

PRESS RELEASE: Dignity is not a fundraising tool

To:

The President of the Malta Council for Voluntary Sector (MCVS), Ms Gertrude Buttigieg
The Commissioner for Voluntary Organisations (OCVO), Mr Jesmond Saliba
Hon. Katya De Giovanni MP, Committee Chairperson, Social Affairs Committee, Malta Parliament
Perit David Xuereb, Chairperson, MCESD

From:

Prof. Andrew Azzopardi, University of Malta

C.C.

Minister Hon. Julia Farrugia MP, Minister for Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector
Minister Michael Falzon MP, Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights
Deputy Speaker and Shadow Minister for Sport and Volunteering, Hon. David Agius MP
The Media
The Members of Parliament
The General Public

Date:

5/1/2026

Subject:

Dignity is not a fundraising tool

Preamble:

I urge you to convene a public debate, leading to a national convention on charity fundraising.

It is time for Malta to confront an issue it has avoided for far too long.

To this end, I put forward 13 tangible recommendations to fundamentally reframe the role of NGOs; from charity to social justice and dignity.

Context:

L-Istrina, Dar Bjorn, Puttinu Cares, Missio Malta, Richmond Foundation, Dar tal-Providenza, and Caritas Malta telethons to mention a few, are regular fixtures of Maltese public life. Not to mention that these large organisations are super organised and resourceful when it comes to generate money leaving the small ones to lick their wounds.

Let us be clear: the work of these organisations is indispensable. The public generosity they inspire is genuine, and the funds raised are, by and large, well spent.

But that is not the main issue of concern.

The issue is that these events institutionalise a model of charity that depends on public exposure, emotional leverage, and the recycling of personal trauma, in a country that insists it is economically affluent, growing, and socially responsible.

When people disclose the most painful details of their lives to access support, we are not witnessing solidarity but we are witnessing a failure of the system.

1. Televised suffering is not social policy:

Telethons and mass fundraising spectacles rely on stories of illness, disability, poverty, and desperation to unlock compassion. They turn structural needs into individual dramas. They reward visibility over rights. And they quietly normalise the idea that care is conditional on public sympathy.

We have normalised a culture where people are expected to perform their suffering in exchange for help. That should alarm anyone who believes in dignity or equality.

This is not a neutral model. It creates dependency, shifts responsibility away from institutions and the State, and places the emotional burden squarely on those already in vulnerable positions.

This reality sits uncomfortably alongside the repeated assertion that Malta has an affluent and growing economy; a record-breaking national budget; and, an annual public spending of approximately €2.6 billion on social services

This being true, then Malta must confront a difficult question: Why do people still need to appear on television, in the street (collecting in charity collection boxes), or in public campaigns to secure basic support for health, care, and social inclusion?

Charity should complement social policy and not compensate for its failures. And, let's face it – this form of charity has become the breeding ground for reputational and potentially other forms of laundering.

2. The €2.6 billion question:

This model becomes indefensible when placed next to the facts.

Malta spends approximately €2.6 billion per year on social services and benefits. This not to mention the money dedicated to education, health, inclusion, housing, VOs, local government, to mention just a few who contribute directly to the quality of life.

We are repeatedly told that the economy is booming, that budgets are historic, and that Malta is a success story.

So, the question is unavoidable: Why, in a supposedly affluent state, do people still need to beg politely, publicly, and emotionally for essential support and services?

You cannot celebrate record budgets on one hand and broadcast human distress on the other. That contradiction is not accidental. People with tough life experiences are being made vulnerable, politicians are drawing sympathy for their own purposes and this is disempowering and patronising.

Charity was never meant to replace the State, nor to serve the leaches, especially with the general election round the corner.

Yet in Malta, it increasingly functions as a parallel welfare system, funded not through rights or taxation, but through guilt, spectacle, and annual emergencies.

To add insult to injury the level of leadership at service provision and social policy in this sector has never been so weak.

3. This is a demand for change:

I am demanding better systems so NGOs are no longer forced to rely on outdated, harmful fundraising practices to survive.

NGOs are trapped in this model. When the only way to survive is to run a telethon, the problem is structural not organisational.

