protecting this social value. At that time many Maltese obeyed what the Church said that the spouses must be open

to life; children were seen as a blessing from God and the family would welcome all the children that are 'sent' by God. This hegemony of the Maltese Church ended completely. We can say that birth control is now the practice of all families, with some minor exceptions.

Today families seek to live in large, beautiful homes owned by themselves and not rented. This wasn't the case traditionally. The working class, which was the vast majority of the population, would have had to make do with small and poor houses. Most of them didn't even have a bathroom. However, the size and type of household did not affect the number of children in the family.

By 1948, 25 % of Maltese families had more than ten children. At that time Malta was among the countries with the highest number of children under the age of 15; 34.8 % of the population (Dench, 1975). By 1963 the size of the family began to decline but still the average family size remained at six children (Central Office of Statistics, Malta, 1963).

This meant that there were families who did not have sufficient space for their children at home and some children were sometimes living with grandparents or relatives. There have been cases where a family with ten children lived in two chambers, with some sleeping on the floor.

The Home - A Status Symbol

Today no one would even dream of such a thing, because it is not respectful. Young couples today do not seek to rent a house, but to buy a house, because economically it makes more sense, and because the type of house in which they live determines their social status. Home is a status symbol and the family's pride. Many couples take out a loan which would have been equivalent to the rent amount, however this means that ultimately they would be home owners. Many times this means that they have home loan until their retirement, because the property prices in Malta are among the highest in the Euro Zone. But the home is fundamental to their social status as a family and they also argue that when they own their home they are investing for their children.

As the loan takes a considerable part of their salary and because of the high level of living they wish to retain, this is having a drastic effect on the number of children in the family. This is also having an effect on the age of marriage, which is constantly going higher, as we will see. The higher the age of marriage, the lower the chances of having children.

The affluence of the Maltese Society

Few are those who are happy to live in precariousness. On the contrary, the affluence of Maltese society is affecting the quality of life of our families. In the vast majority, the Maltese want to live a comfortable life, even if not necessarily one of luxury. They want to eat well, wear beautiful, branded clothes and go out to eat. Holidays are regarded as a right and a large number of families seek to travel for holidays at least once a year. All this, of course, adds to the costs incurred by the family. The less children you are able to live this type of life. The low fertility rate in Malta is showing that by the way they live, families are finding it difficult to cope with the cost of living, even with two children, let alone more.

Education

Education is another factor that can have an incidence on the number of children in the family. The number of those continuing in post-secondary or tertiary education is increasing and this is having an effect on the age of marriage. In addition, most families feel that they should invest well in their children's education because of their future, which is adding to the family expenses.

In the last decade the number of those continuing post-secondary or tertiary education has made a giant leap; from 26 % of pupils to 40 %. This means that we are only 5 % lower than the European Union target of 45 % for this year 2023 (NSO Malta, 2022). Developments at both the University and the MCAST certainly contributed to this quantum leap. We hope it is also a leap in the quality. Certainly because of this, more and more young people are getting married at an older age because they cannot afford to get married before finishing education, also because of costs. This adds to the other factor we have already mentioned of the high costs of purchasing the house. For these reasons it is almost impossible to get married at a young age, and the older they marry, the less likely they are to have children.

Age of marriage

Just over half of our young people between 25 and 34 still live with their families. The average age at which young people leave the parents' home is 29 (NSO Malta, 2022). Statistically, Malta is in the first four western countries where young people are mostly slow to fly from their nests. Ahead us are Slovakia with 56.6 %, Bulgaria with 52.8 % and Greece with 51.6 % (Arena, 2022, Chetcuti, 2014). In fact, the average age of marriage in Malta is 30 years for men and 27 years for women. This means that the age of marriage is rising increasingly over time (NSO Malta, 2022).

Education as a Status Symbol

I return to the cost of educating children which can be another factor why families are having fewer children. Besides being a valuable investment, the children's education has also become a status symbol for the family. Many parents boast that their children are either in a private school or in a Church school, because the general impression is that state schools are inferior, otherwise there are too many children from different backgrounds, especially children from the lowest classes of our society.

Costs increase not only when children are in a private school but also when they are in a Church school. The latter, on paper, are free of charge, but everyone knows that Church schools demand a 'donation' and some schools insist that it be paid, except in some exceptional cases. Students in these schools will also have to pay for any services provided, such as the purchase of books, photocopies and laboratory equipment.

Migration

The last factor that I shall refer to is that of migration, not so much of how many foreigners are coming, which in itself is a concerning factor, as much as the Maltese, especially young people who are willing to migrate to another country of the European Union. According to the EY Generate Youth Survey (2022), around 60 % of our young people aged 16 to 39 said they would prefer to live in another EU country two years ago. This percentage rose last year to around 70 %. If our youths are not going to be living in Malta, it is certainly not going to increase the birth rate, at least of the Maltese.

A policy in favour of a higher birth rate

The five most birth-friendly measures found worldwide are:

1. Subsidised public childcare (88 %)
2. Children or family allowance (78 %)
3. Paid or unpaid parental leave (73 %)
4. Paid or unpaid paternity leave with assured employment (73 %)
5. Other incentives such as flexible working hours, part-time work for parents, and tax credits for young children (UN 2021)

The European Union is also making every effort to increase the birth rate in member states. The last set of pro-natal policy options are all about childcare measures:

1. The possibility of childcare even for young children to be free. The Scandinavian countries, United Kingdom and France all have free childcare from an early age and have all increased the birth rate.
2. Gender Equality appears to be another factor increasing the birth rate. Where fathers are taking part more fully in raising children, the birth rate has increased.
3. Part-time work is more favoured among women, and where this has become possible the birth rate has increased, because women are not forced to choose between having children and working full-time, because they cannot work part-time.
4. Flexible working hours and work that can be done at home and the possibility of taking short leave, also of a few hours, to be able to respond to children's urgent needs, have also helped to raise the birth rate.
5. Housing also affects the birth rate. Where housing is affordable, the birth rate is higher. Some countries have social housing programmes in favour of families with children.
6. Coordination in social policy greatly helps to increase the birth rate. Social policy includes employment and fiscal policy, housing and gender equality, among others. Where support for family and fertility-friendly policies is guaranteed in practice, the birth rate has increased (European Parliament, 2013)

Cultural Change

We note here that all these measures exist in Malta, with the exception of housing, but the birth rate has not increased. This is not only happening in Malta, but also in other countries. It is likely that the limited number of children in families has become part of our culture. So even if all the conditions are favorable to having more children, families are lagging behind. We must remember that culture does not change quickly.

This change in culture where the social value of having children has drastically diminished has been confirmed by recent quantitative empirical research carried out by a University student under the supervision of Dr Vincent Marmarà. The results showed that among those with one child, only 12 % said that this was due to financial problems, 20 % said one was enough, 22 % said it was their decision and 15 % said it was down to nature. 44 % said that for the time being they do not have

children but in the future they would like to have them, while 18 % said this is their decision because they do not want to have children.

I personally think that apart from the fact that the birth of a child has declined as a social value, the factor that is mainly affecting the low birth rate in Malta is the housing problem. We need to address this problem seriously because it cannot be that the price of property continues to rise unbridled with all the consequences that this is entailing.

May this exercise that we are doing today in this House of Deputies fall on the ears of those who are willing to do what is necessary to address this serious problem that can have many consequences in the present and future. Thank you.

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MR KEVIN J. BORG

Consultant, Malta Employers' Association

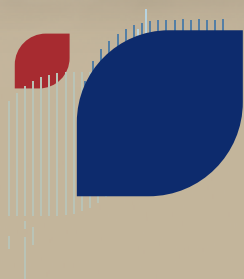
Mr. President, Your Excellency President Emeritus, Members of Parliament and colleagues. Over the past years our country has generated strong economic growth to the extent that the race towards career progression and financial stability in people's lives has taken priority over aspirations of motherhood, paternity, or family upbringing.

Moreover, the spill-over effects of rapid economic progress including mental stress, pollution and environmental degradation have further escalated the decline in fertility in Malta, as is also happening in other developed countries, after all.

The Association of Employers had been warning that, in the short term, the country would have to face a high price for rapid progress, a price expressed in damage to society, the environment and natural resources as well as to the economy itself.

Therefore, the Employers' Association, together with other opinionists from all walks, expressed their scepticism regarding the current economic model for the mere fact that it depends on numbers and quantities, factors which are at odds with characteristics of any small island lacking any kind of resource, including people.

Economic wealth is created by combining capital with talent and entrepreneurship in different doses. We now know from the statistics that the supply of skilled labour is insufficient to meet the demand of the labour market.



We as a MEA feel that we should not leave out any effort to stimulate a higher rate of fertility so that through careful economic transformation, our country can strike a proper balance between economic progress and the safeguarding of all our resources.

This labour shortage can only intensify further with the decline in the fertility rate. It should be clarified that when the fertility rate decreases and falls below the replacement level, this does not only mean that, in the future, the population will decrease but it will also age. This obviously has clear and serious implications for the labour market, both at macro and company level.

The current situation is such that it is distorting the competitiveness and business continuity of entire companies and sectors due to incompatibility between the resources needed and the size of our population together with the rate at which it is growing.

It is therefore clear in this context that the country must modify its economic formula so that by reducing the human capital dose but increasing the investor's technology and industry it generates a superior product. It is possible that we continue to improve our standard of living by producing more but with less resources if with a sense of courage and innovation we change our business models and move up the value chain. We must therefore aim for smart economic growth with a view to ensuring both robust and sustainable economic development.

"I am of the idea that for a small country, especially in the light of Malta's situation as an island, the only way is to move to a value-added economy, which aspires to higher productivity rates, basing growth more on productivity than on a mere extension of the workforce. I think this is the way forward."

These are not my words but the words of the European Commissioner for Employment and Social Rights – Nicolas Schmit as reported by the Times of Malta during his visit to our country earlier this month.

This target can be achieved by shaping our business models around innovation and capabilities in modern technologies in both new and traditional economic sectors. This is why we need to embrace technology in manufacturing, big data analysis in retail, AI in financial services and to combine sustainability principles with the Internet of Things (IOT) to improve the experience of tourists visiting us. All this helps us increase productivity with less burden on our workforce and resources.

To succeed on this path, our workers must be up-skilled in both knowledge and creativity. Our new economic model must use less people because we do not have and will not have people unless we continue to bring them from abroad, as we hear statistics this morning.

The gradual decline in fertility and the race for numbers has in fact made us almost entirely dependent on foreign workers. This is most evident in the tourism sector although the situation is not very different from that experienced by other sectors. But while in other industries it has been easier to replace local workers with foreign workers, this creates difficulties in areas where the person works in direct contact with the client and is unable to provide basic information and to contribute value to the tourist's experience among us; information related to Maltese culture and traditions, certain historical knowledge, culinary advice or even mere direction.

There are other risks to the future of the workplace arising from the fact that fewer children are born. These are about safeguarding traditional Maltese crafts that typically pass from parents to children. I am referring to various forms of farming, agriculture and fisheries, cooking Maltese food, bakery ovens, salt pans, shipbuilding and Maltese luzzus apart from many other examples.

Therefore while economic transformation is underway to one which is more fit for our democratic developments, we must also drive a higher fertility rate because the new economic plan still needs a certain amount of people and specialised people as workers.

So what can employers do to sustain higher fertility rates?

Clearly we can help design and implement policies and initiatives aimed at more children as, after all, we have been doing consistently not least through this morning's conference.

As I pointed out above, certain money and career pressures have impacted people's personal choices and delays in bringing children into the world. Often as we know, some undue postponement brings with it biological barriers that are difficult to overcome.

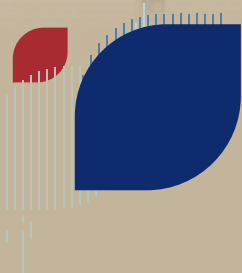
MEA therefore supports any measures that could improve the fertility rate provided that they are implemented on a voluntary basis and in accordance with the employer's prerogative. It is easy to imagine that these measures revolve around the flexible work arrangements for both women and men as well as fiscal measures to encourage parents to plan their families with the greatest confidence and least sacrifices on their careers while not creating extra financial burdens.

Other important measures relate to the availability of childcare services as well as school hours. In this respect, the initiative taken to provide free childcare services has had a not minor impact in helping people – mostly mothers – to strike a

balance between their work and private life commitments. But even here, we still have room for improvement because with all the good we have done, the present systems still leave certain categories of workers lacking this essential service, such as all those who work at night, health professionals, members of the police force, as well as those working in catering, entertainment, transport and manufacturing to name a few examples.

Childcare centres of course cover only children of a young age. There is a need for school reform beyond Clubs 3-16. Today it can be said that these Clubs serve mainly as a place where parents can leave their children under supervision while working. But if we meet the challenge, our schools can offer a broader and more comprehensive education. This is in view of the fact that according to European statistics Maltese children are the least children in Europe who spend time in school during the school year. I believe that extending the school day can serve as one of the keys to bringing a better balance to parents' lives and to give greater confidence to more young people to have children or more children.

That is why we as a MEA feel that we should not leave out any effort to stimulate a higher rate of fertility so that through careful economic transformation, our country can strike a proper balance between economic progress and the safeguarding of all our resources. Thank you.



I therefore appeal that this is not just a one-off conversation but a start of a national conversation that must lead us to national reflection and a clear vision of where we want to go. Let us be visionary and strategic.



H.E. MARIE LOUISE COLEIRO PRECA
President Emeritus of Malta

Thank you very much, Mr President. Here practically I know almost everyone. I greet you my friends, colleagues. I also take the opportunity to congratulate the Employers' Association for taking these initiatives to stimulate discussion. I hope that this discussion taking place today, with a full diversity of experts and practitioners in the various sectors, will only be the beginning. The issue of the birth rate, from what we have already heard from many speakers who have spoken before me, is not a discussion that can be made in isolation. I will probably repeat some of the things I have already heard, and I think it might seem that we have prepared for this discussion together.

