

THE MALTA FOUNDATION FOR THE WELLBEING OF SOCIETY

20
23

ANNUAL
REPORT



The Malta Foundation
for the Wellbeing of Society
*Investing in children,
within families & communities*

**THIS REPORT COVERS THE PERIOD BETWEEN
JANUARY 2023 AND DECEMBER 2023**

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FOREWARD



**Her Excellency Marie-Louise
Coleiro Preca**

President of Malta (2014 - 2019)

*Founder and Chairperson of
The Malta Foundation for the
Wellbeing of Society*

I am honoured to present **the Annual Report of The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society for 2023**, which captures a year of transformative action and dedicated advocacy for the wellbeing of our society.

Our commitment to addressing the stark gaps in access to health, education, technology, and other critical aspects of life in Malta, remains unwavering. Scientific evidence and on-the-ground experiences continue to highlight these disparities, urging us to act with urgency to narrow these gaps for both current and future generations.

During 2023, we made **significant strides in amplifying the voices of children**. The initiatives highlighted in this report stand as a testament to our progress and commitment in this regard.

I must say that the highlight of 2023, was the launching of the **RIGHTS** project by Prime Minister Robert Abela, a significant undertaking aimed at enhancing and ensuring structured child participation at local and regional level. Laying the groundwork for the RIGHTS project took several years, but I am certain it will set a powerful example of how children's voices can influence national discourse.

The Children's Council of the Foundation has been a continuous inspiration to the development of our work. Their regular engagement and tireless discussions have been invaluable to help in the needed insights to ensure that our focus on Children's Human Rights continue to be spot on.

Throughout the year, the **Child Rights Observatory Malta (CROM)** continued to champion children's rights through research and advocacy.

The Rainbow Family Network continued to support families from the LGBTIQ community and their children. Over the years this support group has continued to strengthen its trust which is resulting in a continuous increase in attendance.

As we look ahead to 2024, we are committed to building on these achievements. Our plans include extensive training programs for professionals and local council members, the development of comprehensive Children's Council Policies, and ongoing outreach activities to engage further with communities.

Together, we will continue to promote wellbeing for all and strive towards a more equitable society.

The Foundation has delved into several complimentary initiatives, as laid out in this report. I will mention a few.

Our advocacy for safe, inclusive, and green open spaces, guided by the insights from the **Proġett KomunitArja** initiative, remained a priority. These spaces are essential for the wellbeing of children, families, and the broader community, and we will continue to advocate for their establishment across Malta.

We are also proud of another milestone we have achieved in producing a very first sample of a **Wellbeing Index for Malta**, led by Principal Investigator Prof Marie Briguglio. The first phase of this essential research project started in 2020. Our aim is now to take this project on a more sustainable and regular insight into the wellbeing of Maltese society and in particular children with the aim to influence national policy.

The Blended Families Research Study led by Prof Angela Abela is another achievement for the Foundation. Not only is it a first for Malta, but it has also garnered interest on an international level. The Foundation has embarked on the preparation of an international conference on the subject to continue with its advocacy and sharing with reputable professionals, academics, and practitioners in the field.

Taking the opportunity of Malta's election to the UN Security Council, the Foundation partnered with the Ministry of Foreign and EU Affairs and Trade, the Special Representatives of the UN Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict, Ms Virginia Gamba, and Ms Najat Maalla on Violence Against Children, to conduct a **Research Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children**, led by Ms Michelle Cilia and Dr Bernadine Satariano.

This year has also been one of remarkable progress and significant achievements for **MaltaCAN**, by our contribution to this network of organisations, dedicated to championing the rights and wellbeing of children in Malta. 2023 marked the finalisation of MaltaCAN's statute and its registration as a voluntary organization, setting a solid foundation for future growth.

The Foundation continued in its constructive contribution to strengthen the **Mediterranean Children's Movement**, and its Children's Council, to help in creating safe spaces for the children of the Mediterranean to engage, to acknowledge their diverse cultures and celebrate our shared history. The main aim being that children in the Mediterranean will be empowered to build peace for holistic wellbeing for all children in the region.

Our work within the largest European network of organisations that work with and for children, **Eurochild**, continued to offer opportunities for the Foundation and its Children's Councils to embark on projects that give us further insight on Children's Human Rights.

The Interfaith Children’s Council continued its mission of fostering harmony and respect among different faiths. The Interfaith Harmony Week 2023 was a vibrant event that underscored the importance of mutual respect and diversity through dialogues, art, and performances by children.

The Pop-Up (Promoting Online Safety) project, launched in June 2023, focused on ensuring the online safety of children. During 2023, psycho-social professionals received training on online safety through a collaboration with the United Nations International Telecommunications Union. Now, we have 81 fully trained professionals in our schools, the very first group of fully certified professionals in Europe by UN ITU.

As we move forward in 2024, our commitment to promoting the wellbeing of children and addressing inequalities remains steadfast. We will continue to build on our achievements, expand our networks, and foster collaboration not only locally but also across the Mediterranean region and beyond.

I thank **our collaborators** for their continued support. It is through our collective efforts that we can make a lasting impact on the wellbeing of our society. Together, we can continue to create a more equitable and inclusive society for all children.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to the **members of the Council of Governors, and Board of Administrators.**

I must acknowledge the incredible contribution of **Ms Angela Caruana, Ms Lorella Gatt, and the core team** for their unwavering enthusiasm, dedication, and hard work throughout the year. Ms Angela Caruana (Projects Manager) and Ms Lorella Gatt (Office Manager – Finance and HR) have proved to be the backbone and soul of The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society.



Her Excellency Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca

President of Malta (2014 - 2019)

Founder and Chairperson of The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society

1 ABOUT US

1.1 Mission and Vision

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society believes in:

HUMAN RIGHTS AND DIGNITY

We value human rights, especially children’s human rights. These are the starting points of our work and are at the core of what we do. For children to reach their full potential, they must have access to the rights outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

ASPIRATION

We strive to achieve our goals successfully, adopting a forward-looking and goal-oriented attitude that inspires communities.

