

DG JUST on Child Participation in Political and Democratic Life: MALTA REPORT 2020

Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society

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1.0 Introduction to DG Just Malta Study

All children¹ – regardless of one’s background, age, gender, ethnicity and religion - have a fundamental right to express their views freely, to have their voices heard and to be involved in the creation of environments in which their contribution in all matters that affect their wellbeing is facilitated in a respectful way. This is clearly stated in Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (FRA)², as well as in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989)³. Hence, it is within this framework that the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS) embarked on the DG JUST Project coordinated by the Eurochild secretariat, in hope to transmit voices of children coming from diverse and/or vulnerable backgrounds, from Malta to a European level.

This document reports the qualitative methodology and analysis of consultation carried out with children in Malta. This study was carried out throughout the month of September 2020, in which three separate physical semi-structured focus groups were conducted with diverse cohorts of children, on different mornings. These three focus groups comprised of migrant children living in an open centre; children in a juvenile corrective facility; and children living in an out-of-home care setting. The selection of child participants was done in close collaboration with the gatekeepers of their respective organizations and institutions.

Each focus group was facilitated by a member from the Children’s Hub within the MFWS who holds extensive experience in working with children and an activist in child participation, with the support of another two members from the same team. The guidelines provided by Eurochild were set as a framework to develop the agenda for running the sessions and discussed in a preparatory meeting before the focus groups were held. This included an introductory session to explain the objectives of the focus groups and introduce the children to the facilitators, followed by an ice-breaking session to put the children’s focus on the topic about to be discussed. Following this session, a discussion ensued with open-ended questions asked about the current state of play in child participation at a local, national and European level; their knowledge and understanding on the right to heard; and how this

¹ The term ‘child’ refers to anyone under age 18 years.

² EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (date). Article 24 Retrieved from <https://fra.europa.eu/en/charterpedia/article/24-rightschild>

³ United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Retrieved from https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf?_ga=2.14476404.238492205.1571758110-631070909.1571758110

may have been possibly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. The focus groups were wrapped up by an evaluation of the process and by future recommendations put forward by the children. Although this structure was used for all the focus groups, it was necessary to adapt a different approach according to the needs of the children in each consultation group.

In every focus group, an appointed reporter was present to take notes of what was being said, along with other observations. Given the perceived vulnerability of children in juvenile corrective facility and the larger size of this group, a warranted psychologist was appointed to be present in this session, in order to intervene in the eventuality that any child shows an exacerbation of emotional distress triggered off by the discussion. This report was ultimately compiled by the reporter, in consultation with the team of facilitators from the MFWS, as well as with the contribution of the appointed psychologist in the final evaluation of the process.

The final sample for this study consisted of 28 children - 25 males and 3 females - having 12 different nationalities, being: Maltese, Afghani, Syrian, Eritrean, Somali, Libyan, Sudanese, Chadean, Bissau-Guinean, Nigerian, Ivorian and Bangladeshi. The following table (Table 1) provides more information about the three different groups.

Table 1. Information on the three focus groups

Cohort of children	Location of Focus Group	Number of Participants	Age Range of Children
<u>Group 1:</u> Migrant children living in an open centre	Open Centre for Migrant families	6 children (5 males and 1 female)	7 to 16 years
<u>Group 2:</u> Children in the juvenile corrective facility	The Young Persons Offenders Unit	20 children (all males)	14 to 17 years
<u>Group 3:</u> Children living in an out of home care setting	Residential Home for Children	2 children (both females)	13 – 14 years

For this study, Eurochild’s Code of Conduct and Children Protection Policy were adhered to throughout every stage of this process. This also included obtaining informed consents, and the provision of all information to the children in a child-friendly, transparent and inclusive manner. At all times, COVID-19 protective measures were kept in place to ensure the safety of the children and adults alike.

2.0 Consultation with Migrant Children

The consultation with migrant children took place in a hall in one of the migrants open centres in Malta, in a round table setting. This open centre dedicated to migrant families, currently accommodates over one hundred persons, and is run by the church in collaboration with the Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS)⁴. Given that all children spoke and understood the English Language, this was the language of choice for this focus group. Two staff members of this centre were present in the background, to oversee the children.

Following a round of names and introduction referred to as check-in, the group was divided in two smaller groups: one for the younger cohort (children up to 10 years of age) and one for the older cohort (children between the age of 13-16 years). The warm-up session started off by asking to tell us anything that comes to mind about children's rights. Initially, none of the children stated that they knew what rights are, but once the facilitator explained the concept in a child friendly manner, children started to mention different rights like that of education and right to practice their own religion. One child said that for him rights meant that *'all children should be able to have a good future'*. Regarding the right of the child to have a voice, migrant children claimed that typically it is the older people who are in power the ones who take decisions about their rights. Examples given were ministers in the country, head of their school, leader running the open centre, and the big brother or parents within their family. The children added that unfortunately, at times, these people in power do not give anyone else the chance to speak, and *'their attitudes are not OK'*. This way, they said, although they are the ones taking decisions *"if they are not polite with the people, still no-one will listen to them or obey them anyway because they will not be respected."* They also expressed that perhaps adult people in power behave this way because of the way they were raised, and *'they might be doing like they were raised'*. Probing further, the children maintained that they feel listened to when a person is polite with them and stops talking when they speak.