I will move immediately to the point by saying that I feel that what we are doing here today should be the beginning of a discussion that moves to the national level. This country needs to have a vision where we intend to go, a strong strategy and implementation plan with effective actions to mitigate the effect. We want progress but as we know every progress has its effects. That is why we must avoid those effects and find the balance so that we can start working on human wellbeing, which Dr Briguglio has spoken about, rather than starting to do something about the situation when things start to regress. I think that like everything else in life, we come to a crossroads, and we say that we need to do a national reflection to evaluate what is working, how to refine what perhaps is working less well, and to address what might be causing pain in certain strata of our society.

Statistics have been widely mentioned. I will mention one of the points already brought up. Today we have many young girls who have continued their studies

at post-secondary, vocational and tertiary levels and this is on the rise. Today we have many more girl graduates from the University, from MCAST and from other vocational institutions. We also have private educational institutions that are helping in upskilling young people. We know for a fact that we have many more girls and women who are graduating and this is something positive, and thank goodness this is happening. In fact, my concern will always be that we will continue to have a rate of early school leavers. Progress has undoubtedly been made but we are still below the European average. In fact we still have 11 % of children who are – so called – the dropouts from the system. We therefore need to see how we continue to address this problem. Sometimes in these sorts of discussions there are some references to the old trade schools but today we have MCAST and the vocational educational institutions, which are excellent institutions carrying our exceptional work, just like the University. If we think that these institutions could give a boost in reducing these 11 % of dropouts so that the economy can have more valid contributors, let's try to do our best.

I still remember a case that the head of the College Network had shared with me, about a boy who used to escape from primary school because he was a horse amateur. This will probably continue to happen once he progresses to a secondary school, and who knows where it will end. Now maybe some might ask: What is she saying? If this boy is a horse lover he is motivated by something. This is why we need to look at the education system and develop a personal educational plan for this type of children. I would tell this boy that I would help figure out a way for him to be able to enjoy horses but he would need to learn a craft; for example, become a farrier or a cart-maker, but he should also learn some math and English as otherwise he would not be able to develop his dream. Now I am not an expert in this field. We need to start thinking outside the box to see how to address certain difficulties. I am saying this as an example because there could be many more.

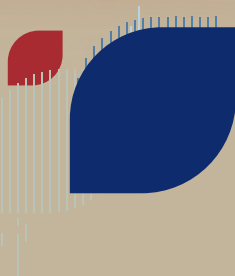
Young women who are continuing their education are therefore unable undertake family relationships at an early age. As Fr Charles and others have mentioned already, we know that the fertility window has a start and an end and it slows down as well, so this can be a reason for lack of fertility. We had childcare centres whose purpose of getting more women out to work was achieved because from 45 % in 2012 we rose to 69 % in 2021, i.e. they could be said to have been a success. But every measure we are taking is always taken from an economic perspective. For example, with all due respect, when we made childcare centres, we did not even consider the development which is so important for our children. It is important that those working in childcare centres are quality people who can offer development and care. Today this is one of the pillars of the child guarantee within the EU. So we need to see what we will do. I am not convinced. I also know, because we constantly discuss with our experts in this country on childcare, that we are missing the bus.

For example, in European countries, such as France and several other countries, the first thousand days in a child's life are giving great importance and I think we should put this under the spotlight. This is a crucial period for our children. We need to invest seriously so that the quality of people who work at such centres is much better. If we have children who are missing out from taking one hundred percent during this important time, they will have emotional problems when starting formal education. We, as part of the Foundation and Mr Karl Coleiro who is present, often discuss issues with the team at the Department of Education. For example, in schools we encounter many problems of lack of attachment.

Mr Kevin Borg mentioned Club 3-16. Today we are pleased because we have many more working women, and I cannot stress enough that we wouldn't have it otherwise. Dr. Briguglio mentioned single parent families. Please keep these in mind because they are one of the groups who suffer most, while the present and the future of our country is in their hands. We have children who arrive at Breakfast Club at 7:00 am, then sit through school and they start their evening at 5.00 p.m., 6.00 p.m. or 7.00 p.m. depending on the time when one of the parents picks them and takes them home. We have children who are passing from one set of hands to another – that's the word – three times a day. They will have the care giver at the Breakfast Club, the teachers if they are in primary school and then have the care giver again in the evening. We have only one mother. These are basic things. When we look at what we do only from an economic point of view only we are creating a huge gap. We have parents who cannot afford to stop working because they need to pay their home loan, and having despite parental leave we are leaving the children who are a few weeks old at childcare centres. That is why the problem of attachment must be seen as fundamental to the life not of the child today or of the young person tomorrow, but of the man, woman and worker who will have to contribute to society in the future. Even when it comes to education, we tell children to study hard so that they can get a good job and earn enough money. We don't tell them to study for their dignity, to be active citizens and critically-minded citizens, not everyone pulls the same rope. Our perspective must change.

I therefore appeal that this is not just a one-off conversation but a start of a national conversation that must lead us to national reflection and a clear vision of where we want to go. Let us be visionary and strategic. Let us understand that the economy is there for people and not that the people are for the economy. Fr Charles, this is another value that has been turned upside down. It doesn't matter, we know that the world around us has changed but we must be proud that we are different and that we do things differently. People's wellbeing is as important as the economy, and in my opinion, often, much more than the economy.

Thank you.



The population ages rapidly and workers decrease, thus there will be challenges for the country concerned to provide an adequate health system, social security and support systems for the elderly, including pensions.



MR KARL PAUL COLEIRO
CEO, National School Support Services

I am Karl Coleiro, educational officer responsible for counselling services in Government schools. Thus I am here on behalf of the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation.

The low birth rate affects a country in many ways. The population ages rapidly and workers decrease, thus there will be challenges for the country concerned to provide an adequate health system, social security and support systems for the elderly, including pensions. A decrease in the number of workers would affect different sectors of the economy such as health, education and industry. This is already very much felt in Malta where many professional as well as manual jobs are not being filled by Maltese people, and therefore foreigners have to be brought in to do these works. After completing their tertiary education, many Maltese youths are deciding to leave and build their families in other countries for various reasons, including to continue advancing their career.

A low birth rate increases the dependency rate between those sections of society that do not work, such as children and the elderly, and sections in working society. In addition, it puts more burden on those who have to provide for those who are dependent on them, and this will require changes in social policies and support structures. Today women are encouraged to continue working. Certain jobs do not give enough flexibility to the woman who is raising a family and wishes to build a career. There also needs to be a change in the mentality, there needs to be more

flexibility in what is expected of the woman who is building a career while, together with her partner, bringing up a family.

A low birth rate can have an impact on a country's cultural fabric. Smaller families and fewer children can change social dynamics, traditions and family customs and structures. One of the main features that give a country identity is language. What will happen to our beautiful and unique language? This is already being threatened by enemies such as social media and the subcultures of our own country. In fact, a recent survey by the National Statistics Office showed that English is more spoken than Maltese with 96 % saying they feel more comfortable speaking in English while Maltese is used by 90 % of respondents to the survey. And what about our villages feasts? If there are no Maltese youths who strive for these to be held throughout the year, who will take care of them in the near future? Bands are already in crisis due to the fact that there are not enough students and bands are having to pay a lot of money to find a person to play a particular instrument.

And what about the infertility rate in the country? According to Dr Mark Sant, a gynaecologist, one couple out of six in Malta experiences infertility problems. One reason is that the woman is older when she decides to have a child. Another reason is the lower sperm count of older men. This is in addition to the anxiety and stress we live with, all the more so after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many couples decide not to have children or to be a bit older when they have children, even because of the cost of living. The average wage in Malta is EUR 1,850 per month for a week of 40 hours. Many are undertaking many sacrifices to buy their own place and have the basic amenities because everything is very expensive. A low birth rate in a country can stifle public finances. The more the working population decreases, the more tax contributions, health costs, pensions and social services increase.

Malta has seen great upheaval in recent years also because of the drastic increase in the population, naturally with foreigners. The more the population grows, the more the demand for certain needs such as food and drink resources, adequate housing, energy, healthcare and transport, among others, increases. All of this consumption contributes to ecological degradation and a complete challenge for everyone to live and help his family live as comfortably as possible.

Let's discuss how all this affects the educational field. Due to the increase in population which started to grow some years ago, in 2014 the Ministry of Education founded the Migrants Learners' Unit which is a very helpful section for foreign

students. In fact today, children who arrive in Malta who do not know either English or Maltese are required to take a one-year course at the Naxxar Induction Hub which today has both the primary and the secondary level. When the children then go to their respective schools they still take lessons in both languages delivered by dedicated teachers. Today there are 65 teachers in 25 schools or hubs who give these lessons, with the largest number of students being in Sliema, Marsaskala and St Paul's Bay. During the scholastic year the Migrants Learners' Unit gave support to 984 children, 280 of whom came from EU countries while 704 were Third Country Nationals. The largest numbers of children arriving from Europe came from Italy (79), Bulgaria (28) and Romania (21), while from Non-EU States mostly from Ukraine (126), Albania (79) and Syria (74). As regards children from Ukraine, the Ministry reached an agreement with a particular NGO to provide a Ukrainian counsellor to help children who have experienced the trauma of war.

The Migrant Learners' Unit also employs so-called Community Liaison Workers. There are currently nine and they work as mediators between the school and the family, especially because of linguistic difficulties. They come from different countries and offer their services in Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Serb, Hindi (Indian), Urdu (Pakistan), Armenian, Ukrainian and Macedonian.

To get an idea of the current situation in our schools when it comes to foreigners, we can say that today we have schools where there are higher percentages of foreign students than Maltese students. We can mention, for example, the primary school in Sliema where 67 % of the school population are foreigners including 37 British, 22 Italians, 22 Ukrainians, 17 French, 33 Libyans, 22 Swedish and 20 Bulgarians. In Gżira primary school there are also 67 % foreigners. Qawra accounts for 65 %, St Julian's 62 %, St Paul's Bay 60 %, Msida 54 % and Marsaskala Sant'Anna accounts for 45 %. Interestingly, in Gozo Żebbuġ primary has 46% of foreign students, with ten Hungarians, nine Czechs, five Albanians and five Polish.

With regards to nationalities, we mostly find Italians with 870 students, Syrians 619, Serbians 545, British 426, Indians 400, Libyans 366, Ukrainians 354 and Bulgarians 318.

It is worth mentioning Scheme 9 which the Government set up in 2017. This scheme is aimed at improving the quality of life of students in distress, at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The aim of the fund is to assist these students in terms of material living as well as in other areas such as sport. In order to ensure that the scheme reaches the most vulnerable and in need in primary, middle and secondary schools, the scheme was reformed during the year 2020 following an overall evaluation. In

this respect, the NSSS is working more closely and collectively with the Department of Social Security to reach out to these students. Currently, 294 foreign families are benefiting from this scheme.

Multiculturalism has brought multiple challenges to our schools. From the homogeneity of a few years ago our teachers now face a very diverse classroom because in addition to different abilities, they also have to deal with different cultures, religions and traditions. This led many teachers to leave their job, and currently our country is struggling to have the full complement of teachers for our schools. The theme of multiculturalism needs to be addressed more seriously also at University, because this is lacking from the content of many courses.

From this scholastic year the NSSS has been offering COPE sessions, which are training sessions for teachers, entitled “Multiculturalism within Schools”. These sessions give practical ideas how educators can reach out to each student including those from different cultures.

These sessions were popular with schools. Since the beginning of this scholastic year, eight sessions have been held in different schools, both in primary and secondary schools. It is not surprising that the majority of sessions took place at St Clara College. Sessions were also held at St Ignatius College, St Thomas Moore College and St Nicholas College.

The increase in the number of foreign children does not only present curricular problems but also other psychological and emotional issues, especially if the children come from war-torn countries and have experienced great traumas. This means that we need to have more social workers, more counsellors, therapists and psychologists because there are not enough workers to match the demand.

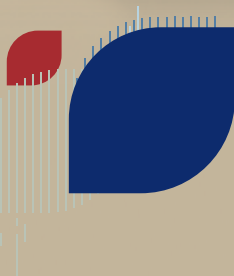
The NSSS is also responsible for the Hospital Service, a service that assists those young women who fall pregnant. In recent years we have also seen a lower pregnancy rate at an early age. While in 2016 we had 49 cases, in 2022 we had 36 cases. Teenagers who are referred today are experiencing many other social difficulties, including the use of illicit substances, prostitution, much older partners, major disruptions in the family structure, etc. The profile of a girl becoming pregnant today is different from what we used to see before.

Some cultures present particular problems and concerns. As NSSS we work hand in hand with the Foundation for Social Welfare Services on many aspects, but we are careful not to have forced marriages involving minors. We are also experiencing

a new reality where underage Maltese girls enter into relationships with young Arab men, fall pregnant and are then asked to get married into their religion. It is therefore desirable to have information programmes on our local media about the cultures, religions and traditions of the peoples living in Malta. Some communities such as Serbs, Philippines and Indians organise activities to make the Maltese more aware of their cultures.

Last June we started intensive training on FGM, Female Genital Mutilation, to increase the awareness about this brutal habit among the professionals.

To conclude, as educators we must convey the message that our society wants to live together in harmony and tranquility. So in our schools we must keep emphasising certain values such as fraternity, solidarity, inclusion, respect and love towards our neighbour. Thank you.



The first point of reflection is therefore: Let us make a wise, long-term investment – here it is imperative that the Government intervenes. I think this is missing in Malta when it comes to maternity leave.