INNOVATION

We act as information catalysts and base our initiatives on the solid grounds of research, innovation, and expertise. This background lends a sense of authenticity and creativity to our projects.

INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY

We respect diversity at all levels and include all identities within society, as we seek to promote dialogue and cooperation. We appreciate the intersectional and multicultural nature of society and work to reach all communities.

JUSTICE AND EQUITY

We seek to promote fairness in various forms. Hence, we go beyond a ‘one size fits all’ model and focus on individual needs, recognizing and valuing diversity. The Foundation strives to learn more about fairness and inequality, especially how ingrained social and economic disparities, over which children have no control, affect children’s wellbeing. Our emphasis on fairness is reflected in our unbiased, and transparent work ethic.

SUSTAINABILITY AND ECO-FRIENDLINESS

We seek to secure a healthy and well-functioning society for both present and future generations. We follow the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and incorporate an environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) approach. We ensure that our projects are in line with these principles.

EMPOWERMENT

We are driven by our commitment to empower people through our work. We tirelessly strive to create solutions that uplift and transform lives, fostering a society where every individual's potential is realized. Empowerment is also about giving children a voice, from the earliest years. The Foundation’s efforts to improve society are guided by its commitment to empowering children.

1.2 Strategic Orientation

The Foundation works towards achieving positive social change through:

ADVOCACY

The Foundation advocates for active citizenship and social responsibility to one another as human beings, at a community, national and international level. It strives to spread hope and promote children's human rights, especially through child participation, wellbeing, and empowerment.

TRAINING

The Foundation works to build, sustain, and improve communities through education and training, in skills and in values. In this way, the Foundation remains proactive and relevant to current social concerns.

COMMUNITY -BASED PROJECTS

The Foundation values dialogue at grass root levels and the collective wisdom. It coordinates community-based projects which are research-informed and act as a bridge between formal and informal experts, which both offer valuable knowledge.

SAFE SPACES

The Foundation provides safe spaces for human encounters and dialogues in which everyone may find a place. Its platforms facilitate communication, respecting diversity and serving to unite all different groups. It seeks to empower a debating society and promotes a culture of positive peace.

ALLIANCES

The Foundation forges alliances and builds synergies with other like-minded entities within civil society, and with local and international institutions, to promote collective action as an antidote to individualism and territorialism. These alliances allow for putting research findings to use, networking and improving the foundation's flexibility.

MEASUREMENT

The Foundation monitors wellbeing on a national level, according to appropriate mechanisms such as the wellbeing index. These findings can direct the foundation's future work and areas of focus as well as influence governmental policy.

IMPACT

The Foundation is impact-oriented, mapping outcomes and evaluating our work process, efficacy, and impact against a framework of expertise.

1.3 Organisational Structure

The Founder and Chairperson of The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society is Her Excellency Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca who leads the core team, and other support team members as outlined in this report.

Moreover, the Foundation is governed by the Council of Governors which is also chaired by Her Excellency. This Council has a consultative function and its role entails sharing with the Chair the knowledge and experiences of its members, and to draw the attention to any social issues that are of national priority and concern to the wellbeing of society. The Council of Governors is composed of the following seven members:

1. Speaker of the House of Representatives – Dr. Angelo Farrugia
2. Representative of the Government – Dr. Justyne Caruana
3. Representative of the Opposition
4. Representative of the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector – Ms. Gertrude Buttigieg
5. Representative of the Principle Permanent Secretary – Mr. Kevin Mahoney
6. Representative of the University of Malta – Prof. Alfred Vella
7. Representative of the Local Council Association – Mr. Mario Fava

On the other hand, the Board of Administrators, also chaired by Her Excellency Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, has an executive role. This Board meets at least once a month and has the responsibility to ensure that the foundation pursues its objectives and carries out its activities to further its aims and ethos, and thus fulfil its mandate. The secretary of the board is Ms. Lorella Gatt, with seven voting members being:

1. Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino – Deputy Chairperson
2. Dr. Charmaine Bonello
3. Mr. Tony Mejlaq
4. Mr. Michael Bianchi
5. Prof. Angela Abela
6. Prof. Maureen Cole
7. Prof. Marilyn Clark

The Foundation is managed by an Executive Team made up of the Founder and Chairperson Her Excellency Marie-Louise Colerio Preca, the Project Manager Ms. Angela Caruana and the Office Manager Ms. Lorella Gatt. Regular meetings are convened to ensure the continuous development and refinement of the strategy, maintaining alignment with organizational objectives. Responsibility for the operational plan lies with the team, ensuring that its implementation reflects the broader strategic goals. In addition, regular strategy and planning meetings with the wider staff are conducted to keep the operational plan informed and inclusive. The involvement of children also plays a significant role in shaping and guiding the work, ensuring their voices are integral to the process.

Initiatives approved by the Council of Governors and Board of Administration subsequently are passed on to the respective core team members within the Foundation who will jointly collaborate with other stakeholder organizations and partners to manage, plan, and execute these projects. Since the Foundation's inception, these projects strived to explore what wellbeing means to different people and has sought to understand this multi-faceted concept in a holistic manner. Through various initiatives, it aimed to address areas that are known to impinge directly or indirectly on the persons' wellbeing, particularly children's rights and child participation.

This report will present ongoing projects, research initiatives and activities executed in 2023.

1.4 Operations

In 2023, the Foundation underwent a change management process and is now being led by an Executive Team comprising of the Chairperson, the Projects Manager, and the Office Manager. The Board of Administrators continues to meet monthly to oversee the work of the Foundation, while the Council of Governors convenes biannually, as outlined in the Foundation's deed.

HUMAN RESOURCES (HR)

The Foundation strengthened its workforce in 2023 by engaging new employees, recognising that its staff is the greatest asset in delivering long and short term projects and initiatives. Continuous professional development (CPD) training sessions were organised to continue with its investment for the professional development and growth of each employee. Additionally, a revamp of the Foundation's policies began during the year to ensure alignment with evolving processes and procedural needs.

