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**SPEECH BY THE HON. JOHN DALLI, MINISTER FOR SOCIAL POLICY AT THE OPENING OF THE SEMINAR ON ACCESSIBILITY FOR ALL, ORGANISED BY THE CHAMBER OF ARCHITECTS AND CO-FINANCED BY THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND - ST JULIAN'S – 15<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2008**

Members of the Council of the Kamra tal-Periti, Distinguished Guests,

It is my pleasure to address this seminar on Design for Accessibility being organised by the Kamra tal-Periti.

This seminar is part financed by the European Social Fund and falls under Measure 2.3 on Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion. Strengthening the human capital and providing training based on needs, are core requirements to ensure a flexible and adjustable workforce in Malta, able to cope with the rapid changes evolving from a globalised economy.

In order to facilitate and mobilise this key resource, this Measure provides a number of initiatives to support the scaling-up of qualifications. Actions include a needs assessment in terms of training content, the provision of responsive training schemes, the provision of research and mobility bursary grants and tackling the issue of integrating both disabled and socially excluded persons pro-actively into the Maltese labour market through specific employment schemes.

Continued Professional Development (or CPD) is a key aspect in achieving a workforce that is adequately equipped to tackle the challenges of today's economy. In particular, the continued professional development of architects and engineers is instrumental in ensuring that today's professionals are in a position to offer a better service to their clients and to society at large.

It is my understanding that Continued Professional Development is not currently a requirement locally for the perit. It can however be argued that CPD is always an obligation of a professional advisor. In other words, a professional is obliged to keep up to date with the fast evolving technological changes in building material technologies and practices and energy conservation

technologies, as well as the ever changing regulations. CPD should however not only provide for this, but it should also ensure that the professional develops expertise in particular areas.

This seminar deals with the all important aspect of Accessibility for All, or to use a more recent nomenclature, Universal Design, and is being organised in collaboration with the National Commission Persons with Disability (known as the KNPD). Since its inception in 1987, the Commission has been guided by the Social Model of Disability, which views the major, root causes of disablement as social, man-made constructs. Thus, the primary energies of KNPD have not been aimed at changing disabled people, but at the eradication of social difficulties through the removal of barriers.

While these barriers can take on a multiplicity of different forms, lack of physical accessibility consistently remains one of the most serious barriers to social inclusion. It is thus an equally grave cause of social isolation for disabled people, and here one must also include elderly people.

In the year 2000 the Maltese House of Representatives unanimously passed into law the Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act. In the same year the KNPD issued a first edition of its Access for All Design Guidelines, followed up by a revised edition in 2005.

It is my understanding that these guidelines were admittedly received with resistance at the start, but through education campaigns and information seminars such as this, professionals are slowly but surely realising the importance of accessibility in the buildings and spaces they design. Creating an inclusive environment requires a change of mentality, a change in traditional practices and conviction that an inclusive society is both desirable and attainable.

There is, of course, still a lot to be done. And Government has a lead role to play in this field. For example in the sector of social housing, government has a unique opportunity to lead the way in developing homes that not only are sustainable, and adequate to meet today's living standards, but also to create homes that, in the long run, provide spaces for their occupants that are accessible throughout their life span. The Housing Authority, for example, already has two schemes aimed at bettering the lives of disabled persons.

One scheme provides grants for the adaptation of homes to cater for occupants with special needs, while another scheme provides grants for the installation of lifts within homes. However these are measures that occur post-requirement – that is, they are applied for only after the need arises. Wouldn't it be much better if our homes and public spaces are designed to be fully accessible at the outset? This would certainly raise the value of the homes and spaces that we are

providing for our citizens and offer a better built environment within which we all live, work and play.

The Agenzija SAPPOR, within the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, formerly known as Supported Living Division, was set up by the Ministry for Social Policy in August 2001 with the purpose of providing community and residential services to disabled persons, and their families.

The Residential Service became SAPPOR's core service, and with the ultimate aim of independent living in mind, the Agency set out to identify residences based within the community and possibly housing just a few persons within each unit. The housing models adopted were based on anticipated client need and the available resources.

These presently include: two Housing Authority apartments, one in the Fgura Housing Estate and the other in the Kirkop Housing Estate; Villino Maria, a purposely built (government owned) bungalow in Mtarfa; and Residenza Vajrita in Marsascala comprising of twelve flatlets. The Agency also administers an agreement between the Ministry for Social Policy, the Ministry for Gozo and the Arka Foundation which provides six clients with a residence at Dar l-Arka in Gozo.

These initiatives are certainly laudable. However, as already pointed out, they tend to try and alleviate situations in isolation, rather than looking at the bigger picture. The way we carry on with our daily activities, the manner in which we create our spaces, are oftentimes an obstacle to those persons who are not endowed with all the faculties generally associated with the average person.

These obstacles include:

- physical inaccessibility, both in the home, at the work place and in public spaces for people with mobility impairments
- further still, inaccessibility for those with visual and hearing impairments
- lack of adequate transport options
- a cultural scenario that is not always tolerant and ready to accept the differing needs of the various sectors of the population

I conclude by quoting from the document "Architecture and Quality of Life" published by the Architect's Council of Europe in 2004: "A fully functional, quality and well-managed built environment has a motivating effect on society, it sustains its identity and propels it to excellence in all of its undertakings."

Allow me also to quote from the document "The Urban Challenge", published last year by the Kamra tal-Periti: "Our urban environment reflects our social and economic aspirations. Our economic development will increasingly depend on our environmental standards. Only by defining an appropriate vision for Malta where social, economic and environmental objectives work together

harmoniously can we achieve lasting sustainable development. This will require us to be courageous and visionary working towards strategic long-term objectives and resisting the temptation to be derailed by short-term expediency or the concerns of specific interest groups.”

Certainly, achieving a quality built environment that is more accessible for all citizens, without exclusion of any, will contribute towards government’s vision of a more inclusive environment and one that encourages participation by all the members of society at all levels in achieving a better living environment for all.

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