At this stage of discussion, it was noted that the younger children needed a more active approach to the session, given that they were becoming restless after some time, in contrast to the older ones who were noted to be more engaged in the discussion. For this reason, the younger children were given

⁴ For more information, kindly follow link <https://homeaffairs.gov.mt/en/MHAS-Departments/awas/Pages/Open-Centres.aspx>

the choice to choose their communicative medium. The children preferred using colouring crayons and blank paper to draw their vision of the ideal, in terms of relations between adults and children.

In parallel, in the focus group with older children, the discussion continued by giving examples of ways in which they can make their voice be heard. One child sustained that a good means to make your voice heard is by protesting. This child explained that this is because *'you are not alone, you need to be in a group to have more influence and to have more power'*. Another child mentioned that this can be also done by writing an email to politicians, whilst the other child said that *'when I was younger I used to watch TV and have ideas, but now I don't anymore. I stopped watching TV'*. This statement perhaps shows how this child has lost hope and empowerment throughout the years of his childhood. However, another child added that whilst he is aware of his right to speak and feels empowered to speak, he does not complain or argue because in his opinion *'often decisions have already been made- so then I wait. It might affect or not affect me'*. This continues to reinforce the latter sentiment which put into light the loss of faith that these children have in the power of their own voices; believing that no matter what they say or think, it will ultimately not make any difference. This leads to demotivation to speak out and lack of interest in the decision-making processes.

On a positive note, the migrant children in the focus groups felt that at a community level, they are being cared for, because they are given the opportunity to go to school, have good education and better themselves. They spoke highly of their school in which they feel respected and listened to. They said that when they faced an issue at school, they are taken seriously, and action was taken. Additionally, one child appraised the good relationship with his football coach whom he describes as being like father to him, as he listens to his suggestions, and even notices when he is tired. He said that with him, he feels empowered to speak out when he does not agree with decisions taken. However, the migrant children also noted that they are aware that this reality in school is not the same for every migrant child, because they are the lucky few who had the opportunity to attend to one of Malta's highly esteemed school, which is run by the Jesuit Brothers.

In terms of challenges in child participation, the children pointed out that some children are not listened to by their parents. Within this context, they brought up the issue of when decision making and communication involving children is done through their parents and not the child, particularly when it comes to giving consent. They explained that there can be situations in which the children do not want to consent, but the parents will still consent on their behalf, or vice versa. One child said *'if you are doing something for a child, it is useless asking adults; you first need to reach out to the child to see what he wants'*.

Upon probing into their views on child participation in decision-processes at a national level, none of the children could give any other example of mechanisms or structures other than school, football and family. They also stated that they have never met in person anyone from the decision making arena, or had the opportunity to speak to them, except for a visit they had some years back from Her Excellency Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca when she was the President of Malta. Likewise, it was felt that they feel detached from people in decision-making at a European level. Children maintained that they only heard of the names of the European Parliament, Union and Commission, and how they form, through Social Studies lessons at school, *'but do not know what they do'*. They stated that decision makers at a national and European level need to have better communication with, and reach out more to, children. Another child pointed out that he is aware that in the European Commission there is no commissioner for children but there is a commissioner for fish. This made him wonder whether Europe feels that fish are more important than children.

In terms of their hopes for the future in terms of improving child participation, the children in the focus groups brought up the issue of racism. They maintained that recent surge of racism and protests on this issue, has induced fears of being treated differently. They described that they have experienced racist comments and situations several times in their daily life. One child said *'If it is a one-time event, I let it go. But when it is repetitive it brings out of me feelings of aggression... but I know that if I attack back, I will get the blame, so I just try to just ignore'*. A Sikh child expressed that the family had to leave their native country out of fear of persecution due to their religious beliefs by the government. He adamantly stated that he categorically does not allow anyone to mock his religion especially when it is about him not cutting his hair. He asserted *'If I report and no action is taken then I have to take it on me, to defend myself'*. This child said that he feels safer to pray at home, and not outside.

In the focus group, migrant children pointed out that society needs to look more into the cultural differences in the way child participation is viewed, as they claimed that *'there are different kind of children and adults'*. One child also explained that there are people who have experienced hardships in their native countries, and we need to keep in mind that some children *'had bad things in childhood'*. He spoke of his concerns about the potential impact that childhood trauma may have on his adult life passionately stating *'when I was young, I was in a bad country. People in power were cruel. I heard shots 24/7. I don't know how these things will affect me and how these may influence my future, or if they may cause any problems for me... like my brother, he was kind when he was younger, but now he has a lot of anger; anger he cannot control. This worries me.'* Another child replied that he too left his

country because the situation was bad *'but I was only 4 years old so I do not remember anything that happened'*.