DR ANNA BORG

Chairperson, Malta Women's Lobby

Thank you very much for the invitation to the Malta Employers' Association. I greet everyone.

In my speech I would like to show and talk about how policies and measures concerning family and work that have been adopted over the years under both governments were not sufficient and were not done in the best interests of parents who want to work and raise a family at the same time. This is likely to have an effect and impact on the birth rate. Many of the policies concerning the family and work were carried out in haste, lacked a scientific basis, were carried out without consultation with the organisations representing women, as if they were not important, and many of them were introduced because they were pushed by the European Union and not because we really believed in equality or in these issues.

We also note that over the years Maltese families who want to work and have a number of children have been treated with stinginess. Nowadays everyone has to work because it has not become possible to do otherwise. This lack of investment and attention to these families certainly did not help Malta to register a higher birth rate. When you have a conflict between work and family, the parents have to think carefully whether or not they should have another child.

I will give a few examples of what I am referring to and I will start from maternity leave. Our politicians, most of whom are men, decided that 18 weeks are enough for a mother after giving birth, and in these weeks she should recuperate her

health and adjust to the arrival of a new baby. What if a woman has caesarean? Most probably she would have to stop breastfeeding because once she returns to work it is very difficult to continue this process, against any advice of the World Health Organisation which stresses that ideally mothers should breastfeed for at least six months. Thus she has to organise everything, perhaps with the help of her parents or find a childcare centre, because within 18 weeks she has to return to work. My message is that 18 weeks is too little time for mothers. Countries with better birth rates than Malta have much longer maternity or parental leave. I will give the example of Sweden; we always turn to Nordic countries because they have the best policies. There, couples return to work after 18 months. This means less stress for parents and a better upbringing for children, allowing more time for the aforesaid attachment. In Malta, if a woman works in a factory, she has to wake up at 5.00 a.m. to take the baby to the grandparents because the childcare centre is not open at that time, she leaves for work to start at 7.00 a.m. then someone takes the child to the childcare centre, someone will pick it again once the day is over, and if the mother is working full time, she returns home late in the evening. This is a lot of pressure on parents especially in the early months when they are not likely to be sleeping much during the night, because during that period babies wake up several times through the night and very often they are unwell. This causes a lot of stress, therefore 18 weeks are not enough.

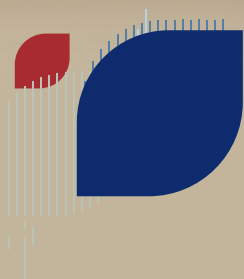
The first point of reflection is therefore: Let us make a wise, long-term investment – here it is imperative that the Government intervenes. I think this is missing in Malta when it comes to maternity leave.

There is also parental leave. Thanks to the Work-Life Balance Directive, we are now being paid for two of the four months which we were entitled to. This was done last year. I say that this was a golden opportunity to make a good policy which makes sense for new parents. Unfortunately, however, the introduction of this policy was not done well and there was no consultation with the organisations that work for women's rights, or even with mothers. Why am I saying this? Because the payment rate is of EUR 23 per day. Today you cannot live on EUR 23 a day when you have home loan, most likely a car loan and the expenses related to having a baby, who needs to be taken to the paediatrician and requires medicine. This is a clear case that where the government is being stingy with new parents and has not recognised the value of raising a baby in the first months. Why have we introduced excessive conditions that make no sense for parents? For example, do you know that from the four months of leave, parents can only take one month of paid leave in the first four years of their baby's life? Why these conditions? These are restrictive conditions. Countries that introduce truly meaningful policies pay

well for parental leave and allow for flexibility because each family is different and has different needs.

There is also the issue of when children fall ill. In 2017 a public consultation was started, however nothing more has been said about this. Probably someone decided that it is not important. School hours, which have already been mentioned, are incompatible with work and family life. I suggest that we should no longer shortchange parents, and instead, the government should introduce generous policies and measures both in terms of time and in the payment offered. If we continue to offer insufficient policies and measures, parents will have to continue to choose between work and whether they have more children.

Thank you.



To promote equality in the workplace, it is essential to provide paid and extended parental leave for each parent, without distinction between genders.



MS KAREN BUTTIGIEG
Chairperson, Empower

Mr President, Hon. Members of the Chamber and colleagues, Empower is a platform of ten women's organisations. We understand that the demographic structure of the country plays a crucial role in developing the economic potential and quality of life for present and future generations. To encourage population development, we believe that this needs to be addressed holistically.

Above all, it is important to ensure support for families, especially in the areas of childcare, maternity, paternity and parental leave. The free and accessible childcare service already facilitates working parents and increases opportunities for women to continue their career. This is not an absolute solution. We know that children become very ill when they start to go to childcare centres and so far there is no such service for children with disabilities or chronic diseases who need individual attention.

It is also important to address the gender gap in childbirth and child-raising leave. The extended absence of women from the workplace often has negative consequences for their career progression and on the financial situation of the family. To promote equality in the workplace, it is essential to provide paid and extended parental leave for each parent, without distinction between genders. Through equal opportunities for men and women to take paid parental leave and participate actively in child-raising responsibilities, we can create a culture of responsibility at home that supports the career ambitions of each employee,

regardless of gender. Carer's paid leave also helps to enable women with children with disabilities to continue working full time.

Promoting work-life balance is a very important aspect. Promoting a culture that respects family time and life activities can contribute to better integration with working life. Flexible and home-based working can enable parents to discharge child-care responsibilities. It is important to strengthen this and not stop post-COVID as is happening in many places. However, while addressing the issue that more women demand to work from home, we must be conscious of the fact that this might be hampering their career development. While flexible and remote work is important to ensure a work-life balance, a number of women have found themselves in a situation where they have not been considered for promotions. To resolve this imbalance, it is necessary to implement strategies that help employees working from home to enjoy equal access to professional development opportunities, networking events and career progression.

Gender equality is essential. Equal opportunities for women in education, employment and leadership positions must be ensured so that they can also make the right decisions about their career and family planning. It is important to confront gender stereotypes and promote equal-shared responsibilities in child-raising and household affairs. We must create a supportive social environment that respects parenthood. Education also plays a crucial role in combating social stereotypes on family planning and child-raising.

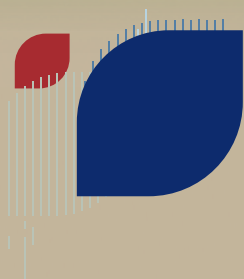
Above all, it is also important to provide financial incentives and support for families to reduce the financial problems associated with raising children.

Therefore this issue needs to be addressed holistically and include the following measures, among others, suggested:

- Support families with children with disabilities or chronic diseases in various ways to enable parents to continue working
- Extension of paid parental leave combined with employment protection
- Address the gender gap in paid parental leave
- Promote flexible work and a culture that respects work-life balance

- Implement strategies so that employees working flexibly or from home have equal access to promotion opportunities
- Address gender stereotypes and promote equal responsibilities in child-raising and household affairs
- Provide financial incentives to support families.

Thank you.



This decline is a cause of serious concern as it has far-reaching and long-term implications for our society, for our identity as Maltese as well as for our future as a nation.



DR CHRISTINE SCHEMBRI DEGUARA

Chairperson, HOPE Fertility Malta

Mr President, Hon. Members, Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour to address you in this parliamentary institution.

Today we are discussing a critical situation affecting all developed countries not least our own. In our country since 1960 the fertility rate has fallen by 70 %. This decline is a cause of serious concern as it has far-reaching and long-term implications for our society, for our identity as Maltese as well as for our future as a nation.

From a medical point of view there are several factors leading to this decline. Ideally, couples should think about starting a family between the ages of 20 and 30. For a number of reasons Maltese couples are choosing to start a family later.

Currently the average age of Maltese women seeking treatment for infertility in our clinic is 34.5 years. It is natural that women over 35 years of age start to experience a decrease in both the quality and quantity of eggs with a greater possibility of genetic anomalies. In the same period men have reduced sperm quality.

There are various measures that the Maltese Government, present and future, can take to improve the fertility rate of the Maltese population.

- 1) As always the education of our children is very important. Early knowledge of factors that may reduce their fertility and easier access to fertility controls

will lead to the early identification on an individual basis of factors that cause reduced fertility and allow specialists to address them.

- 2) The local health service has been offering a limited service to couples facing this challenge for a number of years. Improving access to high-quality fertility treatments locally, without the need for people to travel abroad, is imperative.

Hope Fertility, launched in our country in 2022, is an IVF tertiary centre proud to have reached an average success rate of 70 % when the European average is around 40 %. In addition, this fertility centre offers high-tech IVF/ICSI programmes for people suffering from infertility.

Improving and facilitating access to the population through financial support for tertiary-level technology without long waiting lists is the most important factor influencing success in infertility.

- 3) The possibility of opting for egg-freezing programmes for our young population, such as those over the age of 30 and providing financial assistance for this, would help to combat future infertility and its far-reaching impacts. At HoPE Fertility we offer egg and sperm freezing programmes to those who intend to start a family later or who have been identified as having low fertility to eliminate the risk of infertility in the future.

Families are changing, with a number of women seeking maternity alone. Malta's progressive LGBTIQ law today allows even same-sex couples to have a family. Today at HoPE we manage European sperm donor programmes, egg donation programmes and IVF/ICSI egg-sharing programmes among female couples so that they can also have a family.

Surrogacy provides an alternative path for individuals or couples who cannot conceive or carry pregnancy due to obstacles such as uterine anomalies or repeated loss of pregnancy. Although Malta's laws are among the most progressive, we do not yet have any provision for surrogacy.

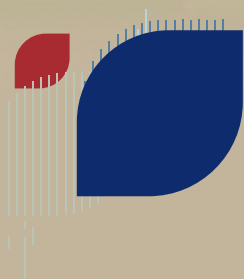
Surrogacy, introduced in the UK and the US among others, also plays a crucial role in ensuring equality for same-sex couples. Malta can strengthen a society that is not only one of the most progressive LGBTIQ legislations in Europe but truly embraces the principles of equality, love and choice.

If and when legislation is implemented, Malta is ready and able to offer services such as surrogacy.

Infertility treatment requires a multi-sectoral contribution. There is no one simple solution although a number of solutions exist.

Governments, legislators within this House, and communities should work together to implement policies that support and encourage family formation in every aspect as we know it.

Fertility education, early fertility testing, financial support for egg freezing and access to quality and state-of-the-art timely treatment in Malta all help to meet this challenge. Thank you.



I would like to say that we have about eight fathers who are receiving help due to mental difficulties because a new baby brings a lot of stress.



MS RUTH ROSE SCIBERRAS

Chairperson, Committee for Positive Parenting and Strengthening of the Family

Thank you, Mr President, Members of Parliament and President Emeritus. Positive Parenting Malta offers a service for couples with a new baby.

Parents As Partners is a programme where a group of couples meet online and support parents in strengthening their relationship together and making them better equipped to cope with the ups and downs of life. The programme is spread over 16 weeks of 2 hours per week. We do it online as requested by the couples themselves. In this programme we discuss with couples how to resolve conflicts, focus on father's role and what the couples should do to find time for each other. Assessments are made from the outset before the baby is born so that if there are mental difficulties, we intervene early. I would like to say that we have about eight fathers who are receiving help due to mental difficulties because a new baby brings a lot of stress. It is a new thing to have fathers participating in this type of therapy.

Another training being carried out for professionals is Co-Parenting. This training is being carried out to help couples who have separated but want to bring up their child together. Today it is very difficult to raise kids alone and therefore, Positive Parenting Malta, offers training services to prepare professionals to be better informed by scientific evidence that co-parenting works. I am not referring here to those cases of child abuse or domestic violence. So far we have trained over 300 professionals including members of the judiciary, child lawyers, social workers, psychologists and psychotherapists among others.

To conclude I would like to say that Positive Parenting Malta runs campaigns about raising children in a positive environment during adolescence and although there are many challenges, this is also a wonderful time. We, Positive Parenting Malta, do not hesitate to deal with sensitive topics. We also organise campaigns about dealing with adolescents who have thoughts of suicide, sexual orientation and depression.

Mr President, the aim of Positive Parenting Malta is to strengthen the interests of children and parents. Those who want more information can access our social media. Thank you.



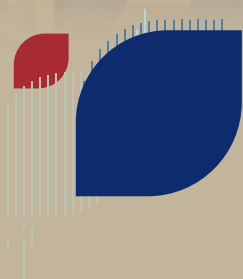
MR BEN RIZZO

Chairman, Civil Society within the MCESD

Thank you, Mr President. Good morning everyone. I am currently the Chairperson of the Civil Society Committee within the MCESD which is made up of 12 sectors representing all Maltese NGOs. I have been chosen to represent this Committee at the Economic and Social Committee in Brussels.

At home I have a crystal ball. I think many of you may have one too. When I shook it, dust came out, and then Father Christmas popped out in the middle of the room and delivered a message. The message that he gave me is that we are facing a melting ice cube. This means that we will sink to a certain level. Families have children and they stop there. I don't think we will get to zero but of course this creates problems for everyone.

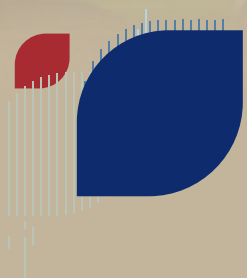
We usually take three minutes in Brussels to address any directive emanating from the European Commission and here I will try to use this time as well. Here I am mostly addressing MPs about the things we want to have as a society. We are discussing how we should providing young families, the majority of which are of course under 40, with financial aid, such as increased tax credits to parents and adults caring for children and better relief from national contributions. We know that those who have children will increase the number of years for which they give contributions. We would like this to be increased so that at least the financial impact is less. If possible we should also start introducing more home maintenance because parents are not at home. We therefore need to introduce better ways how a person can care for his home. I would like to include in this discussion parents who



I would like to include in this discussion parents who have disabled children, because I think that these people need more assistance.

have disabled children, because I think that these people need more assistance. I think that in the future we would also like to see that the amount of aid that can be given to families and single mothers is greater.