The HR policies of the Foundation, including recruitment processes, are aligned with Public Service guidelines. The Ministry for Finance supports the Foundation with HR-related tasks such as payroll and recruitment approvals, ensuring compliance.

FINANCE AND ACCOUNTS

The Foundation relies primarily on government funding and therefore all procurement processes of the Foundation need to adhere to Public Service regulation and policies. The Ministry for Finance provides support with payments, while an external accountant assists with management accounts, which are presented to the Board of Administrators quarterly.

In 2023, the Foundation resumed its auditing processes. It also successfully secured EU funding through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) for its initial new project, RIGHTS, to establish Children's Regional and Local Councils, hence the developing in practice the fundamental right to Child Participation on a structural national level, as a first for our islands. Additional project-based funding was also obtained, including funds from Eurochild for the National Eurochild Forum.

LOGISTICS

The Foundation is supported by a dedicated maintenance team responsible for the upkeep of office premises. A major achievement in 2023 was the renovation of one of the boardrooms, transforming it into a fully equipped hall to better serve the Foundation's needs.

2 CHILDREN'S RIGHTS INITIATIVES ON A NATIONAL LEVEL

2.1 The Children's Hub and the Children and Young Persons' Council

Since its founding in 2014, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has adopted a grassroots approach to its work. With a focus on achieving positive change in children's active participation, the Foundation engages children of all ages and from diverse backgrounds. The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society empowers them to be the change they wish to see in society, enhances their resilience, and creates a nurturing environment where they can thrive and reach their full potential. This work is founded on Article 12 of the UNCRC, which states that children and young people have the fundamental human right to have their voices heard in all matters affecting them, and that their perspectives are to be taken seriously.



Over the years, the Children's Hub within the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has gathered expertise in this area, becoming a specialized Child Participation hub through its various initiatives focusing on addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by children in Malta. The Children's Hub has offered a range of spaces and support aimed at promoting the overall wellbeing and development of children and is also serving as a resource centre for parents, caregivers, educators, and other stakeholders involved in children's welfare, providing information, training, and advocacy on issues related to child participation, child safeguarding, education, and rights.

Through the setting up of the Children's Council and Young Persons' Council (CYPC), the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society strived to effectively implement active child participation through timely meetings with hundreds of children. The young members of the CYPC are supported to form and learn constructive ways of sharing their own visions, dreams, concerns, and capabilities. In turn, children feel empowered knowing that their views are being considered given that children's views are actively included in the planning, design and execution of many outreach and research activities carried out by the Foundation.

Data gathered from the CYPC has not only helped adults to understand children's issues through a child's perspective but is also used to advocate, promote, and defend children's rights, needs, and interests on many matters that affect them directly or indirectly.

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has therefore, not only provided a safe space for children to have their voices heard, but has been the catalyst for dialogue, enabling child-adult collaboration by the presentation of proposals, recommendations, and potential solutions to relevant policy makers. What started as a tiny voice during one of the Foundation's main projects in 2014 has now become a yardstick of good practice both in Malta and abroad. The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society is often approached by local and international organizations to support effective child participation processes, as demonstrated by several initiatives presented in this report.

2.2 Freshers' Week

Every year, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, in collaboration with the Malta Trust Foundation, participates in the Freshers' Week organized by the University of Malta and student colleges. This platform provides an opportunity for the foundations not only to showcase ongoing initiatives, projects, and research, but also to engage with the young students by offering them volunteer opportunities on meaningful projects that align with their individual interests, skills, and academic pursuits. Consequently, participation during Freshers' Week helps the foundations to continue building a supportive community as well as provide an opportunity for networking and skill development. Moreover, the foundations provide incentives such as a certificate of participation and recognition for volunteering to motivate students to participate.



2.3 SkolaSajf 2023 Initiative - the Hidden Friend Project

Each year, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society participates in SkolaSajf through a non-formal educational programme designed by the members of the Children and Young Persons' Council (CYPC) with the support of the students on placement at the Foundation. SkolaSajf Malta is a summer school program organized by the Maltese Government's Foundation for Educational Services, aimed to provide educational and recreational activities for children during the summer months in a structured and supervised setting.

During the summer months of 2023, the Foundation rolled out the "Hidden Friend Project" in seven schools in Malta and Gozo, aimed to promote the principles of acceptance and inclusivity. This project was inspired by a children's book written by a young student Angelina Bilocca who worked at the Foundation during the summer work initiative of the previous year. Motivated by her own experiences of discrimination in being a half-Russian child living against the backdrop of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Angelina's book deals with the notion that although people may appear to be different from the norm, they are still fundamentally human with more sameness than perceived differences.



The execution of the 'Hidden Friend' activity with the children in schools consisted of an interactive session, using laminated cards and cardboard representation of the book's main characters, formed from painted shoe boxes and other recycled materials that were also created by children. Through a non-formal and participatory process, children attending SkolaSajf had the opportunity to challenge their viewpoints on issues of discrimination and of the adverse effects of shunning someone who looks different from the rest. Nevertheless, the strongest take-home message extracted from this initiative is the change in mindset, by focusing on what all people have universally common rather than how one differs.

2.4 The RIGHTS (Regional Interactive Guiding Hub and Training Society) Project

Despite notable strides made within the Children and Young Persons' Council (CYPC), through its work on the ground and outreach projects, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society noted that children's active participation in decision making and in political and democratic life - as emphasised in European Commission's EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child [1] - is still lacking in Malta. This observation was further reinforced by the research findings of a number of initiatives carried out by the foundation over the previous years aimed to listen to children's voices, such as: the Child Participation Assessment Tool in 2019; the DG Just report in 2020; the Local Government Policy consultation process, the Child Participation Tool Kit and the Children's Manifesto in 2021; and the Child's Rights Champions in 2022 – whereby children proposed time and time again their need for safe and inclusive spaces for their active contribution in decision making processes within their communities.

