



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Losing sight of inclusion

It is a fact written in statistics that this country is doing well on a number of fronts. Economic indicators on a multitude of areas indicate optimism and progress, namely, low unemployment rates, a drop in the energy costs that is leading to lower fuel and energy tariffs, respectable inbound tourism indicators amongst other.



All of this, notwithstanding a spike in the public sector expenditure, a drop in exports, institutionalised tax evasion (that we can't seem to find a way how to resolve) and a bureaucratic machine that doesn't seem to be slacking-off any time soon. I believe that the current administration is to take credit that good decisions were taken and have given economic direction. It is also true that this government did not shock the country and implemented an economic policy based on a number of decisions taken by previous Nationalist-run governments. This is good and most certainly a reflection of political maturity. Acknowledging the positives that took place in the past and developing one's future is a noble and commendable attitude indeed.

One also needs to value a number of measures taken when it comes to the social dimension of this country; new community homes for persons with disability, free childcare, improved social benefits, strengthening of disability-related legislation, giving long awaited rights to LGBTI persons in addition to others.

Nevertheless, with the risk of sounding downbeat, all of this needs to be understood within the grand scheme of things and all the above successes will mean very little when we take the following into consideration. It is as good an economy as it is in ensuring that people who are on the brink of poverty are there no more.

It is as good an economy, as the last individual who has to sleep on a bench in a public garden, hoping that hope will not die on him or her, is there no more.

It is as good an economy as the services provided and the benefits given go to where people need them most and not pocketed by administrators, bureaucrat or ill-intentioned people.

It is as good an economy as the quality of life and the standard of living of every individual is improving, more disposable income, improved health, education and social services and a sense of happiness and serenity.

It is as good an economy as those children at the margins who have lost the desire to play and to learn, to laugh and to explore because of the mess they have to face day in day out.

It is as good an economy when single parents, old people, people at the margins of society can make it to any level they want to.

It is as good an economy as those waiting to be operated or treated for some condition or other do not have to squirm to the Malta Community Chest Fund because the State has no money to spare for medicines and treatment that can give them a prospect to live.

It is as good an economy when social injustice exists no more, where the signing of treaties and declarations goes beyond photo shoots.

Lest we forget, as long as our politicians are focusing their discourses on inclusion, it is a claim that we are still experiencing exclusion. We also know that unfortunately for a number of economic unjustifiable

reasons the more wealth is generated the wider the gap between those who can do well and those who are at the bottom of the heap.

It is very clear that this government has focused its intent to beef up and strengthen the middle class. I'm no economist but the reasons for this are quite straight-forward - the middle class spends a lot more when given ready money.

Then again a contrasting argument is that unless we generate economic wealth we will be unable to provide for those in need. However, what worries me is that what appears to be happening is that wealth unfortunately is not seeping through the people who need it most.

Let's face it, the seemingly systematic disadvantage experienced by a number of minority groups has been challenged and tackled through a number of initiatives but complete, holistic and genuine inclusion remain to be achieved.

We need to face the music. We still have poverty that sits around us with increasing conviction. There are so many people who live in misery and many others who are exploited.

Social exclusion is the consequence of a political economy in which some groups secure privilege and exert power at the expense of others.

This phenomenon remains a deeply disturbing issue and integrated policies and measures are not leaving the desired effect. Exclusion comes in different shapes and forms; lack of income and meaningful employment, deficiency in providing

accommodation, education, healthcare and real social participation.

I believe that one of the problems that we need to contend with is the fact that our political parties are doing away with an ideology and instead replacing it with liberal democratic policies and a market economy that is only interested in regulating the wider picture. This lack of confrontation amongst ideologies has been replaced by a 'head-on collision' amongst cultural, economic and ethnic groups, leaving many struggling in the margins.

Within this debate around social inclusion, the relevance of the national state as being powerless comes into the fray. Countries nowadays are regulated by the markets, international agreements, oil prices and the rest, with little or hardly any control that can be governed by the nation. A case in point for example is that our budget has to go to the EU for approval prior to being approved by our Representatives.

So the need for social exclusion to have a coordinated response becomes even more urgent.

We need to try and understand and only then respond to a reality where you have all members in our community that are welcomed, represented, have a voice and sit comfortably in the mainstream instead of having citizens who are ostracised, ignored, bemired and cut-off leaving them no friends, colleagues, kinship groups and sense of engagement. Until we have these people struggling emotionally, financially or socially, inclusion is still far-gone.

“Ghandi xi Nghid”
by THE MALTA INDEPENDENT

Dr Andrew Azzopardi
 Senior Lecturer, Department of
 Youth and Community Studies
 Faculty for Social Wellbeing,
 University of Malta &
 Broadcaster - Ghandi xi Nghid
www.andrewazzopardi.org