Lastly, I would like to apologise because at 12.30 p.m. I must leave and probably will not be able to stay until the end. Thank you.



Over the years Malta has undergone significant social and economic changes in recent decades, including more young people continuing to pursue higher education, more people entering the labour market and our lifestyle.



MR JOSEF BUGEJA

Secretary General, Workers' Union

Mr President, Members of Parliament, friends, thank you for this opportunity to share some thoughts with you on this important subject.

The low birth rate in Malta is indeed a significant challenge for the country and presents concerns for long-term economic and social sustainability. A low birth rate refers to a situation where the number of births is insufficient to replace the existing population. This is a serious and major problem, so we need effective solutions to overcome it. This is not just a Maltese problem but rather a global problem; from China to Africa to Europe. In Malta this problem is more acute. In fact the birth rate in Malta is the lowest out of the members of the European Union.

Several factors contribute to the low birth rate. Socio-economic factors play a crucial role in this issue. Over the years Malta has undergone significant social and economic changes in recent decades, including more young people continuing to pursue higher education, more people entering the labour market and our lifestyle. These changes are leading to more couples having children later in life, less children or otherwise choosing not to have children at all. After so many years of study and sacrifice, these people rightly give priority to their personal careers and aspirations. Other factors that may discourage young couples from starting a family are the cost of living and house prices.

Furthermore, changes in society's attitudes towards marriage and life are influencing Malta's birth rate. Traditional family structures have evolved and individuals now

have more choices and freedom to decide whether or when to have children. As a result, many couples choose smaller families or even choose not to have children.

The consequence of all this is that we have an ageing society. With lower births, the proportion of older citizens will continue to increase and put pressure on social infrastructure, the health system and the world of work. The shortage of births is leading to an increase in third-party workers to fill the vacancies created within the Maltese economy. In the absence of these workers we would have a negative impact on the sustainability of the Maltese economy and on the social network.

With an increasingly ageing society and with the issues of Maltese identity, a time may come when everything that makes us different from other people and the same Maltese identity will cease to exist.

It is therefore essential to recognise that increasing the birth rate is a complex and lengthy process. What we do today will have an effect around 18 or 20 years from now. We therefore need immediate and other long-term measures. This Parliament, together with various societal stakeholders, needs to collaborate, understand the problem and implement measures to address the causes that are leading to the low birth rate in Malta.

After so much work to get more Maltese into the world of work I do not believe that the solution is that parents should remain at home if this is not their choice. However, education and knowledge about the family should be essential to start increasing the birth rate.

In order to be effective, these solutions should be implemented through coordination between the Government, social partners, families, community bodies, educational institutions and other non-governmental organisations working in the social field.

To address this existential challenge Maltese society therefore needs a national policy and implementation strategy. Help and support services to working parents are also another part of an important solution. Contact services, consultancy and financial support should also offer practical solutions. Financial incentives for families, work flexibility, increased pay and parental and paternal leave days should also help in the solution. More affordable housing and adequate supply can alleviate part of the main concerns for young couples when considering starting a family.

Another solution I believe is an immigration and integration policy. Migrant workers with economic skills and competences, crafts and the creation of favourable

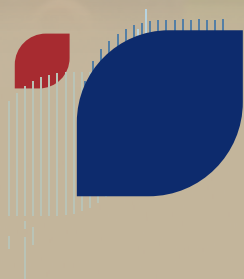
conditions for them to settle in Malta can have a positive impact on the shrinking population and contribute to economic growth.

In conclusion, Malta's low birth rate poses an existential challenge due to its implications for the ageing population, economic productivity, health system and pensions. Surely, to solve this problem we need a policy aimed at growth and support for families, a policy of economic immigration and integration, measures for more affordable housing, a focus on a high-value economic sector, increased competencies and skills of workers and fiscal measures so that more workers reaching retirement age may choose to stay in the labour market.

Our determination must be to solve this problem and discuss and agree on immediate and long-term plans that combine our economic model with social and sustainable strategies. Today should be the beginning of this process to find the solution to all this problem in full consultation with all parties. Thank you.







It is not always the case that economic growth means that eventually well-being, health and prosperity of a future society that must be renewed.



MR WILLIAM PORTELLI

President, Malta Union of Bank Employees (MUBE)

Thank you President, Members of Parliament, Malta Employers' Association, colleagues.

First of all I must commend the initiative and the persistence of the MEA as the importance of this subject was never really truly appreciated and its impact may be long term.

With this, we must not forget the study carried out on demographics by the same MEA a few years ago and so it makes sense that we are here today in this House to debate how best to collaborate to effectively register some form of progress.

Factors

It appears that in European states and not less in our country, the low birth rate is becoming very evident and practically we can say that it is worrying. Some of the factors which may influence this deteriorating situation are:

- Education.
- The impact of the socio-economic environment.
- Affordability.
- Increasing opportunities for women in the labour market.

This imbalance between who is originally Maltese and foreigners in the population growth undoubtedly creates circumstances where the Maltese islands continue to age. This is known as an ageing population.

Implications

The arguments are diverse.

A decline in the birth rate may indicate that while the population is shrinking at its origin, the general thinking of some or of certain states can be interpreted that these same circumstances are a successful result of rapid socio-economic development and thus the success of some national policies.

I want to be clear. It is not always the case that economic growth means that eventually well-being, health and prosperity of a future society that must be renewed. This more than anything depends very much on the vision of the State of the day and of the politicians who sit on these seats, and their real capacity in embracing firm values that honour our country.

We must remember that the level of education of a people reflects their reputation as well as that of their country, and all that goes with this. We should have the pride to protect what is Maltese and what has always united us – the family and a sense of community.

Therefore, without any hesitation, it is very relevant to discuss this within Parliament. We must carefully analyse the truthfulness of the political will to succeed in all that we need to do. It is also the task of stakeholders to tangibly show how much they are willing to participate and contribute to the common good of society.

Effective country progress usually exhibits high standards of living but not necessarily values. We are currently witnessing a change or shift from what is normal and our aspirations.

An example of this, more career opportunities for women help us grow more professionally but we have to factor in the fact that some might choose to have a family later in life, or opt to have a small family.

We must admit that having a successful career has become more of a priority than thinking of building a family, and so this also affects one's plans to have a decent home. In fact first time buyers can hardly dream of having all the benefits that help them to think about creating a family in the future.

Small spaces, lack of financial affordability and a total focus on a successful career to earn more money are common arguments we hear regularly. A constant lack of services and information about what are the priorities one should have to start thinking about building a family should be addressed and be part of an expansive educational process.

Consequences

The consequence of a continuously lower birth rate can be a fatal blow to the recovery of the social fabric, resulting in the risk of losing the Maltese heritage and DNA that makes us Maltese, when one considers the strong influx of foreigners seeking work and permanent residence in the Maltese Islands.

In fact the local banking and financial sector testifies to this because many more foreigners are being recruited by local companies and not just international ones.

This demographic imbalance will strongly impact social welfare, healthcare and future pension scheme plans.

Another impact would be that on the labour market and economic productivity. A shrinking future workforce, skill gaps and a lack of innovation and creativity originating from what is local will certainly convince all parties that Malta really needs to change the economic and development model as soon as possible.

Less quantity and more quality while protecting what is Maltese.

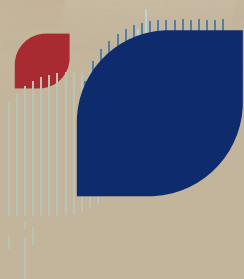
Proposals

As stakeholders we insist for:

- the introduction of specific educational teaching on future family planning.
- The assurance that we continue to work on flexibility in the world of work.
- More work and close collaboration to help change the mindset on burden sharing between father and mother.
- Free counselling and professional assistance services for those who wish to start planning to have a family.
- Initiatives and fiscal measures for family starters.
- Collective bargaining that facilitates terms and conditions allowing the employee to plan a family while helping working parents maintain their position for the future career.

Conclusion

After all, the vision of a country we want for our children's future depends on us. Thank you.



Research shows that work and family responsibilities need to be shared equitably between both parents in order to address stereotypes related to homework.



MS RENEE LAIVIERA

Commissioner for the Promotion of Equality

Thank you, Mr President. I cannot but start with a comment that I have just heard from Mr William Portelli. I wish to congratulate him because he was the first – and I have been careful to follow the entire half day – to mention burden sharing between women and men. If we note how many times we have mentioned the woman and the man in the context of the upbringing and care of children and the family we find that there is a huge gap. Our mindset is still there, traditional. This emerged from a study we have just done with the University on women's and men's perceptions and attitudes regarding equality.

A study recently published by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) on gender stereotypes and patriarchy showed how they still affect the roles and behaviour of society in various areas, including the family. We saw that although many of the participants in the study had progressive ideas about the fact that both men and women should take on diverse responsibilities in the family, childcare and other dependent relatives, it remains an area associated primarily with women. Indeed statistics of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2022) show that 37 % of women compared to 14 % of men reported caring for children aged 0-11 for more than four hours a day. This inequality has negative impacts on women's earnings, career advancement opportunities, lifestyle and pension. Can this double burden on women be deterring them from having more children?

In fact while many measures were implemented in our country with the aim of getting more women into employment, they were not balanced by other measures aimed at men to share family responsibilities equally. Here we have to look at the transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive in 2022 where we have missed an opportunity to achieve the main objective of this Directive, which is strengthening gender equality by encouraging more men to recognise the importance of their full role of spending more time taking on family responsibilities.

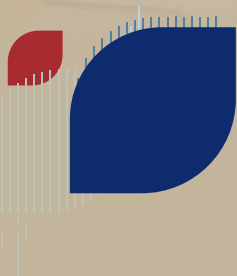
We have seen that the conditions attached to parental leave hardly encourage men to make use of this leave. Apart from difficulties related to gender expectations, which men face more than women, when applying to make use of this leave, the conditions attached to taking such leave are complicated. Moreover, leave is not paid in full and therefore it makes more financial sense for the spouse with the least wage to take this leave, which in many families is the woman. Moreover, leave should be flexible enough to enable parents to use it to meet children's needs, especially when they are ill from time to time. Therefore we should consider payment in full during parental leave so that more men can make use of it. In addition, the concept of use-it-or-lose-it should be strengthened to this end. Indeed in some Scandinavian countries⁵ (Sweden and Iceland), where the rate of women present on the labour market and fertility rates are high, parental leave is long and paid. Although we have increased the number of women in the world of work, our fertility rate has decreased. What's different? What are we doing? These Nordic countries have been embarking on their path towards equality for many more years than us especially when it comes to women and men.

Research shows that work and family responsibilities need to be shared equitably between both parents in order to address stereotypes related to homework. The study carried out by NCPE showed the need to encourage the earner-caregiver model where in a couple both parties can work profitably and spend time at home instead of the traditional model where the husband is considered the main breadwinner. There is a need to break stereotypes in the minds of society particularly in the minds of women who still believe that although they are sharing financial responsibilities with their partner, they still believe that they should remain the main caregivers of both children and home. This must go hand in hand with measures directed at men to understand their important role within the family.

4 Sweden – 480 days of paid parental leave at birth or adoption of children (240 days per parent).
Fertility Rate: 1.67
Iceland – Each parent is entitled to six months' leave: six weeks are transferable between parents.
Fertility Rate: 1.71

It is clear how many factors related to work-life balance and family responsibilities can have an impact on the fertility rate. In view of this, the NCPE has felt a need to develop a study, with academic experts in the field, on the perceptions and attitudes of women and men in our country regarding the balance between family responsibilities and work, and the size of the family in this context. As always, NCPE looks forward to sharing the results of this research with partners working in this field.

I conclude by saying that in the study we are doing together with the University we want to see what our couples need to have more children. They must tell us. We have looked at France which is the country that has been most successful in raising its fertility rate, which is at 1.78. We also looked at the Scandinavian countries. However, as I said, we must understand what our couples need in order to have more children. That is why we are pleased to come back here and share this research with you. Thank you.



We have a problem of young families who are preferring to leave Malta because Malta has become overpopulated, there is nowhere to go and everywhere is full.



MR PAUL ABELA

President, Chamber for Small and Medium-sized Businesses

Mr President, Hon. Members of Parliament, Parliamentary Secretary, Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues of the MCESD.

I will start with something different by talking a little bit about my life. My wife and I have five children. All my children have two children and one of them recently had twins, i.e. ended up with four children. Therefore, I am personally experiencing the things that we are talking about here and which we are projecting. My three daughters are all graduates and professionals. This is a prescription that one can use. It is useless to keep mentioning what other have been doing. We must do the basics and ask what we need.

I represent small shops and I can say that even these family businesses have a problem because since now they have fewer children, they have no one to pass on their business to. They either pass it on to their employees or find some other solution. This is a problem that Malta will face in the future and I think that the Government needs to give more money. For example, Germany gives EUR 250 per extra child. As I said, we had five children and with five children you cannot live in an apartment but need a bigger house.

Then you have to think about feeding them. In the olden days we used to say that cooking for two is the same as cooking for six. This is no longer true. A visit to the supermarket and comparing how much is required to feed five children as opposed

to feeding one will show this. We need to look at this realistically. It is useless to say a lot of things.

And what about pensions? The pensions are being paid by the Government because there are foreigners who are paying and do not take anything. If they leave and we do not get more workers, the Government will not have from where to pay pensions. Therefore something has to be done.

