

Draft Speech by Hon. Clyde Puli, Parliamentary Secretary for Youth and Sport at the opening of the Seminar on Empowerment of Youth Organisations and Youth led civil society initiatives in the South Mediterranean Framework

Good morning. First, let me welcome you all most heartily to Malta. I trust that the coming days will be thought-provoking and inspiring and will mark an important step on a journey that leads to greater understanding and mutual support. In this context, I want to thank the partners who have come together to organise this seminar and who are represented here today: the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe, the League of Arab States, Euromed Youth Platform, the North-South Centre and Aġenzija Zghazagh, the Maltese Youth Agency that recently celebrated its first year in operation. The enthusiasm and commitment that the partners and all of you present here today have shown auger well for the future and is a source of inspiration to us all who live by the Mediterranean – Our White Sea.

The tumultuous events of recent times in North African and Middle Eastern countries bordering the Mediterranean have taken the world at large by surprise and have presented many challenges as well as opportunities. These challenges and opportunities also extend to and include youth policy and Euro-Med youth cooperation. The scale of the challenge has many aspects and demography in particular sheds a revealing light. Over the coming decade, approximately 65% of the population of the MENA region will be under 24 years of age. The youth population of the region since the 1990's has grown by 50% in Libya and Tunisia and by 65% in Egypt. The World Bank's global food price index rose by 15% between October 2010 and January 2011 typifying the upward pressure on consumer prices and the cost of living in the region.

The challenges people in the region face are daunting, particularly young people who have been to the fore in initiating and indeed fighting for change and on whom the future depends. In seeking to support the young people of the region, the international community must now take account of the broad cultural, ethnic and civic landscape of emerging democracies and not just focus on the upper tiers of governmental and public administration. This is particularly so in the context of developing youth policy and strengthening Euro-Med youth cooperation.

However, recent events are also a cause for optimism and hope. More open societies will facilitate the emergence of economies that will generate the jobs and opportunities which young people need to remain at home. Better education and training systems can provide young people with the skills and competencies needed for their communities and countries to prosper in the world economy. The youth bulge in the region can be a driver of economic growth and social stability. However, without proper

education and employment opportunities the youth bulge can be a drag on economic growth as well as a challenge to social cohesion.

For the development of youth policy in the region the challenges are clear. How can youth policy support young people in building a tolerant and progressive society in their own country? How can youth policy address conflicting values? Can youth policy bring about a shared future for youth?

I am glad to say that there are many initiatives already underway that are providing responses to these searching questions. The European Union is placing an increasing focus on neighbouring regions as evidenced by the Commissions Communication “A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood”. Under the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field, “Youth in the World” is one of the priority areas for action by Member States. Through partnership and joint programmes, such as “Southern Facility” , the European Union and the Council of Europe are working together to support the transition to democracy in the Southern Mediterranean by focusing on strengthening civil society through the promotion of human rights and the rule of law by means of targeted cooperation and intercultural dialogue.

We all recognise the need for effective coordination, cooperation and mutual support between all the stakeholders in the region if we are to achieve a sustainable impact. As one of those stakeholders, I am glad to say that we in Malta feel that we need to take an active role. We are the “nearest neighbour” and the future of the region impacts on the future of Malta. From our perspective, the seminar affords all of us the opportunity to focus on how we can, together, empower youth organisations and civil society in the emerging democracies through youth led civil society initiatives and the role that youth policy can play in supporting young people to build democratic societies; a youth policy that is based on a shared partnership with young people in the region.

The challenges the region faces are considerable and while there is a need for effective long term strategies and supports there is also an onus on us all to respond here and now. So let those of us involved with supporting the young people of the region in meeting their needs and fulfilling their dreams act now and empower them.

Thank you and every good wish for your ongoing work.