To address this issue, in 2022 the Foundation invested its energy in the creation of a proposal to secure funding from the European Union for a large-scale project aimed at establishing an effective sustainable mechanism that promotes active citizenship of children in Malta and Gozo on a national level, ensuring that children's voices are heard and considered at all levels of governance. Led by its project manager, Ms. Angie Caruana, and supported by two co-ordinators Ms. Andrea Catania and Ms. Laura Marie Mercieca, this project titled 'Regional Interactive Guiding Hub and Training Society (RIGHTS)' has successfully secured €200,000 in direct EU funds. It was also one of 10 projects shortlisted by the EU from the 154 submitted project proposals.



[1] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en#:~:text=Every%20child%20in%20Europe%20and,and%20intimidation%20of%20any%20kind.

Developed by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, the RIGHTS project will be carried out in collaboration with local authorities such as the Ministry for Education, Sports, Youth, Research, and Innovation (MEYR), and the Ministry for the National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government (MHAL) and the Local Councils Association (LCA). It is a nationwide initiative aimed at developing Malta and Gozo's first child participation infrastructure, one that is based on the respect for children's rights to participate in political and democratic life, through the establishment of local and regional children's councils. RIGHTS also aims to strengthen children's councils within the schools to revamp an already existing mechanism, amplifying the voice of the children within their immediate environment.

This initiative is aspiring to involve the participation of children aged six to 18 years, from all 68 local councils in Malta and Gozo, within the six regions of the Maltese Islands. Through the execution of a comprehensive nationwide children's councils operating at the local, regional, and national level, the children will have the right space to discuss and address matters most pressing to their localities, regions, and in turn, their country.



Furthermore, a large component of the RIGHTS project involves the training of local council members and educators in child participation and safeguarding, to ensure that the adults supporting the children create a safe physical and emotional space, in which effective child participation may take place, and with sound safeguarding policies in place. Although the project plan focuses on state schools, the invitation to hold these workshops in other schools was a good opportunity to further branch out and reach out to more stakeholders. In fact, the RIGHTS' team carried out training in two workshops titled 'Child participation – Theirs by RIGHT' with 32 professionals and educators working within the psychosocial teams in Church Schools.



In 2023, a preliminary consultative meeting with the Local Councils Association – as a main contributor to the project – also took place, whereby 15 representatives from several regions and localities attended this meeting. Moreover, the RIGHTS Advisory Board was established. This board comprises of 13 members that include representatives from each collaborating authority, the chair of the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, the RIGHTS project coordinator, academics with experience in the field, members from the office of the Commissioner for Children, and an advisor from the private sector. The role of this board will be to act as advisors and ambassadors to the project, provide a level of checks and balances regarding its implementation; as well as offer knowledge and expertise on how outcomes may be communicated to effectively reach policymakers, politicians, relevant stakeholders, and the public.

The RIGHTS project was officially launched by Prime Minister Robert Abela on the 6th of December 2023. The launch started with a closed, child-led meeting between the Prime Minister, Her Excellency, and child members of the CYPC. This meeting served as a platform for children to discuss the importance of child participation and what is important to them as children and young activists with Malta’s Prime Minister. This event also served as the launch of the new physical space - the Children’s Hub - which is a child-friendly space within the Foundation’s premises where various activities can be held in an inclusive manner. This activity was followed by a series of speeches on child participation by both local and international experts, and an ex-member of the CYPC. Local stakeholders and project partners were invited to this event, with 46 registered adult attendees and around 20 children in attendance.

By the end of 2023, the following objectives of the RIGHTS project were achieved, being the formulation of a Project Action Plan and the writing up of Child Protection Policies for each partner in the project. It is projected that in 2024 the RIGHTS team will continue to train more professionals, educators and local council members, devise Children’s Council Policies and Procedures, establish a Mentorship Scheme and training of mentors and continue outreach activities in schools and other branches; with the ultimate goal being the setting up of children’s councils in each region and locality.



2.5 Children's Rights Observatory Malta (CROM)

CROM is a collaborative initiative between the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the Faculty of Social Wellbeing within the University of Malta that aims to bring together academic, inter-disciplinary and cross-sectoral contributions, to advance progress in the implementation of children's human rights; identify gaps and priority areas in implementing children's rights; address challenges in legislation, policy, and practice; carry out research to inform policy; monitor progress over time; advocate for change; and offer training on children's rights to relevant stakeholders that work with and for children.

Since its creation in 2020, it has joined together experts, researchers, and academics in monthly meetings to conduct further studies and raise awareness on various aspects related to the needs of children. Her Excellency Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca and Dean of Faculty Prof. Andrew Azzopardi act as co-chairs, with Dr. Bernadine Satariano being its Chief Executive Officer and coordinator of this observatory. Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino, Prof. Maureen Cole, Prof. Annemarie Callus and Dr. Clarissa Sammut Scerri are representatives of CROM from the University of Malta.



Part of CROM's work during 2023 focused on the planning of a follow-up event for the Children Rights Champions activity that was held in the previous year. This event aims to bring together the 30 elected Members of Parliament who had signed the Children's Rights Champions agreement, hence, promising to prioritise the issues presented in the Children's Rights Manifesto, a document presenting the views of children backed up by research evidence from the academics in the CROM team. In parallel, CROM started the execution of the Child Friendly Justice project - a research project focusing on how children are given a voice during their family's court case proceedings. Interviews are being conducted with young adults who were children during their parents' or family's case; supportive parents not related to the participating young adults; and other professionals who are involved in judicial cases such as social workers, psychologists, mediators, lawyers, and retired judges. Such study will shed light onto a highly complex issue and offer recommendations that are relevant for the Maltese context, in hope for advocacy to ensue this project, and to ensure that children are safeguarded and heard effectively in family courts.

2.6 Proġett KomunitArja

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society continued its commitment to uphold the rights of children, as outlined in the UNCRC. Following extensive consultations carried out by the Foundation with children and young persons over the years, it became clear that there was a strong desire for more green, open, and safe spaces within local communities. Inspired by Article 31 of the latter convention which emphasizes the importance of providing environments conducive to play, creativity, and cultural engagement, Proġett KomunitArja kicked off. This project focuses on revitalising communal spaces through active participation, with children taking the lead in designing unused land within their communities. Supported by local councils, NGOs and Ministries, children's designs were translated into professional plans, to ensure that the resulting spaces are inclusive, environmentally friendly, and centred around the holistic needs of children and young people.