4. A direct call to MCVS and the Commissioner for Voluntary Organisations:

I would like to emphasise and demand that the MCVS and the Commissioner for Voluntary Organisations:

- Publicly acknowledge the ethical cost of exposure-based fundraising;
- Commit to a transition away from shame-based charity models;
- Champion dignity-first, rights-based, and sustainable funding systems;

Across Europe and beyond, NGOs are funded through automatic micro-donations, payroll giving, participatory public funds, social impact financing, crowd funding initiatives, community foundations, and transparent digital platforms, all initiatives that can be taken on by the people themselves, without placing people in the spotlight or demanding personal disclosure.

5. Recommendations:

I am inviting you to consider these and other recommendations at a National Convention.

Recommendation 1: To do this I am exhorting these two entities to convene a national, open, and critical public debate.

Avoiding this discussion is no longer neutral. Silence protects the status quo.

I would like to therefore call for a national public debate that:

- Critically examines existing charity fundraising models
- Confronts the ethical cost of exposure-based appeals
- Explores sustainable, dignity-first alternatives
- Clarifies the respective responsibilities of the state, civil society, and the public

Social operators, participants of telethon campaigns, volunteers, beneficiaries, survivors, policy makers, politicians' economists, social operators, academics, media, NGOs, professionals should all be invited in this National Convention.

Recommendation 2: Automatic micro-donations via payments

Platforms in countries like the Netherlands and Sweden enable citizens to opt-in to small automatic donations through digital payments, quietly generating reliable revenue without public solicitation. We already do this in some places of work to pay for our union membership – maybe it is time to incentivise this system. Used widely employees commit small monthly donations directly from salaries. This method builds regular funding streams without public panhandling and can be matched by employers.

Recommendation 3: Participatory public funds

This is an idea based on the notion of developing a foundation, a concept I have been talking about for some time.

There are also countries whereby there is participatory budgeting experiments and citizens decide how portions of public funds are allocated to community projects democratising funding and reducing reliance on street appeals.

Recommendation 4: Social impact bonds/results-based funding

Develop innovative platforms as they did in countries like the UK that use results-based financing where funds are released only when measurable goals are met improving accountability and donor confidence.

Recommendation 5: Charity lotteries

Embedding giving into lottery ticket purchases.

Recommendation 6: A more thorough and organised product/item donation platform/s

It allows for donors to contribute needed products instead of money, redirecting support into essential supplies without financial barriers or stigma.

Recommendation 7: Strengthening crowdfunding for specific projects

Digital platforms can help raise loads of money in a transparent and regularised way without the need of public begging.

Recommendation 8: Cause-related marketing campaigns

Business-aligned giving can support public good at scale by capitalising on their ‘giving’ initiatives. We need to strengthen legislation.

Recommendation 9: Cooperatives

We have been taking about this way too long. We need to strengthen this concept and bring it into the social sector, this could be a life saver for NGOs sustainability.

Recommendation 10: Social Enterprise Act

This is a law that has been enacted to govern social enterprise organisations whereby entities combine commercial activity with a social purpose (e.g., community benefit, inclusion of disadvantaged workers). This concept needs to be promoted further.

Recommendation 11: Charity collection boxes

Charity collection boxes become illegal – they are inappropriate and dehumanising.

Recommendation 12: MCESD

The Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD), an advisory council that issues opinions and recommendations to the Maltese Government on matters of economic and social relevance, is invited to place this theme on its agenda as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation 13: Social Affairs Committee – Malta Parliament

I am requesting that the Social Affairs Committee discuss this matter at the earliest possible opportunity, with a view to convening a national public debate culminating in a national convention on charity fundraising.

These are only a few ideas. There are other alternatives we can come up with and we know this.

6. Final word: The need for a national reset:

If Malta is truly affluent, then no one should need to parade their hardship to survive. If dignity matters, then charity models must change. And if leadership exists, it must now show itself.

International experience shows that it is possible to fund NGOs, social projects, and individual needs without humiliating beneficiaries, exhausting volunteers, or relying on spectacle. Malta must now have an honest, public conversation about transitioning away from outdated, shame-based fundraising practices.