

Address by Ms Marie-Louise COLEIRO-PRECA (SOC) Malta

**as Rapporteur of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee (for opinion Doc 12558)
on Doc 12539: Unaccompanied children in Europe: issues of arrival, stay and return.**

This report has come before this Parliamentary Assembly, at a very suitable and particular time. The events unfolding on the African continent, in particular in Libya, where so many thousands of civilians and families are fleeing from war, conflicts, and poverty, in search of a better life for themselves and their families, crossing the Mediterranean Sea at great risk to their lives, over to countries like Malta and Italy, gives more essence to this so well prepared report by Ms Reps.

Before delving deeper into the introduction to the opinion of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, Mr Chairman, I would like to commend Ms Reps, for her excellent work, in producing a most intriguing report.

Coming from a country, where the arrival of illegal immigrants has become a common occurrence, and living with so many asylum seekers and refugees on a small island like Malta, it takes only a short while, to understand their rightful plight for a better and stable life. It has become a common experience for Maltese children to live and play with the children of refugees, asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors, at school and elsewhere, who abandoned their homes and risked their lives to find a dignified and stable way of life. Hence coming from such a background, I cannot but not put my full support to this report and urge this Parliamentary Assembly to do the same wholeheartedly.

Researching and delving into the subject matter of our debate, surely was not an easy task for Ms Reps, due to the fact, that the number of unaccompanied children in Europe tend to be only an estimation. Statistics are sketchy, but it is estimated that there are approximately 100,000, unaccompanied minors.

Another significant reason for the importance of this report, is that it highlights the need for us parliamentarians, to give more visibility to these unaccompanied minors in our countries. This report is truly bringing to the fore a very real problem, which sometimes is not given its due importance.

On a profound examination of Ms Reps's report one notes immediately, that even though, many efforts and endeavours have been undertaken during the years, by the United Nations and the European Union a number of important issues have still to be addressed. These are mainly: the actual effective implementation of the principles and measures already embraced by the international community, to achieve the necessary goals of safeguarding these unaccompanied minors and helping them to develop into their adulthood in the right way. Ms Reps was very wise to depict this in her report, and very appropriate for this Parliamentary Assembly to adopt, and hence approve and establish the 15 common guiding principles that are being proposed in the report.

In her report, Ms Reps unfolds the urgent need, for us as Council of Europe, to acknowledge one basic common approach, and hence harmonise our procedure and support given to these unaccompanied minors. We must not delay any longer in the adoption of these guiding principles.

The Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee has put forward some amendments to sustain and enhance even further this remarkable report presented to us by Ms Reps. These amendments aim to strengthen the social preventive measures that are proposed, whereby as member states of the Council of Europe we commit ourselves to ensure that our countries do extend the services and facilities that are available to our own children.

Briefly, this means that we should commit ourselves to treating and serving these unfortunate minors as if they were our very own children. This means that we must ensure an effective social inclusion and integration policy, with all the necessary safeguards, so as, to give them the opportunity to live and grow in adulthood with the requisites to lead a fruitful and dignified life.

Other amendments are meant to look further than the immediate scenario. These amendments are meant to instigate deeper awareness, to encourage and promote the subject matter within the Council of Europe, so that these issues are kept at the fore of our future agendas.

Unfortunately, forecasts show that the number of asylum seekers is expected to continue to rise over the years. British environmentalist and authority on biodiversity, Mr Norman Myers at Oxford University in 2008, estimated that the number of refugees and asylum seekers will rise to circa 150 million over the next fifty years. Children and youth constitute 50% of all refugees worldwide, as predicted by UNHCR in 2006.

Hence we, as parliamentarians and our national parliaments have to be adamant in our commitment on this worrying issue, which does create a diverse amount of difficulties.

Nevertheless, our commitments to uphold human rights must give us the necessary impetus.

I would like to conclude my contribution by quoting a research paper written by a Maltese colleague, Mr Joe Tanti, for the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies of the University of Malta, entitled: The Rights and Future of Unaccompanied Minors and Children Born to Irregular Immigrants in Malta, which illustrates the premise that underlines our commitment towards effectively working to create an environment that supports the well being and the best interest of all unaccompanied minors in Europe.

Mr Joe Tanti wrote:

'Children arrive here unwillingly. Placed on boats destined to uncertainty, they leave a life marked by fear and persecution they cannot understand. The justice that has failed them in the past must not fail them again in the future. We are, to say the least, bound morally, ethically and indeed legally to provide shelter and security, regardless of race, colour, creed or language. In addition, in our commitment to preserve humanity, it would be a mockery to justice if, in this commendable endeavour, we fail as human beings to include the needs of every child'

With this enlightening quotation from Mr Joe Tanti's research paper on the subject, I urge this Parliamentary Assembly to endorse and approve Ms Reps' report, so as to ensure, that these minors, will not be treated as: *children of a lesser god.*

Thank you.