2000 Gozo Conference

Improving the Employability of the Workforce in Gozo

Bank of Valletta
Malta's Leading Bank
Industry and Manpower: Unleashing Gozo’s potential

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On behalf of the council and members of the Gozo Business Chamber may I thank the Bank of Valletta for giving us the opportunity to express our views in this Conference and for their continuous help and support to sustain the Chamber in its endeavour to promote business opportunities in our island region.

We hope that this intervention will serve to achieve the following objectives:

• To explain our position as a business chamber regarding the issue of employability and the development of human resources;

• To communicate our belief that Gozo is unique and its people deserve to be given the opportunity to keep contributing to the welfare of their little community;

• To inform the public that the chamber believes in the potential of the people of Gozo and is committed to serve their interests by facing the challenges of change and competition with confidence and optimism;

• To invite all of you, who have at heart the prosperity of our island, to contribute to its sustainable and self-reliant development with dedication and commitment.

Before going any further, may I define the words “manpower” and “industry” in the title of my topic. By “manpower” the Gozo Business Chamber means:

“All the women and men who together form the small Gozitan community and with whose mental and physical potential we intend to protect what we have achieved so far and to guarantee a better future for our children.”

By “industry” we are referring to all the sectors of the economy, primary, secondary and tertiary, that is,

“those areas of activity where our women and men, through their productive performance, contribute to the generation of wealth in Gozo.”

In the face of a world that is always becoming smaller, where the only constant is change, where fierce competition is becoming the order of the day and where work practices and procedures that were considered excellent two decades ago are being challenged and scrapped in search of more effective ones,

“How can we together preserve the best traditions of our culture and generate new wealth in Gozo?”

Given the limited natural resources available on our island, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that our strength lies with our people: “unleashing Gozo’s potential”, and, to be more specific, unleashing the “human potential”.

Appreciating the importance of the human potential in the development process of a community is not enough. The problem of translating it into practical action forms the major challenge for business and political leaders. It is time to have a close look at
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ourselves, to acknowledge what we have achieved and to be mature enough to understand and to accept that our past successes offer no guarantees for the future.

World-wide, especially in the most industrialised and advanced societies, work organisations, peripheral communities and regions are questioning their existence and rethinking their way of doing things in view of the fast changing conditions over time. What has worked successfully yesterday very often is no longer viable today. And Gozo is no exception.

The fast changing realities of the world surrounding us, and within which we are expected to compete successfully, are exerting forces on our small operations that we, perhaps even more than our counterparts in mainland Malta, have previously not encountered. New problems and new challenges demand new solutions, new processes and new strategies. It is pertinent to make a quick reference here to the not uncommon criticism of some sceptics who question our belief that Gozo is not simply a microcosm of the Maltese Islands.

The uniqueness of our peripheral situation and of our dual insularity cannot be overemphasised. Our strengths and our weakness, our threats and our opportunities, our problems and our challenges create our unique identity. This identity constitutes our reality and indicates that there are no readily available development models that can be imported. Something needs to be done to enable our people themselves to initiate and maintain our own island's development process.

This, however, does not mean that the Gozo Business Chamber intends to isolate itself and work on its own. On the contrary its objective is to strengthen Gozo's presence in the formulation and implementation of national policies through active collaboration and involvement. The Chamber believes that, given our peripheral and regional problems, a stronger effort has to be made on the part of national authorities to give Gozo the treatment it deserves.

We believe that Gozo deserves an industrial policy that takes into account its unique characteristics and it is our responsibility to ensure that our policymakers on the national level refrain from treating dismissingly the islands of Malta and Gozo as one and the same. A recent example is the White Paper “Prosperity in Change: Challenges and Opportunities for Industry”, published in December 1999, where reference to Gozo’s specific needs was hardly visible let alone acknowledged or taken into account. Furthermore, the island needs a concrete, coherent and comprehensive regional policy that invites the dedicated co-
operation between the public and the private sectors - an intensive Public Private Partnership that goes beyond a few scribbled and soon forgotten statements.