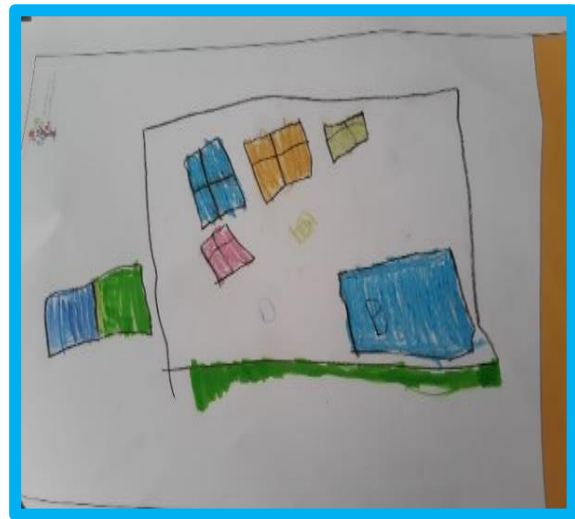
At this point of discussion, the two cohorts of children were regrouped, and discussion continued on how COVID-19 crisis impacted child participation. The younger children spoke of their fear of the virus *'making everyone sick and dead'*, adding *'If the virus was something solid, I will smack it!'* They spoke of spending a lot of time constrained to stay indoors, avoiding crowded areas, and keeping a distance from their friends. The older children said that on one hand, it was positive as they had no annual exams, and no-one was infected in their open centre. They also said that this time may have brought out creativity in children, as they were seeking something to do out of boredom. On the other hand, they pointed out the negative aspects of being physically inactive *'with no training, just using phone, playing online games'*, as well as a disturbed sleeping routine.

Regarding closure of schools, children complained on difficulties faced particularly with online learning stating that *'Online learning annoys me, I prefer going to school, I had too many distractions.'* Another child said that *'Online lessons are the worst nightmare; I don't understand lessons as I need the teacher to explain in person; I need the classroom feel.'* Moreover, the children also voiced their concern regarding the uncertainty of the future as one child stated, *'you cannot tell, waves going down today, then cases up again tomorrow.'*

As regards to lessons learnt from this pandemic, a young boy exclaimed *'Do not eat bats!'* An older child sustained *'When you do something bad to the world, the world will answer in the same manner'*, to which another boy replied *'With the increase in pollution, don't expect the world to be kind to you!'* The final thought-provoking statement made by a child was that the lesson he learnt from these times is that *'There will always be something in between you and your future, you always need to find a way.'*

In the final part of the focus groups, the young children were asked to present their painting to the whole group, giving a short explanation of what they drew. As shown in the following pictures, all paintings were full of colour, and all depicted a home. The children pointed out that the different rooms they wanted to have in the house, their individual family members, their pets, their favourite toys and their own play areas. The description of these pictures comes to show that these young migrant children's view of the ideal world was related to the basic need and basic right to have their own home; a home which does not only provide them security and safety, but also gives them a sense of freedom, peace, unity and love. These children yearn to be part of a normative community, with a desire for stability, status and identity, surrounded by people they love and objects they own and care for. For

these children it may be that having a voice means first having your basic needs met. Without them, they might feel as though they might not even qualify to have a voice.



Caption: These are the true copies of the images drawn by the children in the consultation groups. Names of the children were concealed to maintain anonymity of the child participants.



At the end of the focus group at the evaluation stage, an exercise was done in which children were asked to describe how they are feeling after the session referred to as check-out. All six children gave positive answers as regards to feeling happy and good, with one child saying that he feels worried. When asked about why he is feeling that way he said that the next day he had a football match in which their team is playing against a rival opponent. The session ended with a big clap to all the group.

3.0 Consultation with Children in the Young Persons Offenders Unit (YOURS)

The second focus group was held at The Young Persons Offenders Unit (YOURS) at Mtañleb, Malta, which is the main correctional facility for juvenile offenders in Malta. Currently, this facility holds almost 50 male convicts, aged between 14 and 21. There are presently no young female inmates residing in this facility. Unlike the young male offenders, the young female offenders reside at Malta's main correctional facility; Corradino Correction Facility (CCF). Given the eligibility criteria for this study, only those children under the age of 18 years were called to participate in this focus group, ultimately totaling an amount of 20 children. Only one of these children was a Maltese national, whilst the other 19 hailed from diverse Asian and African countries, with the vast majority being migrant children previously residing in detention and open centres in Malta. Present in the room throughout this focus group was one of the correctional facility's security guard.

At the start of the focus group, the facilitator checked about the children's spoken languages. It was noted that these consisted of four languages, being English, Maltese, Arabic and French. Two participants who could fluently speak two languages (Maltese-Arabic and English-French) were identified to offer translation from Maltese and English to the Arabic and French speaking participants so that each child could be able to understand and participate. In order to aid the flow of the discussion and decrease this language barrier, the facilitator kept the language simple. It must be stated that the process of language translation proved to be a time-consuming exercise.

The introductory session referred to as check-in, started with a round of names and an ice breaker question in which every person had to identify something which is much significant to oneself. Most of the child participants mentioned their yearn for freedom and to have good education, whilst a good number of children mentioned recreational activities which included different hobbies and sports like football, cars, table tennis, music, rugby, boxing and basketball. In contrast, three of the children stated that until the day of their freedom, they would not like or love anything because they felt very unhappy.

