

Children's needs cannot wait

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The coronavirus pandemic has increased the risk of young children in Malta experiencing poverty within their immediate environments. Photo: Shutterstock.com

Did you know that from research on child development we now know that the architecture of the brain develops at its fastest rate during the first years of a child's life, creating the foundations for the well-being, health, education and lifetime success? Such evidence may serve as food for thought for several stakeholders in Malta during these challenging COVID-19 times and beyond. Young children's needs cannot wait.

According to the UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 2020, Malta ranks as one of the bottom

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three from 41 high-income countries in children's mental and physical well-being as well as their academic and social skills. Also, Malta has the second-lowest percentage in children's physical well-being.

The same article concludes that all countries – no matter the ranking – have room for significant improvement to ensure children's holistic well-being. It calls for all countries to act on three fronts, namely: consult children, connect policies and create strong foundations.

Where does Malta stand within this triad and what would be the next step?

Coming from an early years background, I argue that, now, more than ever, Malta needs to look at and address these three fronts from an early years perspective. If we want to maximise our children's health, education and well-being, it is time to start digging at the roots rather than just hacking at the leaves.

Consult children: Adultism, the belief that adults know better than children, especially young children, is one of the barriers to child participation in consultation processes. The promotion of meaningful participation of young children, as stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, nurtures strong foundations for social cohesion, socially-just communities, and active citizenship, and provides a healthier and smoother transition into adulthood.

“ Policies' programmes and frameworks should harvest children's views ”

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society realised the meaningful participation of young children in practice through some of its community-based projects. Also, some local

researchers, institutions and voluntary organisations have worked, and still do, to give voice to young children voices. However, do such efforts always result in young children's voices being heard? Policies' programmes and frameworks that concern children should harvest children's views.

Connect policies: Malta needs to invest in the formation of an early years network or advisory governance group formed by stakeholders groups and sectors to co-create overarching policies and develop strategic action plans. All sectors (health, education, economy, etc) and various stakeholder groups (government, civil society, private sectors, etc) are responsible for children's overall health, well-being and education and in achieving policy outcomes.

Multisectoral collaboration is instrumental in strengthening the connection of policies, programmes, services and procedures as from the earliest years. Simultaneously, vertical coordination between governance levels is needed to maximise the synergy and effect on young children's well-being, health and education.

In our society, barriers to such collaboration might include structural, procedural, financial and professional issues.

It is time for major surgery in the fragmented foundations of the different sectors that tap into the health, education and well-being of the early years in Malta. Effective and sustainable local initiatives operating through a systemic vision and strategic partnerships, such as the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing for Society, should be reflected at the policy level.

Malta needs to establish a broader unified vision that shifts from a programmatic to a systemic approach, employing multisectoral action and encouraging integrated national policies for brighter beginnings to young children's well-being, health and education.

Create strong foundations: A tree with strong roots laughs at storms. The UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 2020 draws attention to the Sustainable Development Goals and calls for governments to invest their efforts on several aspects, including child poverty and high-quality early years education and care to construct stronger foundations. The coronavirus pandemic has increased the risk of young children in Malta experiencing poverty within their immediate environments.

It is well-documented that early childhood is the right place to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty if the use of funds prioritise the immediate and long-term

needs of all children who are at risk. Such spending will target not only child poverty but also

health, economy and productivity in future years. The HighScope Perry Preschool programme in the US projected annual social rates of return of seven to 12 per cent. In other words, every dollar invested resulted in \$7-\$12 benefit per person (personal, societal and intergenerational benefits, such as crime reduction).

High-quality early years programmes have direct positive effects on child poverty, well-being, cognitive, physical, social and emotional development of children, immediately and long-term. If the early years are so critical, why are the roles of child carers and kindergarten educators not recognised as a profession in Malta?

Valuing the early years profession in the Maltese Education Act and developing a strategic plan that paves the way to the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce in Malta is a critical next step if we want to create more substantial foundations. Robust legislation, courageous leaders, accountability and commitment within the different sectors are required to generate political priority for early investment in children's well-being, health and education during these challenging times and beyond. There is no time to lose.

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