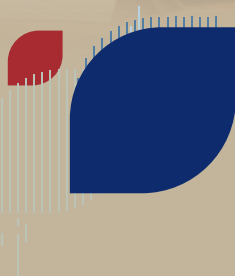
We now have another problem. We have a problem of young families who are preferring to leave Malta because Malta has become overpopulated, there is nowhere to go and everywhere is full. For example, we used to say that it would be best to cap tourism but I did not agree with this. But today I think I have to agree. To fill the hotel rooms we will have in 2024 we need to get five million tourists a year! The airport cannot cope with these figures and I think Ryanair will need to start launching them in parachute! Maybe drop 500 in Għajn Tuffieħa! It is therefore very important that we start taking actions now.

I want to thank the Malta Employers' Association for this initiative they have taken but we have to start working to meet certain milestones. I always say – before I was mayor and now a President of the Chamber for Small and Medium-sized Businesses – that not talking and discussing will result in nothing, what matters is how much we work. For example, when the Council would tell me that 50 people came, but I would tell them: Have you done something? Did you manage to help them? Otherwise it is all for nothing.

I think the way forward is to start taking some measures. For example, I read this morning in the news that people are leaving Ireland because they cannot afford to rent or buy housing. Many of them also come to Malta. This is a problem we need to address. We must make a long-term programme. I am now 72 years old and I can say that both parties work for five years. In the first year you will be happy because you have just been elected, in the second and third years everything is right and in the fourth year you will be thinking about another election. You forget all that you had promised in the first year and start pledging for another five years. We must work in the long term and in collaboration with the two parties and the social partners. We must all work together.

I hope that this conference we are holding today at this Parliament serves to find a solution to this problem we are talking about. Thank you.





When you have a low fertility rate the Government will have less income and a great expense, both in terms of health care as well as social care.



DR MARTHESE PORTELLI
CEO, Chamber of Commerce

Mr President, I will try not to repeat what has already been said. When we are approaching the end it is always a little more difficult.

I will start by quoting a few international figures. The problem of fertility is not only a problem for Malta but is a global problem. In 2000 the world fertility rate was at 2.7. In 2023 globally it fell to 2.3 i.e. it is just over the amount we need to be sustainable. In Malta the rate is 1.13. Official information shows that a number of large countries that are traditionally not known to have fertility problems are now also facing this issue. Among these countries are America, China and India. I am mentioning India because as we know today a substantial part of our workforce is relying on people coming from these countries too. Therefore we cannot be reassured that a shortage of workers that we will have in the future will be filled with foreign people because foreign countries have the same problems that we have.

What are the repercussions of low fertility rates? On our side we will be looking from the point of view of how this problem affects business. As the pool continues to shrink, the more difficult it will be to find suitable candidates and find the necessary amounts required to continue expanding business, but also to provide the consumers with what they want. This problem is not only being faced by businesses that are not finding employees, but will ultimately also be felt by the consumer because he will not find the necessary worker to serve him the product or service he requires. Obviously the less workers, the less income from National Insurance taxes and contributions. This in turn has a direct effect on the pensions

of future generations. I think that in parallel with the discussion we have today it is also important to look seriously at pension reform. Both employers' associations and employee representative organisations have for several years been saying that the current pension system is not sustainable and must be looked at.

When you have a low fertility rate the Government will have less income and a great expense, both in terms of health care as well as social care. This morning I was reading an article on education which said that while reducing the number of people might save a small amount in terms of the cost of education, in reality, when you consider this over a longer term, and see the investment made in infrastructure, schools, maintenance, etc., the per capita ratio of each pupil will probably be much higher than at the time of making the original investment. These are all considerations that the management of the country must take into account. Only then can we really assess our economic sustainability.

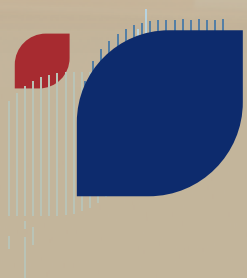
Then you also have the social element. When you don't have enough human capital the dependency ratio increases, ultimately resulting in greater economic pressure on the workforce. Then we know what happens; much more stress at work etc. You also have social and emotional wellbeing issues. Today no one mentioned the fact that various studies show that relations between siblings are generally the longest standing, which provides a certain degree of stability and support. Obviously when you have siblings who get along well, this ultimately contributes to general wellbeing as well. There are also the difficulties encountered by older people.

I would also like to mention the point about our culture and identity as we can combine it with the fertility rate. We are talking about Malta's fertility rate but it would also be worth noting that in 2000, 4.9 % of the births we had here in Malta were born to non-Maltese mothers. In 2017 this rose from 4.9 % to 22.2 % and is now around 29 %. My point is that it is important for us as Maltese to integrate with all the foreigners that are in our country so that they can continue to maintain our culture.

I will close with a few solutions. Flexibility in the workplace is good. It is important that employers also try to promote it further but this is not enough. This is clear in the technology sector. If there is a sector that can offer flexibility, this is the technology sector. However, official statistics show that the number of women working in the technology sector is still very low. Therefore the reason is not only linked to a lack of flexibility but is also linked to what we have in mind, the difference between a woman and a man and who can take up a job and who cannot take up another job.

The second point concerns maternity, paternal and parental leave. There are positive and negative elements in the fact that some leave can be taken between the mother and father, especially when there are children, but the truth is that generally it is the woman who has to sacrifice her leave to be added to that of the husband. Now maybe some might say: Isn't it both of them who agree to this? Yes, it is true that both have agreed on it, but they may have agreed on it because that is our culture. We also know that when someone spends a substantial amount of time outside the world of work, they find it much more difficult to reintegrate.

I think that as a country we also have to think about the reform that I call "Attractiveness reform" both to keep the Maltese people working here in Malta as well as for foreigners, who in reality are serving us where we have our shortcomings. As regards the attractiveness reform I am referring to governance and also to aesthetics. People are getting fed up of having to experience traffic, dirt and a lot of red tape, so we need to see what needs to be done to keep the Maltese here, and not be the ones to expel them out of our country. Thank you.



The Commissioner recommended that the Maltese economic model should change and move away from an economy based on low wages to an economy based on jobs of quality.



MR CHRIS ATTARD

Vice-President, Maltese Forum Unions

Mr President, Members of Parliament, colleagues, today we face a topic of great importance for society, the economy, the environment, culture and especially the identity of everything we call Maltese. One wonders whether Malta's identity is threatened with the low birth rate. In the last 50 years, the average birth rate in Malta has fallen from 30 to nine children per 1,000 persons. This significant drop in the birth rate may involve serious challenges, complications for the future of the country, and can have profound effects on various aspects of Maltese society. It could be argued that the low birth rate directly affects the dimension and structure of the workforce. With fewer Maltese people entering the labour market in the future, more foreign workers will be needed to sustain life as it is today. This has also been evident in the high rate of urban development in Malta in recent years.

In the workplace there are great challenges to find Maltese workers, and this is also the case for professional positions. The employer must therefore have recourse to workers from outside our shores who need to be trained at the workplace. Very often they come to Malta only for the sake of finding a job in other countries in Europe, so this entails investing money and time in the place of work which does not yield long-term results. The economic and societal implications of the low birth rate are very complex. Today in Malta, for a family to make ends meet, both parents have to work, giving priority to their careers, with little or no time for personal needs, because after work both parents have to continue housework and while seeing to the children's needs. Some of the main factors being highlighted by our union members are related to the challenge of cost of living. Inflation, rising

property prices, rents and food prices make it harder for parents to offer the best to their children. Flexibility in workplaces must be compatible with the needs of upbringing children. Work-life balance should be the priority. Many Maltese youths and young families have high expectations, and so it should be. However, if these highly skilled young people do not find the place of work with adequate pay, they will seek work abroad.

During a visit to Malta a few weeks ago, the European Commissioner Nicolas Schmit urged Malta to invest in the skills of its workers if it wants to increase the wages for the workers and avoid the brain drain, of most Maltese tradesmen. The Commissioner recommended that the Maltese economic model should change and move away from an economy based on low wages to an economy based on jobs of quality. The low birth rate is considered to have a negative impact on the sustainability of public finances, as many speakers said, with the lowest taxes that can be allocated translating into lower social benefits, investment in health services and pensions for the population. However, if the country moves towards high-quality, value-added jobs, which yield much more profits and taxes for citizens and the country, it will make up for the drop in the birth rate.

Moreover, we must bear in mind that the Maltese islands are extremely small. The impact of the large population is having a negative effect on our country's environmental capacity. This is clear because Malta ranks in the top tenth in the world's most densely populated countries. A high population translates into a decrease in the quality of life and the surrounding environment. This situation poses significant challenges to our country's policy, and calls for innovative solutions to ensure a stable and prosperous future. But if we do not do our best to explore new economic models based on more performing research and consultation, then we will continue to see a low birth rate as the solution with the problems posed by a high population on the environment, infrastructure and services that an advanced country needs. That is why there is a need for a strategic plan that gives a clear direction for our country and which places Maltese families and their quality of life at its centre. Thank you.



MR MATTHIAS AZZOPARDI

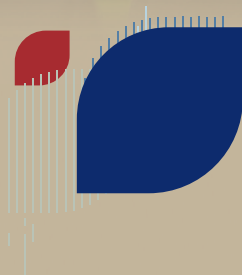
Social Policy Officer, University Student Council (KSU)

Mr President, Honourable Speaker, Members of Parliament, Malta Employers' Association and esteemed colleagues. Thank you for the invitation.

My name is Matthias and I am here on behalf of the University Students Council.

It is difficult to come here today and speak about fertility rates in Malta when yesterday, in this same House and on these same seats, the Maltese Parliament decided to vote against a public inquiry into the death of Jean Paul Sofia. In this same House the Maltese Parliament decided to kill the desire for justice and also tried to erase the memory of Jean Paul, the fruit of Maltese fertility. This sends the message that in this country we do not want to protect Maltese children and families!

There might be those who argue: But what does this have to do with the low fertility rate? And I say to you: Of course it is relevant! To encourage new generations to build a family here in Malta and have children we need to look not only at the person who is taking the decision to have children in Malta but also at the environment around that person; that same environment where their children will grow up and embrace social values. That is why I would like to briefly evaluate with you the environment in which young Maltese people find themselves today. This environment is one where, according to EY Generate Youth Survey statistics, 72 % of Gen-Z and 77 % of Millennials would prefer to move abroad. And for the minority who want to live in Malta and appreciate this environment, how can they raise a

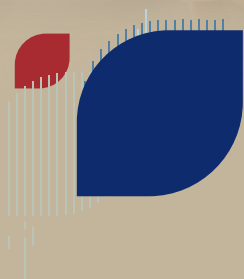


My colleagues and I get anxious when we think about our future, if we are somehow we will not manage to buy our home or have the time and energy to build a family because of the long working hours to meet the costs.

family in this country if they cannot even dream of being able to buy property in our country? We must never forget that in order to increase the birth rate there must be a desire for a couple to bring up a family. How can a couple have this kind of desire if they do not have a family home?

My colleagues and I get anxious when we think about our future, if we are somehow we will not manage to buy our home or have the time and energy to build a family because of the long working hours to meet the costs. We become anxious when we hear about the costs of having and raising a child and about the decisions we have to face when they start growing up, such as, which school will they attend, since this is currently based on lots, or how much money we will have to fork out. Moreover, we are unhappy with the values that this environment can create in our children.

Yes, the statistics are important and point to the problems that we face in the challenge of the low birth rate but I encourage you to look away from the numbers and focus on the environment and social climate in our country, the Maltese streets, Maltese homes, Maltese youths and the social conscience of the Maltese people. Let us come together to create an environment where Maltese youths not only want but are also able to raise a family and we can really start to address the low birth rate in Malta. Thank you.



Health and the environment also play a significant role. It is important to improve the quality of healthcare services, including prenatal and IVF care, maternal health care and family planning service.



MS CHERISE SULTANA

Vice-President, National Youth Council (NBC)

Mr President, Members of Parliament, I would like to thank the Malta Employers' Association for giving us the opportunity to be part of this discussion.

We, as a Council, worry about this low rate in our country. Although the Government is establishing incentives to help those who want to have children, we believe that more needs to be done because the rates continue to decrease. We as a Council would like to put the following four main points forward for discussion:

- Youth priorities and employment;
- education;
- the cost of living and dwelling;
- health and the environment.

Evolving social and cultural norms have led to changes in individual expressions and life goals. Personal fulfilment, career advancement and individual passions often take priority over starting a family. This cultural change can divert attention from the roles and responsibilities and traditions of the family. Lifestyle and economic position also play their role. The desire to maintain a certain standard of living or to achieve financial stability before starting a family may lead to a decision to have fewer children or delays in becoming a parent. Financial considerations play a significant role as a stable career provides people with a secure income and gives them confidence in their ability to provide for children. A stable career contributes to a better balance between work and the children's upbringing when jobs offer

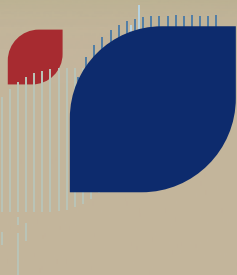
flexible arrangements and support measures, allowing individuals to effectively manage career aspirations as well as family commitments.

Access to parental leave benefits and childcare support continues to encourage individuals to have children by providing more free time and necessary assistance. Countries like Switzerland, as we have already heard, have taken measures to put parental leave at 480 days to increase the birth rate. This generous measure allows parents to prioritise the care and well-being of their children during the early stages of their lives, and fosters a solid foundation for family ties and support. In Bulgaria they have 58 weeks of maternity leave. We believe that in Malta maternity leave should be extended and it should not remain that the mother has only the first 14 weeks of paid leave and four weeks with half pay, while paternity leave should also be extended to more than the current ten days. Incorporating comprehensive sexual education into the syllabi of education can have a positive impact on low birth rates. By educating students with knowledge about contraceptives, family planning and STIs will help them to prevent unintended pregnancies and make informed decisions about their reproductive health. By addressing myths and misconceptions, sexual education removes misinformation leading to unhealthy behaviour; it also promotes strong relationships, communication and consensus that contribute to better family planning choices. Creating a secure and inclusive space for open dialogue reduces stigma and encourages students to seek guidance and support.