Moving on to the topic of discussion, when children's rights were mentioned, the children cited the right to have a family, the right for education and the right to be employed. The children added that unfortunately, even though they are aware that there are rights, not everyone enjoys them in an equal and fair manner. One child put forward an example on the child's right for education, explaining that not every child goes to school, and that in his native country he never had the chance to go to school.

Another boy claimed that he believes that he has a right to go back to his native country, but he feels that this right is being infringed since he has no passport to travel with.

Another child passionately opined that although he is aware that he has a right to speak, it is useless to use his voice unless the adults around him listen to what he says. Other children claimed that many times adults around them only listen to them when they can offer a solution. In situations that adults cannot help them, they refuse to listen to them, and avoid them. A child gave his own personal experience as an example, explaining that in less than a month he will be out of the facility '*but outside I have nothing and no one*', a situation that is making him feel voiceless and helpless. This sentiment brought about an intense discussion between children who were replying back and forth, with an abrupt surge of commotion. The children were saying to the facilitator that it is of no use to discuss children's rights if it is '*talk only*'. One child asked, '*why do you want to listen to me if you are not going to help me?*' The children explained that for them, listening to children means offering them the practical and tangible help they need, saying that '*in order to make my dreams happen, you need to have help first*'. A group of children argued about their desire to play basketball, but they were not given the ball to play with. They stated that in a similar fashion, it is just a waste of time to speak of rights, unless the needed assistance is provided. At this stage, children were challenging and urging the facilitators to help them. It was even noted that some children were somewhat under the impression that the facilitators were sent from the Refugee Commissioner's Office or the migration department.

Whilst the facilitator validated the children's feelings, with the intervention of the appointed psychologist who was present in the session, she again explained the main purpose of the session. She reminded the children that their participation is voluntary, and they have a right not to engage in this discussion should they do not wish to. The facilitators also elucidated that although as researchers we cannot offer practical help, it was the Council of Europe through Eurochild who sent people to meet them and to create a safe space to listen to them. The facilitators then explained that their views will be written in a report which may be referred to by decision makers, thus in turn possibly creating awareness of what they are feeling. Following this clarification, the child participants seemed calmer and were willing to participate in this discussion. None of the children opted out of the discussion.

In attempt to ground the children back into the consultation process, the facilitator asked the children to rethink about the example of basketball and to reflect on proactive examples on how they, as children, can relay their message to decision makers. The children said that they can tell their family members to speak on their behalf or to reach out to sports authorities to assist. Yet again, there

seemed to be a consensus amongst the child participants that *'outside prison, a child may have a right to speak, but inside you do not have that right.'*

When asked whether or not they believe they have a voice, only 8 children answered in the affirmative, mentioning that they have the support of family members outside prison – like mother, siblings and cousins. One child said that when he needed to speak about something within the facility, he approached the prison administration and action was taken. In contrast, the other 12 children adamantly stated that they have no voice. Examples of verbatim statements from these children included:

'In my life no-one has helped me. I had to help myself.'

'Nobody listens to me. That is why I am here.'

'No, I only have myself.'

'No, I gave up that there will ever be help for me, I have no hope, I feel sad.'

One child declared that for someone to listen to you *'you need to have a job, you need to have education, you need to have a place where you live. That is when people will listen to you. Otherwise no one will listen to you'*. Moreover, four of the children spoke of the concept of freedom and liberty, to which they described as being *'life'* itself. A child said, *'I only want back my freedom. If you do not have freedom, you have nothing.'* In addition, another child opened about his feelings of loneliness in the facility, given that he does not have any friends. Although he communicates in basic English, he divulged about how much he misses speaking his mother language. Similarly, another child stated, *'I feel alone. My parents and family are all dead. I have no-one.'* This sense of isolation was also echoed by the children when they were asked about the COVID-19 pandemic and how this may have affected them. Their reply was that the effect was minimal, as most of the children do not have family members in Malta and therefore no one visits them in prison.

Moving on to their views on national and European Institutions, the child participants expressed that for them the European Union is the *'government of Europe'* and they are there to *'help people'*. Nevertheless, children expressed disappointment with regards to the lack of help given to unaccompanied children asylum seekers, especially regarding the lack of provision of education to these children. They discussed fervently and in length, the issue of putting children in detention centres. Although one must note that back in 2014, Malta developed the National Action Plan⁵ aimed

⁵ For more information on Malta's National Action Plan, kindly follow link <https://www.unhcr.org/565727c39.pdf>

to end detention of child migrants - a plan championed by then Minister Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, as part of the UNHCR Global Strategy (Beyond Detention 2014-2019) – this was not the reality of some children in the focus groups. One child spoke of helplessness felt upon his arrival in Malta, given that although he claimed to be under-age, he was still detained. When trying to escape from the hardship of detention, he was caught and are now imprisoned in the corrective facility for minors, which is a contradiction. Speaking on his personal experience, another child emotionally said, *‘I wish to know why I was put in detention. I arrived in Malta at 9 years of age and was put in detention, now I have been 2 years here. I never found someone who listened to me. All I want is a normal life, as normal as the ones that people out there have- a house, work, friends.’* In this part of the consultation, there was an overarching sentiment felt by the participants that Europe is not doing enough to help children in migration. One child said that the only message he wants to pass on to the commission is to ask them why he was detained in detention centre after fleeing his country. *‘You escape detention, they catch you and put you in prison. This happens only in Malta. Why?’* Another child shared the same sentiment, as he stated *‘I am thankful for the Government of Malta for saving me from the sea. But I want justice, as I am not in the right place.’* This statement opened up another discussion with children narrating their emotive stories that started off with a series of hardships leading up to the decision to leave their native country in search of liberty and help, in turn ending up in a life behind bars, with no way out. One boy recounted:

‘In my native country I never had any problems, but here I already had two problems with the law because of false documentation. I left my country in search of liberty after my mother got sick and died. I thought that I will find help. All I want is to find a country to live in freedom, but I ended up from one prison to another to another. Now I just want to go back to my country, but I do not have the passport to go back.’

Only one child divulged that he was put in a home for minors, and not in detention, upon his arrival to Malta, and due to this, he wished *‘to say thank you to the EU because I am grateful they helped me’*. Other children expressed similar appreciation to Europe and the government of Malta *‘for saving them from the sea’*.

One child who has a Maltese nationality felt that he is *‘the lucky one and that everything is good’* for him because he has a Maltese passport and he has a family outside prison to support him and knows what his rights are. He explained that he has already spent almost one year in the facility and has shared his prison cell with different migrant children. This child stated that after listening to so many stories of these children, he feels bad for them and finds the way they are treated very unfair. He was

referring to migrant children as 'msieken', a Maltese term denoting a person one pities. This child explained that the migrants often lack information when it comes to knowing court dates and even the outcome of their prison sentence. He also spoke fervently about the inhumane conditions migrants are placed to live in at the detention centre claiming that *'they are not treated like human beings... you would not even put a dog to live in those conditions let alone people... then we are surprised that they try to escape and when they do escape, we immediately put them in prison... this does not make sense. They leave their countries to come to Europe to find peace and help, risking their lives, and what do we do? Not only do we not help them, but we lock them up! We take away their freedom, we take away their lives! We move them from one prison to another! They fight for liberty and we end up taking away their freedom...'* This child's passion and humane heart so much touched us facilitators as he spoke as their advocate and protector. It also revealed that even within this setting, some children may be more privileged than others; creating a cycle of inequality and minorities within minorities.

Overall, this focus group proved to be a whirlpool of emotions for the facilitators. Initially, it was more about giving time for the child participants to trust us, to understand the purpose of the meeting, and in creating a safe space for children to speak openly. A lingering sense of sadness and loneliness could be felt amongst many of the children in the room. These children's desire for a 'normal life' was paramount in this focus group, and this included having a safe haven, education and to be able to support themselves in society. Although they yearn for freedom, they are immersed in fear of life after prison, with limited or lack of support outside the prison walls. Moreover, even though these children are aware of their right to speak, they revealed a sense of helplessness, believing that their rights have been breached over and over again.

Despite the perceived injustices, these children expressed gratitude for having been saved from the seas, and still have dreams and aspirations for a better future. Three children spoke about their willingness to start studying, to learn to read and to speak English, so that they will be able to have a better chance of employment. Another child said that he wants to make music so that he could be in a position to help and support others through his music. In fact the evaluation session ended with the check-out section with a song created by one of the participating children, as the group cheered, children sang and clapped to the positive rhythm. For that brief moment, the children's eyes lit up and an ambience of bliss engulfed this dwelling of lost childhoods.

4.0 Consultation with Children residing in an Out-of-Home Care Setting

The third and last focus group was carried out in a residential home for children, run by the Congregation of the Ursuline Sisters of St Angela Merici⁶. The aim of this home is that of creating a family-like and nurturing environment for children coming from families who are going through difficulties, in turn making them unable to care for their children. Currently there are around thirty children, aged between 3 and 14 years, residing in this home. For this study, two girls, aged 13 and 14 years participated in the focus group. Both children were Maltese speaking, and hence this language was used throughout the discussion. No member from this residential home was present throughout the consultation.

In the initial part of this focus group, an informal dialogue was carried out between the facilitators and the children, which tapped into personal interests and recreational activities enjoyed, such as music, art and sports, with the purpose of an icebreaking session. Following the check-in session, the objectives of the consultation process were explained to the children and the discussion kicked off by asking children the first questions related to their knowledge of children's rights. One child abruptly stated that for her, *'rights are when each child, no matter what position he/she is, has the freedom and opportunity to be and to live as an equal to other children'*. Speaking with passion, this child gave the example of children with disability, asserting that they have the fundamental right to thrive within mainstream schooling. In order to be able to enjoy this right, she averred that there need to be the right support mechanisms in place. The two children both concurred that this is not always the case. This is because there are children who are lacking the needed support within the educational settings, and hence are falling behind other children. Another alleged infringement of rights mentioned by the children was that Muslim children living in Malta are not eligible to attend to a Church school. These children argued that alike all Maltese children, who are offered Roman Catholic teachings in the Religion lesson, Muslim children should be provided with the same opportunity, that is, to have lessons about their religion in schools. Nonetheless, the children articulated that they also aware that the latter issue may also generate an uproar, within the context of the current furor on racism. They continued to explain that they followed closely the latest news on the death of George Floyd. Although this unfortunate incidence has put into light the devastating reality of racial discrimination, the children noted that it has also triggered a surge in hate speech and further division between peoples. One child