The Chamber believes that our island has now reached a crucial stage in its industrial development where we can no longer rely on an abundant, industrious and cheap labour force to attract fresh local and foreign investment. We have reached the stage where our competitive edge depends more than ever before on the quality of our people.

It is within these parameters that the Gozo Business Chamber intends to initiate a self-reliant development process through the unleashing of Gozo’s human potential. We do not intend to allow ourselves to go through the sad experience that other unfortunate islands have suffered in the recent past, that is, isolation and desertion. To take one extreme example, the Greek island Kastelorizo had a population of 17,000 in 1918, thirty years later, its inhabitants amounted to 3,000, and today the total population is merely 250. This is not an isolated case, a number of Irish islands have also suffered the same fate.

The Chamber is set to do its utmost to prevent the social bleeding that has occurred in other peripheral regions, from happening in Gozo. Unleashing our human potential means, first of all, preventing our young and talented people from deserting us. We can do so by providing them with all the space that they require to put into practice what they had striven for during their long years of education and by giving them the opportunity to continue to develop themselves through their daily work activity and through well planned and effective adult education and further training programmes.

Unleashing our human potential also means that we are obliged to care for and give our full support to the large number of self-employed workers and entrepreneurs who constitute one fourth of our gainfully occupied population. These too have their particular needs to improve their skills and to acquire new ones in order to pro-act to emerging demands and to keep up to the requirements of their market.

Aware of the existing limitations on the individual organisational level the Chamber, in collaboration with the Institute for Development Policy and Management of the University of Manchester and the Executive Development Assessment Centre, has launched a Management and Professional Development Programme. This initial programme was open for those members who want to further develop themselves as leaders, managers and professionals while providing for the sustainable and self-reliant regeneration of Gozo.

The aim of the programme is to initiate a participatory and collaborative development process amongst Gozitan business leaders, managers and professionals in the private sector. On an individual basis the participants will get to know themselves better in terms of their performance as team members,
their preferred working and learning style, their problem solving tendency, how they cope with uncertainty, how they deal with complex situations, how they perceive change and whether they can promote it.

On a community level the programme will generate knowledge in the form of answers to the following questions: What is our collective profile as a business community? How have we jointly addressed problems and challenges so far? What strategies and initiatives do we require together for the future? How can the strength of our differences be taken advantage of and transformed as positive capacities? How can we collectively convert the threats and problems that are facing our small society into challenges and opportunities? In short, how can we together preserve our environment and the best traditions of our culture and generate new wealth in Gozo?

The final outcome of the programme is to establish a continuous community-based action learning process organised in small teams of business leaders, managers and professionals who work on real problems of immediate relevance and importance to their business and professional activity. This team process will hopefully develop into a high level of competence, a capacity for active adaptation and proactivity, effective communication and strong collaborative relations amongst a significant number of self-employed entrepreneurs and small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

There is no doubt that SMEs form a vital part of the social, economic and industrial infrastructure of Gozo. They are facing increasing international competition, rapidly changing technologies and a turbulent environment. Our limited access to material, financial, technical and human resources, together with our lack of financial resources to invest in people and to provide the possibility for further education, can no longer be overlooked.

In unleashing the human potential the Chamber is fully aware of the importance of including all levels of workers in this development process. Every effort will be made for this initial learning and development process to have a cascading effect. Committed business leaders, managers and professionals participating in the creation of this process will themselves extend the network dynamics to their own organisation and initiate similar learning and development processes by means of employee participation and involvement programmes amongst their own employees. This will evolve into an inter- and intra-organisational learning and development process through which every worker will be given the opportunity to learn and develop his/her potential and to fully contribute to the regeneration of Gozo.

Through this participatory and collaborative learning process the Gozo Business Chamber is set to face the challenges ahead and to unleash the human potential through the creation of a network of SMEs in Gozo. This network will offer mutual support and enable the participating companies to
pool resources. It will also open up new avenues for collaboration with other institutions in Gozo, in Malta and abroad thus seeking to access and take full advantage of the provision of technical and other assistance.