Following a thorough consultation process involving over 900 children, the Children's Hub produced a comprehensive report and presented children's designs to professionals. These designs aimed to inform the development of open spaces, demonstrating a commitment to listening to and acting upon the voices of children. Additionally, an accessible version of the report was created by a member of the young persons' council, ensuring that the project's progress is transparent and inclusive. Proġett KomunitArja represents a significant step towards creating vibrant, child-friendly communities where play, learning, and social interaction flourish. Throughout 2023, the Foundation continued with its advocacy efforts concerning the establishment of safe, inclusive, green open spaces in Malta for children, families, and the broader community; informed by the insights gathered through the Proġett KomunitArja initiative.





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Child Participation is fundamental, as it is the gateway to all Children's Human Rights.

H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca



2.7 Malta Children's Associations Network (MaltaCAN)

The MaltaCAN network was established in 2019 to promote, foster, and support children's rights and child participatory mechanisms in Malta. Using an integrative, collaborative, and child-based approach, this network seeks to raise awareness and influence policy through the creation of working groups tasked to react to and promote issues related to children's rights and child participation.

In 2023, MaltaCAN witnessed significant progress and achievements including the finalisation of its statute and the registration of the network as a voluntary organisation, laying the groundwork for further development. It has been reactive in its advocacy role, issuing two press releases, one calling for the urgent need of a holistic education reform following the worrisome O-Level failure rates of Maltese students [2], and another appealing for the promotion of inclusive education, in response to the growing segregation of children on the autism spectrum within the Maltese education system [3].

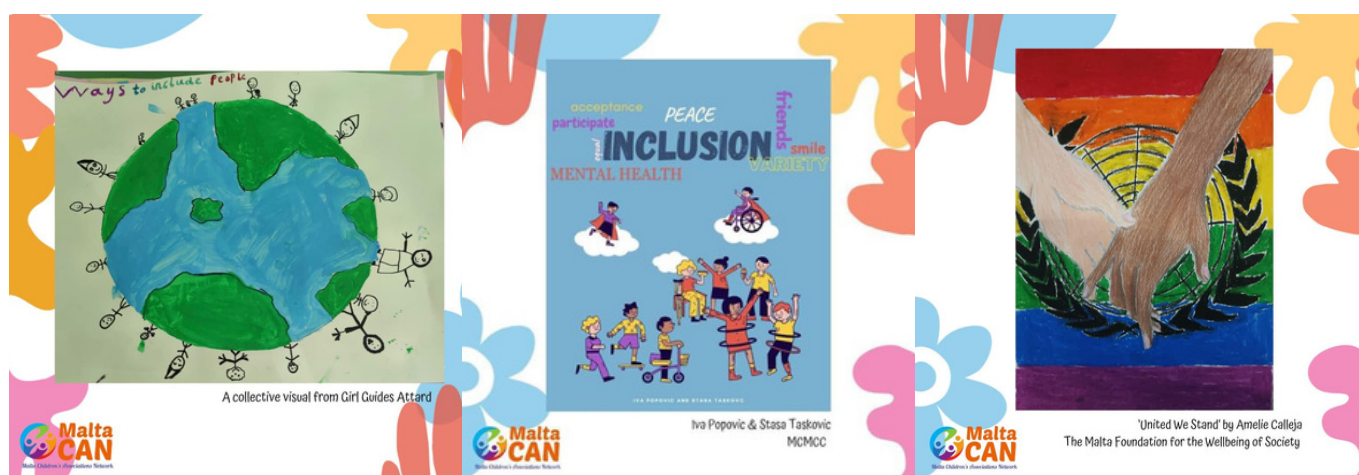


Moreover, throughout this year, MaltaCAN has actively convened on multiple occasions to discuss contemporary concerns, amplifying its impact as a unified voice, and representing a diverse spectrum of children. This way, the network was able to provide collective feedback on key policy frameworks and strategies, such as the National Action Plan for a Child Guarantee; the Children's Policy Framework; and the Education Strategy.

[2] <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2023-08-07/local-news/Education-system-requires-urgent-holistic-reform-network-of-organisations-says-6736253938>

[3] <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2024-02-07/local-news/Organisation-troubled-by-escalating-segregation-in-education-of-children-on-autistic-spectrum-6736258414>

To further enhance outreach and visibility, this year MaltaCAN strengthened its media presence through various channels, including the establishment of an Instagram page, the sharing of best practices on both Facebook and Instagram, the dissemination of press releases online; participation in radio programmes and issuing features in newsletters. In celebration of Children's Day in November 2023, MaltaCAN organised an engaging online exhibition inviting children to express their perspectives on inclusion through various mediums. This initiative not only empowered children to voice their opinions but also fostered a sense of belonging within the network's organisations. A total of 11 pictures were posted online, showcasing the work of children coming from six different organisations within MaltaCAN.



By end of 2023, MaltaCAN – as a voluntary organisation within the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society – had a total of 14 independent organisations registered in the network, which in different ways all work towards the wellbeing of children in society and aim to safeguard their rights in line with internationally established standards. The network is chaired by Ms. Karen Buttigieg, with the support of vice-chair H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, Secretary Ms. Laura Marie Mercieca and treasurer Ms. Ivana Restall.

To further develop a unified collaboration among member organisations, two strategy days were organised throughout this year, focusing on strategic, cohesive, comprehensive, and effective planning of advocacy, research, and awareness-raising activities needed to drive change. The network remains committed to its mission and vision and looks forward to continued success in the upcoming year, focusing on its identified four priority themes, being: neglect, stereotypes, education, and parenting values.

3 CHILDREN'S RIGHTS INITIATIVES ON A MEDITERRANEAN LEVEL

3.1 The Mediterranean Children's Movement (MCM)

The Mediterranean Children's Movement (MCM) [4] is an active network of Mediterranean non-profit organisations and individuals working to improve the quality of life for children across the wider Mediterranean region. This unique network advocates for better policies for the protection of children, particularly those hailing from conflict zones; collects and exchanges knowledge of best practices, pushing for more cohesive and collective regional state policies. It also gives voice to children from different Mediterranean countries by involving them in its campaigns and initiatives.