⁶ For more information about this congregation's work, please visit <https://usammalta.weebly.com/our-residential-homes.html>

fervently stated that she categorically '*cannot stand*' when someone generalizes an adverse act of one person based on skin his/her colour or religion unto a whole racial or ethnic group, in attempt to justify biased racist and stereotypical views. This child said that she confronts such people, and in attempt to make them reflect on their judgements she uses role-reversal, telling the respective person to '*imagine if Malta is struck by a war, and all we have now is turned to ashes. Imagine if at that time Maltese would need to seek refuge in an African country. Then, we would be the odd one out, as we would be a small group of white people surrounded by large group of black people. Imagine how you would feel if you are treated differently, just because you are white*'.

Moving on to the involvement of children in decision-making processes, both child participants concurred that children should be involved in decision-making processes, in accordance to their age, experience and level of maturity. They also stated that the type of decision that need to be taken, must be also a determining factor that informs what specific cohort of children need to be consulted. As one girl exemplified '*Decisions about children with disability should be made in consultation with children with disability. They are the ones living this experience and therefore, they would know what their needs are. Children who are not living that reality will not have the right insight*'. At this stage of discussion, the two children were giving basic examples of how they were involved in decision-making in their everyday life, such as when choosing subjects in school. They also affirmed that when they wanted to voice their opinion on issues that affected them, they typically used a hierarchical approach. This means that they start off by approaching their immediate guardians and continue to take steps accordingly, such as writing emails to NGO. The children's optimistic display of confidence, awareness and knowledge of local structures and mechanisms at different levels in this focus group much differed from the previous two consultation groups.

Furthermore, in these focus groups the researchers noted that these two girls showed a high level of determination and empowerment to pursue their own decisions. This also contrasted the sentiment felt by the researchers in the preceding two cohorts. It was felt that this was vastly related to the extensive support and nurture provided by the nuns running this residential home. This continues to demonstrate the significant and direct link there is between the extent of support within the micro level and the strength of children's voices within the macro level.

The facilitators also observed that these children had strong insight on their actions and reactions. This may be clearly noted in the upcoming *verbatim* statement in which one of the girls explained in detail the approach she undertook when needing to report an incidence to an adult person in a decision-making position, in this case being the Head of School (HOS).

She narrated:

'One time I witnessed a group of children bullying a child with intellectual disability.

I could not take it.

I felt I had to intervene to defend her; so I decided to report to the HOS...

At first, I had butterflies in my stomach, as she is the HOS and I do not see her every day.

I did not know what mood I might find her in, or how she would react.

I was even worried that she might tell me off for telling on other children.

But I went to her office anyway.

I held my head up high as I spoke.

I kept myself straight.

I looked straight at her....

and I made sure I told her all the points that I wanted to say.'

Although the HOS did listen and investigated the incidence, this girl felt that the outcome was not favorable because the HOS solely relied on the negation of the perceived bullies and hence no action was then taken against them. Nevertheless, this child declared that these situations do not dishearten her, as she wants to be an advocate for any child whom she believes need protection.

In this focus groups, researchers noted that the children participating were highly sensitive to, and observant of, children in vulnerable situations, and they seemed to have an innate drive to act as defenders – as a voice to the voiceless. In fact, one girl said *'I feel that I am forced to act, and I feel the need to speak out. This is who I am; it part of my personality, my character'*. The other girl also added that when she is not able to speak out for another child, she tries to empower the other child to do so in safe manner, such as encourage her to approach a person they trust. One of the participants also proclaimed that the topic of human rights is so close to her heart that in the future, she desires to be work in this area as an activist. She conveyed that this is because she does not tolerate injustices. For the same reason, she aspires to be part of her school council, so that she can be the voice for these children.

On the other hand, both children conferred that they are also aware that, at times, speaking out may come part and parcel with a backlash. They gave personal examples of when adults around them listened to only one part of their story, or did not give them a chance to express themselves, and therefore were given the wrong impression of the real scenario. In these instances, the children said that first they reflect on what they could have done better, and what factors might have brought about

this reaction. This way, they will try to process the situation, and would be in a better position to rebut the matter in a constructive manner. These perspectives also again reinforce the advanced level of awareness and insight that these children have.

When discussing decision makers who influence child participation, the two girls identified guardians, social workers, health care professionals, police and politicians. Here, they mentioned instances related to police, judiciary and court proceedings, in which children were not given the opportunity to tell their side of the story. These young participants said that in these situations, children's voices are often left out, *'as if you cannot understand what is going on'*. They insisted that in fact children might have invaluable information which might even change the course of the whole court proceedings especially when it involves their parents, whom they have known closely over time. In light of the fact that the court room may a frightening place for a child to speak out, the child participants called for the creation of a comforting space for children in which able to speak out in a safe and serene environment with trusted professionals.