Another important point to mention is the inflation crisis. This is posing many problems. Families who previously covered the costs are now suffering because the minimum wage is insufficient for these costs. The minimum wage should be revised. Frequent incentives may be given to enable the family to benefit from a subsidy on activities. Social benefits should be exempt from tax. Another problem facing many young people is that although the Government has launched incentives such as the first time buyers scheme among others, there is still a segment of young people who can never have their place or home from where they can start their family. Government should build units for which young people could apply after undertaking a means test.

Health and the environment also play a significant role. It is important to improve the quality of healthcare services, including prenatal and IVF care, maternal health care and family planning service. The country should have centres where people can receive assistance and information about raising children and psychological support as not everyone has access to assistance. They are like parent hubs.

Environmental factors of chemical and toxic pollution can lead individuals to delay or avoid having children, to protect their health and that of their offspring. Efforts to promote environmental sustainability and create a cleaner and safer environment can positively influence birth rates. Improving access to quality healthcare, family planning services, environmental sustainability and reproductive health education and awareness campaigns contribute to more informed decision-making and a safer environment for potential parents and their children. This is not a partisan issue, it is not just a political issue, but it is a national problem, and if we want the Maltese nation to survive we have to work together to solve these problems. Thank you.



I think something we need to consider seriously is how we will really listen to young people and how we will really collaborate with them.



MS MIRIAM TEUMA
CEO, Youth Agency

Mr President, Hon. Members, colleagues. Today I have not come here with anything written. I knew that I would be talking towards the end, so I knew that what I had in my mind would have already been mentioned. So I decided to come here and share a story that will help us to reflect.

Once there was a frog and a scorpion. The scorpion wished to cross a river. As you know the scorpion will sink if it crosses the river, so it went to ask the frog to help it get across by riding on his back. The frog told him: Definitely not! If I trust you and let you ride on my back, you will sting me and kill me. The scorpion replied: Why would you think I would do this? Do you think I am going to sting you in the middle of the river, causing me to sink with you? The frog believed the scorpion, trusted it, let it climb on its back and started to cross the river, but in the middle of the river the scorpion stung the frog. The frog told him: Do you know what you're doing? You have killed me! The scorpion told him: That's nature, I couldn't help it and I had to sting you.

I have chosen this story today because actually having children is a natural thing. But today it has become a natural thing that we don't have children. To choose what is natural and what is not natural we collectively, not just the Members of Parliament, need to see what we will do and what we want from our society. The scorpion represents man and how he goes against his own interests. In truth sometimes we do this. For me the frog represents young people; the two young people who have just spoken to you before me. I am happy that they spoke before

me rather than me speaking before them. These are young people who trust, just like the frog trusted the scorpion. The two youths who spoke here today sincerely said what they think would be the best for them and our society. I think something we need to consider seriously is how we will really listen to young people and how we will really collaborate with them. We must not only push young people forward and give them responsibility. Sometimes we think that talking to young people and pushing them to the forefront means that we are doing so to vote for them, to elect them to Parliament and to allow them to decide despite their inexperience. But in reality we will truly accommodate them with the measures we take, of which we have many, we cannot say that we do not have. We have mentioned many of these but they should be directed to young people much more than society as a whole. Sometimes we forget that we should have a few more special measures and that we should accommodate young people a bit more. It is the young people that we have today who will make the society of today and tomorrow. So let us listen to them, let us assist them and let us see how we can guide them forward. Thank you.



MR JUSTIN FACCIOL

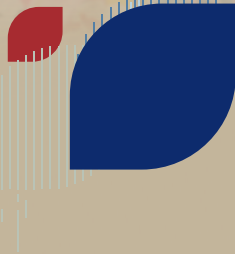
**Director for Research and Evaluation, Ministry of Social Policy
and Children's Rights**

Thank you, Mr President, Members of Parliament, Ladies and gentlemen. Today I will be intervening on behalf of Mr Mark Musù, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Social Policy and Children's Rights, who due to other commitments, which could not be rescheduled, could not be present with us today.

I'm one of the last speakers and of course it is difficult to mention points that have not already been raised. I think we must start by recognising the positive things that have already been implemented and continuing to work on them.

This discussion is undoubtedly highlighting the fact that today our society is facing different challenges and is experiencing new needs. The decline in the fertility rate is the result of several new changes that are often leading our society to different lifestyle choices. This is no different from what is happening around the world, not least in Europe, where the fertility rate fell to 1.5 in 2021. Yes, the impact on social policy is noteworthy. We heard the numbers this morning, we also saw the statistics and the challenges are evident. But in recent years the Government has reacted by establishing policies, measures and initiatives to continue supporting families to overcome various challenges and to further incentivise women to have more children.

The childcare centres, mentioned above, were only the beginning of a number of measures to provide family assistance, especially for parents. This service has



This discussion is undoubtedly highlighting the fact that today our society is facing different challenges and is experiencing new needs. The decline in the fertility rate is the result of several new changes that are often leading our society to different lifestyle choices.

continued to be strengthened over the years, and as we discussed this morning, it will be further improved in the future. The In-Work Benefit, introduced in 2015, has had a positive impact on thousands of families. These families received financial assistance without the need to submit an application because they were selected according to their income as registered with the office of the Tax Commissioner. This benefit continued to increase in 2022 and 2023 and today more than 23,000 families benefit.

In order to further incentivise couples to have more children or grow their family, the Government introduced the birth and adoption bonus. This bonus was added in 2022 and there are plans to increase this further in the coming years. There is also Children's Allowance, which has also been increased over recent years and will continue to increase in the coming years in order to better assist parents in their duties. These financial assistance measures, combined with a number of tax credits supporting parents during the rearing period are just some of the key measures designed to support our families.

It should be noted that Government intervention was not just a financial one. As already mentioned by my colleagues, who intervened before me, the balance between work and family life is a fundamental aspect in this discussion as it impacts on personal, family, and individual choices. Therefore in 2022 the Government updated the law on family leave, in order to strengthen or introduce new rights. In particular amendments were introduced with regard to paternity leave, parental leave and carer leave. This was done in order to continue supporting a better work-life balance and to further encourage a more equal sharing of parental leave. Paternity leave has thus been increased to 10 days which is fully paid; carer leave to support a relative of the family was set at five days paid and two months of paid parental leave was introduced. I believe this was the first step in the right direction.

The Government has recently strengthened and introduced new modern working practices in the Public Service to continue to ensure sustainability, flexibility and efficiency. Working practices of reduced hours, flexible times, a flexi week and remote working have all been structured and strengthened. Today the Malta Public Service is leading the way and is setting an example with various initiatives to help employees achieve a good work-life balance. I believe that the private sector has a very important role to play in helping its workers find a necessary balance between work and family.

Mr President, these are all measures and initiatives that over time have helped and will continue to help our families and which should continue to serve as an

incentive for women to have children. A lot of work has been done but we believe that much more needs to be done. Reducing Malta's fertility rate is undoubtedly a challenge that should remain a priority and be addressed holistically with all stakeholders. While ultimately the decision of the person whether to have children is a personal one of the wife or couple, I am sure that the role of the Government and the employer should create a good environment and conditions that offer more incentives to nurture one's family. We must keep working with everyone to ensure that policy-making addresses and upholds the country's priorities. Yes, the fertility rate is undoubtedly one of the most important priorities of the country. Thank you.



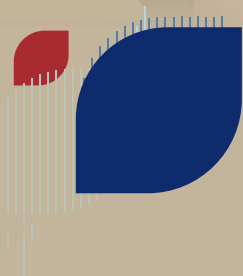
MR DANIEL BORG

CEO, Gozo Business Chamber

I thank the Malta Employers' Association for this invitation. The theme ahead of us regarding Malta's population vis-à-vis work is a very interesting one, especially within a national debate. As a Chamber of Business established in Gozo, I will be giving a little perspective from Gozo during our discussion today.

From the last census (2021), it results that Gozo's population is currently 39,278 people, an increase of over 25 % compared to 2011 when the population reached just over 31,375. This is taking into account that between 2005 (31,007) and 2011 – census data – population movements were almost nil. This follows a similar trend throughout the country encouraged by economic growth which has seen a sharp increase in migrants working in our country. Also according to the last census, the population of foreigners residing in Gozo amounted to 7,662, i.e. almost 20 % of the population. The average age of the population in Gozo is almost 44 years old (43.8). It appears from the latest revised figures that these population movements are mainly caused by an increase in migration.

Here I would like to share with you a few reflections on the challenges that this poses, challenges such as development in Gozo. In Gozo we have seen an overdevelopment in recent years. This wasn't the only reason, but the demand stemming from migration was one of those aspects that increased demand for property, especially in the rental market. I must confess that as an island we were not prepared for this and the lack of regional planning meant large and excessive buildings in communities that are not equipped for this.



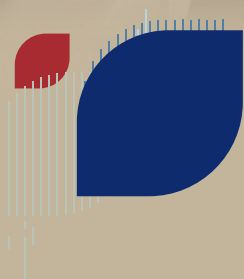
I must confess that as an island we were not prepared for this and the lack of regional planning meant large and excessive buildings in communities that are not equipped for this.

Research also shows that the increase in migrants has also meant new dynamics in our communities for which we were not prepared. Many good studies have recently been carried out; it is important to understand these new realities, but we must not only reflect, we must also act. The services that are present in Malta with regard to migrants also need to be introduced in Gozo and there should be greater awareness among all.

Migration does not always mean that people being rooted on the ground; they can leave if they find better opportunities. And one cannot blame them! Therefore our thinking regarding the growth in population that we are experiencing, which is not caused by a higher birth rate in our country, should lead us to ask: Why is this happening? Have we unconsciously created a model which is overwhelming us? Can we face a crisis if our economy does not remain good enough to attract foreign workers? We have seen this for example in the health sector. There are many questions. In this context it is important not to put everyone on the same footing, as we do in many other respects. Gozo has different realities. The lack of certain good economic niches in Gozo is leading many small professionals to decide to establish themselves in Malta. If the economy in Gozo does not diversify, we risk becoming an island of pensioners and old people. This is to the detriment of other important sectors in Gozo that support our society, such as volunteering.

This presents new challenges on the services being provided to the elderly in Gozo. It emerges from the last census that the old age dependency ratio in Gozo is 33.5 %. This is very high when we note that the national average is 27.6 %. That is why I appeal for projects such as the Home for the Elderly in Għajnsielem to be implemented as soon as possible.

I believe that when one considers the whole context, the challenges facing Gozo are greater. You may ask: Why? This is due to over-reliance on sectors, such as tourism and construction, which are entirely dependent on foreigners. These are also sectors that often have a negative impact on the island's sustainability if they are not driven by targeted and regulated planning that takes proper account of Gozo's reality. Thanks.



We are living in a country where it has become difficult to have a home because of prohibitive prices that discourage you. No undue aid is sufficient if prices aren't regulated.



MS SANDRA GAUCI
Chairperson, ADPD

I would like to thank everyone for this invitation. I would like to continue on Mr Matthias Azzopardi's very good speech about the environment we are living in. For a society to grow and grow, it is necessary to feel that sense of care and security, to feel protected and to know that if something happens to you there an efficient justice structure to make it right.

When a human being has been deprived of that sense of security, man lives in fear and therefore does not feel that there is room to grow, have a family and nurture. This is what is currently happening in Malta; many are not feeling that safety that a country should offer to grow and make a family. Rather, it is a somewhat hostile country towards children and young people because apart from good free childcare, there is a huge void when it comes to activities that can be carried out by our young people without paying. From childcare to Paceville the pace is fast, and we are forcing our children to grow too quickly. Open environments are increasingly being taken up rapidly so while others do business our children are shortchanged.

We are living in a country where it has become difficult to have a home because of prohibitive prices that discourage you. No undue aid is sufficient if prices aren't regulated.

We are living in fear of losing our work to employers' greed because they are willing to turn their backs on the workers, threatening them with workers brought from abroad for the sole purpose of spending less.

We are living in the fear that if you end up dying in an accident, you need to beg to get justice – this is what happened yesterday with the case of Jean Paul Sofia, who will continue to overshadow this administration and a dead weight which will weigh on the government.

How can we, in an environment of this quality, think about increasing the number of children? By giving more money, will there be a shift in the birth rate? People's priorities have changed. People are trying to survive in a place where there is no enforcement, where the laws are only a waste of ink on paper and where the woman, if she becomes pregnant, ends up as Government property as she no longer has control over her own body. This is not a country that encourages you to have and raise children. This country excludes; a hierarchy of rich and poor, victims and bullies, the haves and the have-nots has been created. With this in mind, people do not feel safe enough to have children. Thanks.

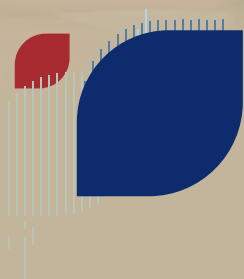


DR IAN MIFSUD

Director, Secretariat for Catholic Education

Thank you, Mr President, ladies and gentlemen.