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society always envisioned the need to reach beyond Malta's shores to advocate for peace and respect among children and the diverse cultures that are within and around our shores. It was this vision that led the Founder and Chairperson of the Foundation, H.E. Marie Louise Coleiro Preca to reach out to Child Rights Defenders in Malta and in the Mediterranean Countries, to collaborate, and to work with and for children to safeguard their human rights, within our region.

These efforts resulted in the setting up of this network in 2021, whereby a group of Child Rights Defenders from Malta, Cyprus, Tunisia, Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia set up an active network for Mediterranean organisations, to address the unique geographical and cultural challenges that children face within this region. Based on the principles of the UNCRC, the MCM aims to put children at the heart of the Mediterranean agenda by advocating for the necessary investment in well-being, ensuring for safer communities in which all children can thrive.



Nonetheless, the cornerstone of this year has been the members' Exchange and General Assembly that was held in Malta in October 2023, whereby the children in the council, board members and member organisations had the opportunity to physically come together to discuss and plan the way forward. The children also designed a reader-friendly version of the MCM Mission Statement during their stay in Malta.

[4] <https://meditchildmove.wordpress.com/>

Regarding advocacy work, the MCM Children's Council, in collaboration with the MCM Board, drafted a strong press release on the conflict in Gaza that was disseminated to Embassies and Consulates across the Mediterranean region. This press release was published in several media sources for the creation of awareness on the devastating effects of war on children [5]. Moreover, on the UN International Day of Living Together in Peace, commemorated on the 16th of May, the MCM President H.E. Coleiro Preca issued a powerful message putting into light the growing inequalities, violence, deprivation and hardships that are currently faced by children in the Mediterranean in context of surging wars, conflicts and migration.

By 2023, the MCM Children's council was fully established and today it comprises of 12 children from four different Mediterranean countries. This council's members participate in regular online meetings. Moreover, to date, this network also has 12 individual members and 13 member organisations. However, the MCM aspires to continue its work to expand as a network and foster further collaboration across the Mediterranean region. This year, outreach efforts were specifically targeted to Tunisia whereby the MCM President and members from the team travelled to this country to meet potential member organisations. The movement also witnessed growth with the addition of new member organizations and individuals from Malta and Italy by the end of the year, further diversifying and strengthening the network. Communication was initiated with North-African organisations, with the aim of setting up collaborative meetings at the start of 2024.



[5] <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2023-10-23/local-news/Mediterranean-Children-s-Movement-calls-for-stop-to-war-in-Middle-East-6736255838>

4 CHILDREN'S RIGHTS INITIATIVES ON A EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

4.1 Eurochild and the Eurochild Children's Council (ECC)

Eurochild is a network of 211 members from 42 countries who work with and for children in Europe, striving to bring about positive changes in the lives of children, particularly those affected by poverty and disadvantage. Eurochild thus works to influence policies, build civil society capacity, facilitate mutual learning, and exchange practice and research through its relentless commitment to child participation and children's rights.

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has been an active member of Eurochild since 2015 and has now fostered a close collaborative working relationship through various conjoint projects and initiatives over these years. One significant partnership is the Eurochild Children's Council (ECC), which comprises of a selected group of children from different European countries who advise on advocacy priorities, governance decisions, and events. The ECC, with a mandate of two years, ensures direct representation of children's interests and voices within Eurochild's work. Through monthly meetings with the Secretariat child participation team, as well as participation in management board meetings and input on projects, the ECC plays a pivotal role in shaping Eurochild's initiatives. Since the first inception of the ECC in 2017, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has ensured local representation by appointing a child representative from the Children and Young Persons' Council (CYPC). Andre' Micallef, aged 15 years, currently holds this position, marking the ECC's third mandate. When his term concludes in July 2024, a new member from the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society children's council will be selected to uphold the essential role of representing Maltese children within the ECC.



4.2 ‘Values, Opinions, and Insights of Children (and their Caregivers) on E-Safety’ (VOICE)

Through its collaboration in Eurochild, in 2023, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has participated in an international study that focused on the issue of online safety for children. The Values, Opinions, and Insights of Children (and their Caregivers) on E-Safety (VOICE) initiative was led by ECPAT International, Eurochild and Terre des Hommes on behalf of the Down To Zero Alliance; with the process involving a series of consultation with children aged 10 to 17 years, and their caregivers, about the safety needs of and solutions for children online.

Qualitative focus groups were held across 10 EU Member States and five non-EU countries (Asia and Latin America), aimed at informing digital policy both at EU and national levels by bringing at the forefront the voices of children into debates around safety standards and issues experienced in digital environments. The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society’s participation in this project included data collection and reporting of the voices of Maltese children through the organisation of three focus groups with children. This participation has once again amplified the voices of Maltese children on a global level, with their views noted in the final report “Speaking Up for Change” [6] that was published by the lead researchers. This report does not only put into light the perspectives of children on this topic but has established an array of policy recommendations to ensure effective and comprehensive safety measures for children in the online and global digitalised world.



[6] https://www.datocms-assets.com/22233/1712224378-voice_report_08042024.pdf

5 INITIATIVES ADDRESSING DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND PEACEBUILDING

5.1 Rainbow Families Network (RFN)

The Rainbow Families Network (RFN) project was launched in 2018, in collaboration between the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the Rainbow Support Service within the Malta LGBTIQ+ Rights Movement (MGRM), aimed at creating a support network and a safe space for LGBTIQ+ families, particularly same-sex parents and their children; and transgender and gender variant children and adolescents, and their parents.

During 2023, members of the Children's Hub attended a series of regular meetings on behalf of the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, with MGRM representatives, which focused on how to make this network more effective and functional. These meetings served to strengthen communication and collaboration between the two organizations, and the expansion of effective work within this network.