In Gozo itself the Chamber is eager to explore how to create new synergies among the different sectors of economic activity and how to build alliances that would lead to fresh and innovative business activities while strengthening those operations that already exist. One example could be a strategy that strengthens the links between agriculture, the agro-industry and agro-tourism, while another could further integrate the crafts industry, cottage industry and tourism.

On a different level, the Chamber has already aired its interest in the development of Gozo as a financial and trading centre. Specific reference was made to areas of business that include: internationally operating trading companies; software development companies; international ‘back office’ operator companies and e-commerce companies operating in specialised sectors such as in the leisure industry. We are prepared to generate concrete proposals to explore these areas of business with the support of Malta’s financial institutions and other government authorities. The organisers of this conference, being a financial institution, may take this as an invitation for collaboration.

Another potential area to explore is the fast growing business associated with international trade in higher education and training services. Because of the present shift from industry-based economies to service- and knowledge-based ones, the demand for adult education and training services is growing at a rapid pace in all advanced societies and in countries that are striving to join them. The leading exporters in this trade include Great Britain, France, the United States of America and Australia. Canada is also gaining ground by exploiting its location, being immediately north to the largest education and training market in the world, and is targeting Central and Eastern European countries as potentially rich markets for the export of ‘made in Canada’ education and training services. In addition to the student fees, which form only one aspect of the financial benefits that accrue to institutions recruiting students from abroad, the local economy would benefit significantly from the well-known multiplier effects of the presence of international students in a community.

These are but a few of the possible areas of business activity that the Chamber believes would generate new opportunities where our people, especially the young and those with an entrepreneurial spirit, would unleash themselves from the shackles of traditional employment configurations and start looking at work and business opportunities with a new mindset.

On the international level the Gozo Business Chamber is seeking to gain new experiences and learn from the experiences of other island regions. At
present the Chamber is in the process of applying to become a member of the Network of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the Island Regions of the European Union. “The network’s main object is to serve and promote the particularities and the problems of the islands and to undertake a continuous effort for their solution.”

In a world characterised by rapid change, uncertainty and fierce competition it is becoming ever more difficult to predict the outcomes of change interventions. What can be predicted is that people can either wait to see what happens to them, or can attempt to create their own futures. Our view of the kind of networking we want to create is not in terms of structure where inputs and outputs can be specified in operational terms. We view a network as a process and as a strategy for the sustainable and self-reliant development of our island - an on-going and evolving process of exploration, understanding, creativity and innovation developing from within the relationships amongst a number of actors.

The Chamber acknowledges that this is not a simple and straightforward process. It involves a change process. And change is a complex and messy job. However, we are confident that by involving those amongst us who know, care and can do something about the problems and challenges ahead, every obstacle will eventually be overcome.

If we are truly committed to preserve together our environment and the best traditions of our culture and to generate new wealth in Gozo then we are also duty bound to give our best to our little community. We can do so together in a collaborative and participatory manner, where the spirit of co-operation and solidarity prevails over the spirit of competitiveness and rivalry, adopting the healthy rules of the “winner-winner” game rather than the destructive rules of the “winner-loser” game.

The way forward envisaged by the Gozo Business Chamber involves a long-term strategy that provides for the self-reliant development of our island through the unleashing of the human potential at all levels of productive activity. The learning and development process that is already under way gives space for and requires the input of every one of us who has at heart the well-being, the prosperity and the creation of more common wealth in Gozo.

To reach these goals the Chamber is committed to proactively involve itself in a continuous learning and change process with a mindset that leads to situations where one can springboard from opportunity to opportunity rather than being blocked by threats and problems. We are committed to unleash our human potential and to liberate ourselves from relying on past successes and to open up new horizons that are future-oriented and that create the ability to get us out of a ‘react mode’ so that we can, proactively, position ourselves in the ‘driver’s seat’, shaping, rather than being shaped, by change.