In terms of improving child participation at a local, national and European level, both children eagerly put forward several observations and suggestions. First and foremost, they identified the urgent need to support children in poverty, and those struck families by unemployment throughout the pandemic. They strongly asserted that they believed that *'Malta does have the resources to help out people in need only if we make good use of the idle resources we have on the island'*. Examples of these resources were mainly divided into two: physical space and human capacity. In regard to physical space, the children spoke at length about Malta's loss in keeping a large number of vacant and abandoned property, which they referred to as *'aimless and scope less buildings'*. These children maintained that if converted, these spaces may provide shelter for so many Maltese families and children in need, as well migrant people. One child even described the transformation of abandoned hotels and apartment blocks into supported living spaces, in which carers may be assigned on shift basis to take care of the residents in the buildings. The children also explicated that the utilisation of currently unused land may offer ample grounds to develop open areas, ranging from large parking areas to keep cars off our street curbs, to playing fields for children and families to enjoy. In addition, they sustained that this unused property may even be utilized to create recreational hubs for children. By creating free of charge safe spaces, the children from all walks of life can interact and play together, in turn reducing inequalities and exclusion, especially for those children who live in poverty or those hailing from minority groups. The child participants added that in these spaces, regular discussions can be held with children, which gives a space for children to give their views and suggestions on how to improve their localities. In this

sense, they mentioned that for the country lack of child participation is ultimately loss of human capacity. In the same way, they mentioned that this project can extend to keeping older people active by organizing volunteering projects within the local communities, again making sensible use of existing human resources. In this part of discussion, the children spoke with so much energy about their ideas for the future, further confirming how much children's voices thrive when given the right space, how much they have to say and how invaluable their input is.

In the latter part of the focus group, the discussion revolved around how children perceived to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The children first spoke of having to refrain from their recreational events, such as sports and music lessons. They also expressed that whilst they look forward to the re-opening of schools, they feel concerned about the adaption to the new rules of the mitigation health measures in schools, especially after long months of being away from this setting. They also narrated their experience throughout the first part of the pandemic in which they were not allowed to leave the residential home for four months. On a positive note, the children said that this time served to break off the daily alienated routine, and as time for the children within the home to get to know each other better, to be together, talk and share their stories. They confided that at times they felt bored of the same indoor activities, but at the same time they appreciated the fact they were in a secure place with ample recreational space and resources.

However, these children did disclose that children were not protected during the pandemic. They claimed that *'Adults just assumed all children are safe at home. While I was doing online learning, I could hear the parents of my friend fighting in the background... no one was checking if children were OK or not, if they are living in a safe environment'*. Although they are aware of the Supportline 179 that may provide practical help for children, the child participants perceived this current level of support as inadequate. One child explained that: *'they think that all problems of a child disappear and are solved once they gave them a place to live.'* She continued, *'what about the following up on the effect of trauma? There are children who are afraid to go to the bathroom at night or wake up in the middle of the night with nightmares. Someone needs to get to know these children. They need to ask them what they need, so that each child can have the support she needs individually, and by experienced and trained people who know these children'*. In regard to the most vulnerable children, the participants identified three cohorts, being: children living in poverty; children experiencing bullying, and children who are not entitled to free healthcare under the national health system. The latter group need to find ways to get money for the treatment that is not provided by the government, especially if they need to travel abroad. This girl said that she thinks that this is unjust.

For these children, politicians were identified as having a key role in bringing about cultural changes. The children opined that *'politicians must lead by example'* - putting an end to scaremongering regarding racism, as well as putting the voices of children on the forefront. This may be done by giving children's voices more visibility on the media, and by using children's direct quotations in their public speeches to show that they have consulted with children. That way, the politicians may indirectly instill a normative culture of listening to children's voices and of taking them seriously. The participants also believed that politicians have a great influence of people's perspectives as *'people look up to them'* and hence they should take a proactive approach to educating people by being positive role models. After all, as one child said:

'we are all human beings; our hearts beat the same way; we breathe the same way'.

At the end of the session, during check-out, the children both stated that they feel happy to have participated in this debate and much honored to know that they have been part of this process.

5.0 Key outcomes of the consultation process

At the end of each focus group, the facilitators carried out several evaluation sessions, in which key outcomes were extracted from the consultation process. Primarily, one must note that conducting a study within a context of a pandemic in a designated time frame, made it impossible to meet each group of children more than once. In the initial stages of this process, the researchers did discuss the possibility to use online means to carry out these focus groups. However, upon weighing pros and cons of online versus face to face focus groups⁷, the face-to-face semi-structured focus groups were deemed to be best data collection method to reach the objectives of the study. First of all, online focus groups would have posed a risk of exclusion those children who do not have the correct technology and access to internet. Moreover, the virtual environment is more impersonal, and hence is not able to capture the richness of people conversing together in a physical room. In fact, in the evaluation process the facilitators did reconfirm the validity of this choice, given that they were able to keep strong group dynamics and to maintain an environment in which the children can engage into a flow of conversation. This was particularly crucial in situations when children needed more time and reassurance to first trust the facilitators before they could open up and engage effectively in the discussion.