Effort was also put to increase the number of families enrolled in this network. This was done in close collaboration with the Gender Wellbeing Clinic. One must also note that attendance to RFN events has steadily gained momentum, and 2023 saw an increase in the number of people enrolling and participating in the organised events, as well as continuous informal support between the members in daily challenges faced by these members. To date, there are over 50 families registered with RFN.

Monthly events took place for the network members, alternating between one formal activity and one informal event. In the formal activity, professionals from various fields were invited to give out informative and educational sessions to RFN members on topics related to realities faced by these families and their children. In the informal events, recreational outings were organized in safe spaces in which families could interact socially and get to know each other. Moreover, in 2023, Malta hosted EuroPride. RFN actively participated in the organised events and in EuroPride March held on September 16th in Valletta. Throughout the year, a private chatgroup between the families serves as a source of continuous support system for the parents.

5.2 Blended Families Research Project

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society commissioned a unique study – the Blended Families Research Project – which was the first of its kind, focusing on the needs of same-sex or heterosexual families in which one or both parents have children from a previous relationship, as well as their own. This study formed part of a larger project exploring how the recent developments and changes in the traditional nuclear family give rise to contemporary challenges faced by blended families. It was also based on the results of a 2016 study which indicated that 53% of divorcees and 37% of those who had separated were now in a new relationship. Within this context, the lead investigator for the Blended Families project, Prof. Angela Abela, with the support of other University of Malta academics Prof. Suzanne Piscopo, Dr. Sue Vella and Dr. Allison Zammit Said, carried out over 30 interviews with 10 blended families, including children aged between 10 and 18 years, their biological parents, and their parent's partners. They explored perspectives on their children's experiences of living in blended families, having two different homes and half and/or step siblings, as well as explored the unique challenges faced by the parents and partners.

The findings of this study were launched during a press conference held in June 2023, on which the Foundation's founder and chairperson H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca presented the research findings to the House of Representatives, alongside the Speaker of the House Hon. Dr. Angelo Farrugia and Family Minister Hon. Dr. Michael Falzon. The final findings will be presented in a conference in the upcoming year.



5.3 Interfaith Dialogue

Since its inception, the Foundation has been pivotal in the creation of spaces for respectful interfaith dialogue, in line with its core belief of a universally inclusive world in which despite differences, the fundamental rights and dignity of each person are placed at the forefront and are regarded as the threads that weave humankind. In line with the Article 14 of the UNCRC and Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which both speak of the right for freedom of thought, belief, and religion, on the 9th of February 2019, Her Excellency Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, who at the time was the President of Malta, organised a meeting for all faith leaders during which, the first national interfaith declaration was signed. During her speech on the occasion, she expressed her wish to create safe spaces for young people to be able to voice their views and thoughts, and to share their aspirations regarding interfaith.

Since then, each February, the Interfaith Children's Council within the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society continues this legacy by ensuring that Interfaith Harmony week is commemorated each year with carefully planned events aimed at promoting understanding and tolerance between different faiths; building bridges of friendship based on mutual respect and appreciation; cultivating critical thinking and intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness; preparing children to interact effectively in a globalised multicultural world; and fostering the concept of harmonious and peaceful coexistence from a young age.

In 2020, the Foundation put together the first child-led interfaith forum in Malta, creating a safe space for children and young people from different faiths to come together and discuss how all faiths can transmit their message in a peaceful way. In this event, the children communicated their aspirations through drawing and posters focusing on what unites them including the same principles of love, respect, and courage, and even had some time to pray together.

The following year, in 2021, the Foundation created a video message which was perfectly encapsulated by a quote from a young member of the Foundation's Children's Interfaith Council, Rhythm Garg, who maintained: "Different people of different religions are flowers. Many flowers of the same kind make a bouquet, a plant. But many flowers of a different kind make a garden."

Subsequently, 2022 saw the creation of the Interfaith Flag, with the participation of four different diverse schools being, Maria Regina College Qawra Primary, Maria Regina College St Paul's Bay Primary, St Benedict College Birzebbuga Primary, and Gozo Primary. The four flags designed by each school were sewn into one, portraying society's shared values and principles, with the emerging theme being: We All Belong. In a commemorative event, the Foundation also managed to bring together leaders from 15 different faiths and religions at their premises in Floriana, in a shared message of love, waving the Interfaith Flag, symbolising unity and goodwill. Together, these different religious leaders planted a tree in the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society's small garden, in celebration of unity in diversity.

This year, the Interfaith Children's Council again invited the faith leaders to observe the Interfaith Harmony Week 2023. This inspiring event, held at the Qawra Primary School, highlighted the importance of harmony and respect through talks, poems, art, and colourful messages organised and designed by the children. The event focused on a dialogue between the children and the faith leaders present, with the discussion founded on the importance of mutual respect, values, and the beauty of diversity. In H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca's own words, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society aspires to continue "embracing dialogue among different faiths and religions to secure society's mutual understanding, produce a sense of harmony and improve cooperation. By working together as a united family, we can spread the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill to all".



5.4 A Voice that Counts

Making children's voices count in a participatory approach to address the needs of children affected directly and indirectly from armed conflict environments

In the last decade, around the globe, hundreds of thousands of children were killed in armed conflict zones, and many others faced mutilation, abduction, sexual exploitation, recruitment as child soldiers and displacement to escape the hardships of war. Additionally, conflict-affected children are often separated from their families, lack basic social services, and denied access to health care and education. However, in their attempt to reach a safe destination, children face a whole set of new challenges and threats, as their vulnerability puts them at risk of more abuse, particularly if unaccompanied. Malta's geographical position makes it a passageway for several migrants fleeing conflict zones, some of whom are families with children or unaccompanied minors.



Within this context, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society embarked on this project in partnership with the Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade of Malta and with the support of the United Nations Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children and the Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary Children and Armed Conflict, in February 2023, to be executed over three phases. The aim of this research is to make children's voices count in a participatory approach to address the needs of children affected directly and indirectly by armed conflict environments.