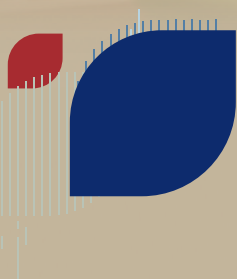
I start by reflecting on three words that have remained stuck in my head throughout this morning. First, the values highlighted by Fr Charles Tabone. Second, the quality of life that I believe Dr Briguglio first mentioned from a particular perspective, and was later reiterated by Mr Matthias Azzopardi and Ms Cherise Sultana. I sincerely congratulate you for the integrity you have shown in your speech; you fill me with hope! Believe me, you give me hope. I also link to what has been mentioned by several speakers, including Ms LAIVIERA and Dr Borg, about what Nordic countries, such as Sweden, are doing. I absolutely do not want to idealise these countries; they have their own difficulties and I disagree with several choices made by Sweden. But then I agree with the choice they are making in the early years of the children, giving parents the opportunity to spend 480 days with their children, an amount of which cannot be given to the other partner. For example 90 days of them cannot pass from the father to the mother, but must be taken by the father, then they can decide whether and how they want to share the rest between them. In the case of a single mother or single father, they will have the full 480 days. This is a way of really incentivising. In fact 30 % of men in Sweden are making use of this measure. I think this is somewhat different to what happens in our country. Our country has made a different choice. This is our collective responsibility; I am not pointing fingers. These are responsibilities that all of us must carry. We have chosen to give greater priority to our presence in the workplace – even I am guilty of this – to fill our pockets. So which values do we attach more importance to? Who will pay the price for this?



In those first two years you form your personality. The price paid when that does not happen, will be paid by all of us collectively.

What will the quality of life be? Who is teaching me to be a parent? I was taught by my mother and my father, and I learn if I am on the job. If I'm not on the job being a parent, how will I manage to learn to be a parent?

Therefore, what I would like from all of us, and from parliamentarians in particular, is to link to the word sustainability. Even economic sustainability even economic, which we need – I am not demonising economy at all – demands wisdom, demands that that we take immediate care of the resources we have; it is not about getting rich as fast as I possibly can to retire as young as possible, without caring about what I leave for my children and their children after me. Sustainability requires me to ensure that when I entrust my child to a childcare service, which is doing its best – most of them are doing a great job – I have still lost my attachment with them. When we are still babies there is a very important bond to be made with a significant adult. In those first two years you form your personality. The price paid when that does not happen, will be paid by all of us collectively. We taste it first in schools, but society as a whole will be carrying it. I therefore want to conclude by appealing to everyone to consider which values we are attaching importance to; let us evaluate the quality of life we want for ourselves and for those who will come after us; let us see how we can find sustainable ways to continue them.



*When we make our policy, different policies,
what measures are we taking to understand
the effect of that policy?*



HON. CLAUDETTE BUTTIGIEG

Mr President, I very much appreciate this initiative. Earlier we heard – it seems to me that it was Dr Marie Briguglio who said this – how much MEA shows that it is visionary to promote such subjects. I think this is something important.

As others before me have already mentioned, I wrote my speech, and then I tore it up. It is useless to prepare beforehand because when it comes to speaking ultimately you find that others have already mentioned what you wanted to say. So I drew up some points on what we are discussing here. First of all, I want to mention that I am the spokesperson for the Opposition when it comes to social dialogue, and I think this is a clear example of how social dialogue should take place. We are in the House of Representatives, representatives of social partners and civil society are present, and other stakeholders, and we are discussing a very important topic. I know that the practice in Parliament is what it is, but I think that if we had the opportunity to discuss together and intervene during the discussion, and not as we have been doing so far, educated and without interrupting even where we did not agree with each other, the dialogue would have been brighter. A more dynamic dialogue would be delightful. The young people present may have felt this much more than us.

President Emeritus Marie Louise Coleiro Preca earlier also spoke about the need to have a vision of where we want to go. After this, other speakers mentioned this and I think this is a very important point. I will mention something I am feeling in this House. I know that the social partners have already discussed this point and would like to think a bit about it also against the background of this topic. When

we make our policy, different policies, what measures are we taking to understand the effect of that policy? I am now referring to everything. So we know that if you have a business of a certain size you need to start by doing ESG, i.e. you must start estimating the effect of your work, the impact of your business on the environment, on the social aspect and on governance; where you will be getting the money from and how you will spend it. I think it's about time to start looking at the policy that is being drawn up even from this angle. I know that there are social partners who agree on this. I urge them to continue to submit this point for discussion. Perhaps it is not ESG, but we should have limits, we should create a clear matrix so that when we legislate, we can measure the effect this will have on our society. And there should not only be economic measurement. This point was mentioned several times.

We have mentioned FGM and forced marriage. This House has already legislated on this, I believe it was in 2014. Sometimes I think that not everyone knows what happens in this House, so there is a need for the laws we pass into this House to be much more effective, also by educating the people who are not in this House.

There were many who touched on the subject of work-life balance. This made us sit up in our chairs! We proposed the work-life balance measures before the last general election. So hearing all this today, I say: What a pity! You should have taken the ideas we proposed then and made them yours! So what? Aren't we all working for the good of our society? Nothing happened. But it is very frustrating to have proposals that have been completely ignored and today we are here saying: Perhaps if we had done so it would have been better.

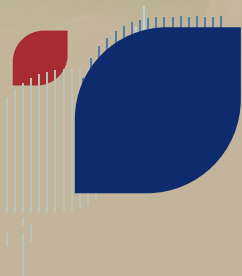
Political will was also widely mentioned. The thing which has annoyed me most today was the fact that we have almost bragging that we have initiatives which for example help those who are returning to employment. It's good, but we must be careful. We should not celebrate the working poor. This is a reality that we have in our country. We have all come across it. Now whether it is the fact that young people cannot afford to raise a family... Today we have a very clear message from young people. Young people are telling us: We don't afford to buy our house; how do you want us to think about starting a family? The message is crystal clear. This is something we want to address. We cannot ignore it anymore.

It has also become very clear today that the role of research is extremely important; research and innovation.

A subject that I think was only mentioned by Ms Cherise Sultana – I do not believe anyone else spoke about it– is that of sex education. I would like to draw the attention of this House that I had the privilege of working with a team on the last sexual health policy, and this was in 2010. Today we are in 2023. There are many experts here so I will not be talking about this topic. But we should point out that today we have diseases that if neglected are sexually transmitted, and among the consequences is loss of fertility. But it's as if we don't have these diseases! I have just asked a parliamentary question for which I hope to have an answer from the Minister after the summer recess, and I hope that he will tell me exactly how many of our population have these sexually transmitted diseases which are obviously having devastating effects.

Mr President, the last point I wish to mention deals with a topic raised by the Hon. Castillo. Today we do not ask whether AI is going to become important, but we know that AI is already here, then we should be questioning if we need to increase the population at the rate with which we are increasing, once work will start being automated through AI.

These are a few thoughts that I wanted to put forward, but I assure you that both the Hon. Castillo and myself have taken note of everything that was discussed here and we will be formulating a report about this to our colleagues who could not be with us today. Thanks.



A lot of research shows that a person prefers to focus on the quality of his family life, the time he spends with his family, and the quality of his career. These are all factors that cause the birth rate to decrease.



HON. ALEX MUSCAT

Mr. President, undoubtedly this is a very interesting discussion. Today I will wear the economist hat rather than that of a politician, because I think that the majority of interventions were rather researched and professional.

I was greatly impressed by Dr Briguglio's point, and I feel the discussion should have started with the question: Is this necessarily a problem? Is the Maltese European trend necessarily a problem? Many years ago, when I was studying economy, those who used to teach me, including Dr Briguglio's dad, used to tell us that this is a fairly old discussion in many emerging countries. Research shows that it is a global trend – it may be worrying, or it may not, then everyone can make up their own mind – the more affluent a country becomes, the more the common good grows, and the better a country's education, the lower the birth rate. This is a trend that exists all over the world. In fact it is interesting that this discussion we are having today was a very fervent discussion in Japan when I was attending University, about 13 years ago. Today Japan has a fertility rate equal to or close to ours. On the other hand, the picture is very different in countries that are much poorer than us. In Africa, for example, Ethiopia has a Fertility rate that exceeds six children. The trend is that the poorer the country is, the higher the fertility rate; and conversely, the more a country progresses economically, socially and even from an educational point of view, the lower the fertility rate. There were several economically advancing countries that shared the same situation we are in that asked: But what's happening? What are we doing wrong? What is this trend?

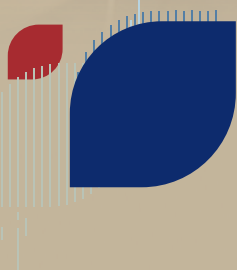
Fr Charles Tabone also mentioned the statistics that Dr Vincent Marmarà had released and published, showing that when the Maltese were asked about this subject, the majority of them said that they had fewer children by choice and not as a consequence, not because they are worried and cannot afford to have more children. It is by choice that they have fewer children. I think that this is a topic that should be examined by such a discussion. A lot of research shows that a person prefers to focus on the quality of his family life, the time he spends with his family, and the quality of his career. These are all factors that cause the birth rate to decrease.

What is the role of the Government and the State in all this? I understand that the State remains obliged to implement all possible measures to facilitate and help the family. As politicians we say that the family must be the centre of our politics; the speakers before me all mentioned a number of measures that have been established recently in this regard and I can make a full list. But I still believe there is room for improvement. I still believe that more work needs to be done. I think one of the interesting suggestions made was related to housing. We know that housing has become a major concern. We recognise that we have worked hard and invested in housing, however, as a representative of the Government, I must say that undoubtedly there is room for more investment. Young people should not look at housing as a limiting factor when they are considering to start their family. I'm also a father and personally the choice of having one child was a choice. Things may change over time; I am still relatively young and might decide to have more children, but today I say that it is a personal choice. Ultimately I think we are talking about a very intimate and a very personal decision. Even though once in this House there was a friend who said that the State should enter the bedroom, I do not believe that this should be the case, and I think that it should remain a personal and intimate decision of the couple. Here I'm talking about couples regardless of their format. As a Government, we have legislated and worked hard to allow LGBTIQ+ couples to have their family. This is something that has been mentioned here too today. I think this is also a way for the State to help increase, if anything, the rate of children we have in our country.

I believe that the role of the Government is to continue investing as much as it can to facilitate those we are calling family friendly measures here. We have done a lot, but I don't think enough has been done. However, these will not necessarily lead, as has already been stated, to some different results... In countries which are much more affluent than us, despite having invested heavily in the social aspect, in particular Nordic countries, they have not always managed to overcome the trend to attain the utopic birth rate of 2.1.

This is not a question of becoming resigned to the situation, it is a question of recognising that we are not special; this trend is experienced by countries which are undergoing certain social and economic affluence. We understand it. Of course, as a society we have to see what the measures work for us. There are very interesting studies showing that a measure that may work in one country does not work in another. I think this is the discussion we should be having. This is a challenge to some extent. I repeat that it becomes a real economic problem when the population begins to shrink sharply. China once had a policy that each family must have only one child. Over time that policy has been abolished. When I was there earlier this year, the Government was discussing the introduction of measures to help families have children. This shows how much a country's trend changes when it is evolving even socially.

I would of course like to thank everyone for this discussion. Thank you to the Speaker who, as mentioned before, is giving the opportunity to hold this kind of discussion here. In my opinion, we had a very mature discussion. Without doubt, as a Government we are going to be taking note of what has been said, and where possible, we will continue to improve.



So we bring children into the world, the wife can go out to work and continue her career, why not, but she cannot neglect the home and the children! Sometimes even if these words are not said, the woman feels that society is waiting and expecting her to keep up with this too.



HON. BERNARD GRECH
Head of Opposition

Thank you, Mr President. I will not read the speech I have prepared, not only because several of you have already spoken in a technical manner, but because everything I might say at this moment is superfluous. I want to thank MEA for planting a precious seed today and brought us all together, after the shameful crime that happened yesterday in this Parliament, in this same House. If, as a people, we are not going to understand what is happening, then everything I am about to say, all that you have said, all our work together, whatever it may be, will be in vain.

When I joined the discussion, Matthias' was in the middle of his speech, and he actually said everything I wanted to say, with the same tone that I wanted to use. Matthias, you give me hope. You gave me hope that our young people, our students are understanding what this country needs. Thank you.

However, let me share with you a personal experience. Several of you remember the Gulf war in the early 1990s. Here I see familiar faces; some of you of my age or maybe a little older, and sometimes we have worked and discussed issues together. I would like to get to know those of you I haven't had the pleasure of meeting yet. I will mention you again, Matthias, you are one of them, because I do not yet know you personally. In the early 1990s the Gulf war broke out. At that time my wife and I had just started going out together a few months earlier. And as is the case when a couple is starting a relationship, among other things we used to talk about our future; if we wanted children, what we would do, etc. When the Gulf war broke out, I remember exactly where we were; this event was so traumatic for us! We were

the garden of the marina in Msida. I remember that my wife and I asked ourselves: What will we do if this war continues to develop?

Why do I share this with you? Because the issue goes beyond money. Now here I have to say that money seems to have become the foundation of everything in this country, and also the foundation of everything for this Government. But with money no one decides to have a child. The money can help you if you have a child and obviously if the child comes, because the child is not like a light switch, once you press if they automatically arrive. With the measures of work-life balance, which I want to say are the least possible that this Government could do at the last possible minute because it was forced to make them... This is the political direction. This is the political will. Not in words, but to have the conviction as to what direction we want to give to the country. The direction is not mathematical, is not one based on balance sheets, is not one resulting from the calculator; but a direction in which this country and this people continue to mature.