The COVID-19 mitigation measures that needed to be in place, such as the use of visors and/or masks as well as social distancing, made it process furthermore complex. Apart from the fact that both the facilitators and the children had to make extra effort for their words to be understood owing to the muffled sound projected with mask-wearing, some of the non-verbal facial cues were lost beneath the covered part of the persons' faces. Nonetheless, in line with the common phrase '*the eyes are the windows to one's soul*', the facilitators attempted to alleviate this limitation by giving attention to other visual non-verbal cues and body language, in attempt to capture the children's unsaid words and underlying emotions. Moreover, in order to reduce the physical barrier caused by distancing, the facilitators made an extra effort to maintain connectedness within the group.

An analogous element observed by the facilitators in the consultation process, was that the child participants in the first two consultation group needed substantial probing and encouragement to speak on the topic of child participation, and their approach at times seemed to be aloof. This

⁷ Bozkurt, Y. (2018). FACE TO FACE VERSUS ONLINE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS- WHEN, WHERE, WITH WHOM, FOR WHAT, WHICH ONE. In book: CURRENT DEBATES IN PUBLIC RELATION & COMMUNICATION STUDIES (pp.33-46). IJOPEC Publication.

contrasted the openness of children in third group. Upon reflection, the researchers concluded that in most part, this was neither related to a language barrier nor to the lack of the children's understanding or knowledge on the topic of discussion. Rather, it chiefly stemmed from the fact that these children craved immensely to speak of their prevailing basic needs; diverting their energy as well as the discussion towards issues hampering their rights within their daily lives. Hence, these children's hopes and aspirations were more associated to tangible, immediate and basic rights related to their next step ahead. At this juncture, one must not overlook the fact that although these children were so much diverse in regard to age, gender, nationality, backgrounds and religion, they had one thing in common: they were all uprooted; trying to find their way in new living conditions. One main difference however was that children in the first two focus groups had limited social support structures and recurrent barriers than the latter.

Hence, in the first two groups, it was felt that the topic of discussion was regarded by the children to be as something which comes secondary to their basic unmet daily needs. It was also noted that this perspective was amplified even further when discussing child participation within a national, and even more at a European and international level. At this stage of discussion, the children seemed to look puzzled, as if we were talking about something goofy, abstract or remote. A lingering sense of disconnection and detachment from the existing mechanisms and structures was grossly felt, along with lack of confidence on their potential to influence decision-making at these levels.

One overarching issue which echoed throughout these three consultation groups was the impact of multiculturalism and cultural diversity on these children. Although these children are living in Malta, the vast majority had foreign origins and diverse cultural backgrounds. Despite the optimal anti-discrimination legal framework that is in place in Malta, some non-Maltese children still maintained that they live in fear of social judgments and differential treatment because of their cultural expressions and backgrounds; and even more still feel unsafe to practice their own religion. Maltese children in the second and third focus group in fact sustained the same sentiment. Moreover, in the focus groups it was observed that those children whose primarily language was not English found it more difficult to find words to express themselves. There were even a few children who were unable to speak the two primary languages spoken in Malta, needing the support of a translator to communicate with us. In this scenario, the researchers wondered whether such focus group was in fact just a snapshot of these children's daily challenges, and how disheartening this may be for a child to make his/her voice heard.

Sadly, these focus groups also put into light the unfortunate reality that the more vulnerable a child is, the more he/she believes to having no voice. The most vulnerable children identified in this study were those who have no social support, with no comrades; children who feel alone in this world. For these children even the smallest thing seems impossible. This was mostly felt in the first and second group. For these children also affirmed that for them, any trivial actions committed brings on an amplified consequence; in turn holding them back from speaking out on any injustices faced; bringing about a cycle of helplessness. Here, it must be stated that the most dismaying moment for the facilitators throughout these focus groups was listening to children stating that they have given up and lost hope that there ever be support to them. Despite the fact that in the third group, children did not share the same sentiment, they did identify privileged minorities even within minorities, and most disadvantaged groups within vulnerable groups.

This report only captures a helicopter view of these children's perspective. Much deeper and telescopic data may be extracted if a larger scale study is carried out to further explore and analyze these rich experiences and perspectives of these children. Merely by looking at each child, one could see that each one held a story, a baggage of experience, stories never shared. In the limited time we had in the focus groups, it was unthinkable to imagine what it may have been like to live through the experiences shared, even for us adults, let alone as children. This made the researchers reflect on the impact of these experiences on the children's resilience as well on their mental and emotional wellbeing, hence bringing into light the extent of professional psycho-social support needed for these children.

Ultimately, this study highlights the needs to identify the minorities within minorities, as the most vulnerable children are likely the ones who will fall out the net, and unfortunately without no-one noticing. It also reveals the importance of creating a sense of purpose, identity and wellbeing in the lives of these children, building on the remains of these children's dreams and aspirations.

Moreover, this research underlines the importance of having professional and nurturing people who work directly with children, given that adults are often the main source of support for children, and their only link to the outside world. It is only with this specialized support that children will be able to venture in society as resilient, decent, and skilled citizens, and as not broken human beings. Not only would children's wellbeing benefit but likewise would society, as the crisis of morality and helplessness may be broken – and these children will no longer feel that they have nothing left to lose, and their future will no longer look bleak.