The first phase of this project was rolled out throughout 2023. A consultative-structured process involved the conduction of 32 interviews and/or meetings and eight focus groups with authorities, professionals, public service officers, members of civil society groups and NGOs, researchers, and activists, who through their work have direct and indirect effects on the experiences of conflict-affected children and/or their families living in Malta and Gozo. The aim was to explore how existing national systems, mechanisms, policies, legal frameworks, and services are supporting, safeguarding, and protecting the holistic wellbeing and integration of conflict-affected children and/or their families from the point of their arrival at our shores to their integration within our communities. The researchers also sought to identify both good practices and areas that warrant further improvement through the participants' practical recommendations such as training needs, possible solutions and action points. This way, the necessary policy changes may be advocated in the best interest of conflict-affected children.

The second phase of this project, which is currently still ongoing, is central to this project since the researchers are listening to, and channelling, the voices of conflict-affected children who arrived in Malta from different conflict zones and are now living on our islands with or without their families. Individual interviews and focus groups are being carried out, to collect the first-hand experiences of these children whilst they navigate and encounter existing national systems, mechanisms, policies, legal frameworks, and services. It is aspired that the children's narratives on their diverse experiences of armed conflict, their journeys, and their daily lives and integration within our communities are further understood, recognised, and validated. Like the stakeholder's interviews, the children will be asked to identify good practices as well as areas for improvement, and to put forward practical recommendations and action points, that may inform policy changes and service improvement.

The third and last phase of this project involves the development of a toolkit which will include this project's methodology along with indicators and guidelines on how such project may be replicated. It is envisioned that, using this toolkit, the project will be applied in other international countries starting from countries in the Mediterranean. Ultimately, it is aspired that the outcomes of the project will be presented as best practice in relevant international fora, with the aim to have more countries taking on the use of the toolkit as well as to give further voice to conflict-affected children and their needs. It is projected that this study will be finalised by end of 2024.

5.5 Day for Conflict Resolution and the Lysistrata Prize

In commemoration of the UN International Day for Conflict Resolution, in October 2023, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society hosted and organised the first Lysistrata prize award ceremony in Malta. Held at Villa Bighi, the event saw the presence of various ambassadors and esteemed guests including the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict Ms. Virginia Gamba, and Speaker of the House of Representatives in Malta Dr. Anglu Farrugia. The event occurred at a critical juncture, where the devastating impact of wars on children underscores the urgent need to prioritize diplomacy. During the event, Her Excellency Marie Louise Coleiro Preca, delivered a powerful address, stressing the harrowing effects that conflicts and wars are having on children, underlining how these young people are being robbed of their childhood and their basic human rights, and urging world leaders to provide a future where children grow up in a world free from the horrors of conflict and war.

During this event, Fr. Dionysius Mintoff, founder of the Peace Lab in Malta, was awarded the prestigious Lysistrata Award, for his unwavering commitment to foster a world where peace, harmony, and social justice reign supreme, marking the first time a Maltese individual received this honour. This award is part of the MED21 Network awards initiated by French-Tunisian poet and novelist Mohamed Nadir Aziza, and highlights the vital role of civil societies in advancing peace alongside formal diplomatic avenues.



6 INITIATIVES ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

6.1 The Wellbeing INDEX

The Wellbeing INDEX, a collaborative project between the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the University of Malta, aims to measure and inform wellbeing policy in Malta. The name “INDEX” summarises the project’s scope, that is, Indicators, Networking, Data Visualisation, Exploration, and eXchange. Launched in December 2020, it continues to provide annual updates through its website <https://wellbeingindex.mt/> and serves as a repository of data and information to guide policymakers and stakeholders in measuring the island’s wellbeing.

On this year’s World Happiness Day in March, Prof. Marie Brigiglio, the principal investigator of this project, shared findings of this index in Parliament. She highlighted emerging disparities in wellbeing by gender, district, and age, advocating for evidence-based policy. This research brought to light that although Malta’s economic growth continues to improve in terms of GDP per capita, its position has slipped down four places in terms of life evaluation, with only 27 other countries globally identified to be feel more worried, sad, or angry than the Maltese population. This data gives clear insight on the urgent need to further understand wellbeing trends and to execute more inclusive, equitable and balanced policy that promotes other aspects of happiness in life, moving beyond the focus of economic growth, work, and money. In his address, the National Statistics Office Director for Social Statistics Mr. Matthew Zerafa, also assured that their office, headed by Director General Mr. Etienne Caruana, would continue to support the collection, and provision of data for research and policy on wellbeing.



6.2 Promoting Online Protection (Pop-Up) Project

Led by Ms. Antonella Gatt, the Pop-Up project, launched by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society on the 23rd of June 2023, aims to ensure that children and young people are healthy and safe online. It is pertinent to note that the creation of this project was founded on sound research evidence, which recommends the importance of protecting the safety and wellbeing of children and young people in the digital environment whilst ensuring that they benefit from the digital revolution.

Indeed, one of its major achievements was the roll out of a statistical exercise, in collaboration with MISCO, shedding light for the first time ever on the Maltese context in terms of online abuse. This data revealed that 15% of children attending school from Year 3 to Year 11 stated that they have experienced online abuse. Of these, 83% experienced cyberbullying, 54% emotional abuse, and 26% abuse of a sexual nature. 29% of all respondents have received inappropriate or rude messages. Alarming, 46% of respondents who have received rude or inappropriate messages, stated that they received them from persons they know. These ground-breaking results also brought to light interesting findings in relation to the use of digital devices. Of particular importance, it is worth noting that 11% of children aged 11 to 13 years old spend more than six hours a day online.



Another milestone of the Pop-Up project in 2023 was the roll out of the train the trainer programme across all state, church and independent schools in Malta and Gozo, that was carried out by UN ITU trainers. A total of 81 psychosocial officers have been certified as UN ITU trainers following their completion of the training and assessment.

Using a collaborative approach, this project aims to bring together multiple stakeholders on a local and global level, such as policy makers, guardians, educators, Internet service providers, NGOs, and the industry. Such partnerships, along with participation in international exchanges and meetings, including the UN ITU working groups, are of essence to tackle such dynamic and contemporary matter in the best way possible.

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