After that discussion I had with my wife when we were still getting to know each other in the early 1990s, after the war ended, we got married and we had two children. We had two children because we chose to have two children. My wife comes from a family of three children, I come from a family of four, but we chose to have two. And this for various reasons, yes even economic ones, and even because the modest apartment we had did not allow us to have a bigger family. But it is important to understand what is happening in our country, and this is why I have mentioned this personal example. Beyond what is happening internationally, we need to see what the climate in this country is today, what the young people say. I am the father of two young people aged 24 and 22. Young people today say that they don't want children, they say that they don't even imagine having children. They cannot even imagine! They say they don't know how they will manage to buy their property. And with empty words, speeches, promises, PR, press conferences, thousands of euros spent, we are not going to change this mentality. We can change the mentality by having a strong will, understanding what we want, and understanding where we want to go.

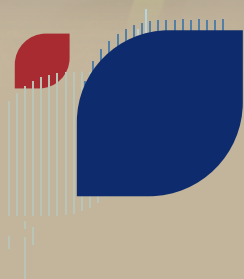
I want to mention something else in this country that hurts me a lot. Constantly we hear that the woman should go to work and must have a career. But in reality many men still have the mentality and still think that, yes, of course, the woman should go to work, but – some without admitting this while others declare it – the important thing is that she does not neglect the house or neglect the children. So we bring children into the world, the wife can go out to work and continue her career, why not, but she cannot neglect the home and the children! Sometimes even if these

words are not said, the woman feels that society is waiting and expecting her to keep up with this too. We can discuss whether we have enough female members in the Parliament! These are the reasons why women do not engage in politics. Because that is another burden they have to carry, after the career, after the children, after the family, after the home, and after the husband as well if they have to take care of him too. This is a mentality; a mindset that we have to change.

I can tell you all the proposals that we, as the Nationalist Party, have had and have, but I don't need to do this. Many of you know them because we spoke, discussed, consulted and issued them after consulting with you. However, I will read this paragraph, which is not a paragraph of technical detail, but a paragraph which provides direction, which reads as follows:

“At the centre of our family policy we will put children by ensuring by every possible means that every child has the opportunity to enjoy their childhood regardless of the material possessions of their families. That is why we have the vision to further strengthen the rights of the child from every point of view so that our country truly provides a healthy childhood and happiness to every child.”

During today's discussion we mentioned that there should be safety, peace of mind. If our youths, if the people who may have children do not have peace of mind, then they will not have that conviction to raise a family, thus helping us to increase the birth rate – not only the fertility rate – in our country. It is therefore necessary to have the will, the direction. But then we should put the money where our mouth is. Not empty words, but facts and serious decisions. The departure point is the mentality, the point of arrival will never be, because as a people we must continue to provide peace of mind not only to every citizen, but to everyone who arrives and lives in this country. For us truly this is the only way that man can be at the centre of our politics. Thanks.



Of course money is not everything, but it is certainly a crucial factor for both everyday life and child-raising. Whoever has children knows what expenses they bring about.



HON. ANDY ELLUL

Parliamentary Secretary for Social Dialogue

Thank you, Mr President. I thank MEA for organising this conference and all the previous speakers.

I will address some of the points I have heard today. I enjoyed listening to Dr Christine Schembri Deguara's speech. I agree with her that there should be continuous educational campaigning and services in this field. I believe that the situation we have today can be addressed not by a magical wand, i.e. by one measure, but rather by a series of measures that we have to undertake.

I also agree with two other speakers, Dr Anna Borg and Mrs Karen Buttigieg, who spoke about the work-life balance. I believe that in this area, even though a lot has been done, there is never enough. However, it is not true that we have complied with the minimum of the Directive. We have opened these measures for foster carers, adoptive parents and same sex couples, as well as providing paid carers' leave. In fact when I announced it – because that was a law that I put in place – as Government we had said that that is only the beginning of what we have to do in favour of work-life balance.

I was also enjoyed Mr Paul Abela's speech, who always contributes to these discussions. He mentioned that in Germany they gave EUR 250 per child; in Malta in the last budget we gave EUR 400 per child! We increased our incentive to people who adopt to EUR 10,000; and the grant given to people who raise disabled children – this point was mentioned by Mr Ben Rizzo – was increased from EUR 500 to EUR 4,500.

I also enjoyed hearing Mrs Teuma, from Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ. I want to say that as a Government we believe so much in the involvement of young people, that we have just set up the Youth Advisory Forum. This will take the form of another cabinet made up of young people. I see here Mrs Michaela Vassallo from the National Youth Council, who will ex officio chair this Youth Advisory Forum. This will be a concrete and effective forum. As has already been said, young people have trusted us, as politicians, to make certain decisions, and decisions are not always well received. I repeat, we have been entrusted to take decisions and we will take them. Sometimes after many years that we have made certain decisions, we are told that we were right, such as when we introduced the same sex marriage, adoption by gay people, divorce and amendments to the IVF law. After a long time we are told: You were right. In fact even with regards to what happened yesterday in this House – because it is mentioned here too – I am convinced and confident that time will prove that the Government was right.

Mr. President the demographic changes that we are observing in our country have much to be analysed thoroughly, because we need to understand what the impact will be not only on the Maltese economy, but also on society at large. Ultimately the birth rate is related to sustainability in our country, especially when it comes to resource use, infrastructure, pensions and the labour market.

As we have heard today, the numbers related to the birth rate in Malta are all pointing in one direction. This trend is also observed in other countries such as Italy, Spain and Singapore, and in other Nordic countries, including Sweden and Finland, two countries known for their progressive family-related policy and work-life balance.

Whenever we hear about the birth rate especially in the western countries, the word 'challenge' always stands out to describe the situation in recent years. Many turn their attention to the government, expecting them to increase the birth rate in some way; as if we could force people to have children. We encourage yes, and I will come to it. I will be clear and direct: this is not the role of the government in a democratic and progressive country. Having a child is an individual choice, a decision that each and every one of us has the right to make in full freedom. The role of government in this context is to create the necessary conditions and a healthy environment so that people in Malta will have the number of children they wish, and that they can make this decision serenely, knowing that they are backed by a government that provides the necessary incentives and takes the necessary measures to ensure that our families continue to be given the support they need. This is precisely the framework that this Government is building, and has been

doing so, as part of its integral policy, since 2013. I will give some examples of how we, as a Government, encourage and support our families.

I start by mentioning, of course, free childcare, a measure that has already been mentioned and which helps thousands of parents to better balance family and career life. This resulted in a record increase in the participation of women in work – and other parents – so much so that we have exceeded the European Union average for the first time. We also extended the support we offer to persons seeking IVF treatment, so that those who wish to have children and are experiencing difficulties, have access to this service, to this technology. But beyond direct incentives, the Government is looking to the future with policies that focus on the well-being of all. We are prioritising innovation and research, as we have seen in the latest National Productivity Board report. As also stated here today, investing in innovative technologies will help increase the productivity of our workers and this will create new opportunities with better wages and improved working conditions. As we know, these are important factors for workers and for every parent.

We are investing heavily in the digitalisation of our country and creating new schemes for businesses – thanks to the work of Malta Enterprise – to assist with an investment that will help not only to increase productivity, but also to create more flexible working conditions, which we have introduced in the Directive on the work-life balance when it was transposed. Research shows how important it is to improve productivity at work, as this indirectly supports families.

We are cultivating value-added economic sectors, such as ICT and the film industry, which are creating quality jobs and new opportunities for our people. Of course money is not everything, but it is certainly a crucial factor for both everyday life and child-raising. Whoever has children knows what expenses they bring about. The choice of how many children one should have should be taken at one's liberty. I am, as the Hon. Alex Muscat, aged almost 40, chose to have one child. It was my choice, and I am saying this to continue to link with what I said before.

The Government decided to protect Maltese families from the impact of the war in Ukraine through subsidies on energy and fuel, because we did not want the economic burden of this conflict to be borne by our families. I remind you that without the Government intervention the prices in Malta would have even doubled.

Ms Cherise Sultana mentioned the minimum wage in Malta. We created the Low Wage Commission to see how we can revise the minimum wage in our country to protect the most vulnerable individuals in society because we believe that everyone

deserves a better living. While in other countries around us austerity measures are being introduced, last year we started to increase the rate of children's allowance, as we will continue to do every year during this legislature, until the rate reaches EUR 450 more per child.

After improving the process with which a low-income parent becomes eligible for in-work benefit, from this Budget we have also started to deliver on another electoral promise, that of further strengthening this in-work benefit four times in succession. As we provide this reassurance on the incomes of families, this Government is giving as much priority as ever to new open spaces for our families through Project Green, a project which everyone has surely heard about. We know how important the environment is for a better quality of life and we know that our young people avidly discuss this topic, as is also apparent from studies carried out. These initiatives will offer new recreational spaces, which are important for children's development, as well as for the mental health of each and every one of us.

I conclude by saying that we are not perfect. We must not give the impression that everything has been achieved. In reality there is still a lot to be done in this regard and our work will certainly continue. I hope this conference will give impetus to further discussions on the subject. For my part, I welcome the opportunity that, even through the entities that fall under my political responsibility, including the MCESD, we will continue to drive discussions like today's, which are so needed in our country. As the Hon. Buttigieg said, this is another form of social dialogue in which we believe in so much and continue to promote.



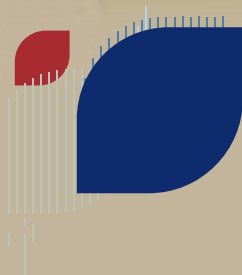
MR JOSEPH FARRUGIA

Director-General, MEA

Mr President, first of all I would like to start by thanking all those who have participated. I think from today's discussion we can conclude that the chosen theme cannot be addressed by any organisation, not even by the Government alone. This is a situation that requires everyone's commitment and I am sure that following today's discussion, what has been said will be the basis for other actions that can be taken in the future.

We started by asking whether there is a problem or not. There were different perspectives. For example, the representative of the Curia mentioned Pope Francis, saying that this was like a new form of poverty. There were those who said that it is not a problem because after all it is a choice. I think that to see whether it is a problem or not, we have to see whether it is a situation that we wish or a situation which is being imposed on us and so we cannot do otherwise. What I have heard, especially from the representatives of young people, is that there seems to be little choice. I think they are seeing some things as obstacles, which are keeping the birth rate low. Here I would like to thank in particular the representatives of youth organisations, because after all we are here for them. If we are talking about future generations and births, our obligation is above all towards young people, and we must listen to them.

I would like to focus on some of the points which have been mentioned. Dr. Briguglio referred to the allocation of expenditure. With a lower fertility rate, you have more money to spend on other things. FR Tabone mentioned the crisis of

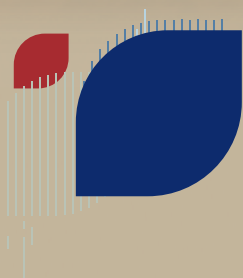


In such discussions, where different perspectives start to emerge, we should come up with ideas for a more efficient use of our resources, human resources, financial ones as well as time, in a way that truly improves the well-being of our society.

values, also highlighting housing and the aspect of solidarity. President Emeritus stressed social realities and the need for strategic direction.

I was impressed by Dr Anna Borg's comment who said that "we have been stingy with new parents". I am mentioning these comments because I will try to link them together. Ms Laiviera referred to the Nordic countries. Friends, sometimes we must be creative. We must be careful not to let opportunities escape us. What does this mean? I will give a concrete example. A decision was recently taken whereby the holidays that coincide with the weekend are added to the leave allocation, and this is happening. There is an average of three days per year. In Malta we have 250,000 in employment. This gives a pool of 750,000 productive days per year. If instead of spreading these 750,000 days over everyone – there could be some, like me, who had these three days added but they absolutely do not need them – we focused them on these 4,000 births, then maternity leave would have become a year long. Instead of mentioning Sweden and Finland, we could have discussed the possibility that rather than having this lack of cohesion – in my opinion – of free time in Malta ... I am not saying that people do not need free time, but I think we should concentrate on those who need it. This is also the case for certain benefits; instead of issuing cheques to everyone, that money can be allocated and directed towards the needs of these people, small families.

In conclusion, this is the emphasis I would like to make. In such discussions, where different perspectives start to emerge, we should come up with ideas for a more efficient use of our resources, human resources, financial ones as well as time, in a way that truly improves the well-being of our society. Thank you.



Let us collect all the information and draft a report to see what the way forward is. I propose that this then be discussed in one of Parliament's committees, such as the Standing Committee on Social Affairs.



HON. DAVID AGIUS M.P.
DEPUTY SPEAKER

Thanks. We were at the end of the discussion. I would like to thank you and also thank the Parliament officials whose work has enabled this conference, including Mr Pierre Mallia. It is worth recognising the work done by him and the team as a whole, together with Mr Anton Vella. I thank the Malta Employers' Association. I personally also learned during these hours that I have spent listening to you. I hope this will be just the beginning. I appeal that good use be made from all that has been discussed. Let us collect all the information and draft a report to see what the way forward is. I propose that this then be discussed in one of Parliament's committees, such as the Standing Committee on Social Affairs. This will allow us to continue conducting the dialogue mentioned by the Hon. Buttigieg, and we can continue to share thoughts with each other.

The meeting will come to an end with the display of a video about the low birth rate in Malta. Thank you, everyone.



Hon. Angelo Farrugia, MP, Speaker of the Parliament of Malta, together with Ms Joanne Bondin, President MEA, Mr Joseph Farrugia, Director General MEA, and Mr Anton Vella, MEA Official





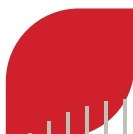
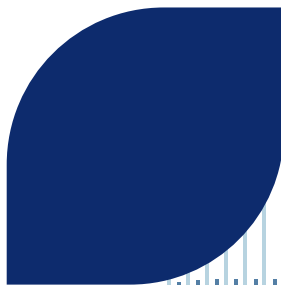
Commemorative Photo

Conference on the Low Birth Rate in Malta

AN EXISTENTIAL CHALLENGE

MALTA PARLIAMENT | 13 JULY 2023





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