



INSULEUR General Assembly

Virtual through Zoom

COVID-19 and impact on Islands

Joseph Borg

Friday 5 June

Introductory Address

My dream for our islands

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen!

This is an extraordinary Insuleur General Assembly being held during extraordinary times. First of all I have to thank you all for participating in this General Assembly. I also have to thank all those who helped in the organization of this meeting.

When we last met on our island Gozo for the International forum in October, little did I think that I would lead through the next Insuleur meeting from the same place, from the same island. But who of you would have imagined of attending the next Insuleur meeting from home, or from your office in your place of work? Yet this is our new experience, as a lot are saying, this is the new normal. The Covid-19 pandemic has wrought havoc in the businesses of our islands but as islanders we must see this pandemic as an opportunity rather than the disaster it is. Let us all firmly believe that positivity could and should be the rule of the day.

If you permit me a couple of minutes, I want to share with you my personal and the Gozo Business Chamber's experience during the pandemic. I am sure that many of you will say that it is all the same for them. The pandemic has taught us a lot, the pandemic has been an eye-opener, the pandemic will chart our future.

First of all, on the economic front, the pandemic has shown how fragile our economy is. As in all islands our economy's principal pillar is tourism. In Gozo, more than in Malta we have put all our eggs in one basket and in excess of 50% of our GDP is based on tourism. So the first lesson is this. We need to strengthen tourism but we must also give birth to new sectors. To be resilient, our economy needs to be diversified.

Secondly, the pandemic has served us well in breaking up our fast work rhythm and has given us a chance to return back to basics by helping us to be more in contact

with nature. This has shown us that our future choices have to be in favour of a green economy, renewable energy and sustainability, which are nothing but choices in favour of a better quality of life. A sustainable economy where the common good dictates and nothing else.

The third lesson which this pandemic has taught us is that we must again learn to appreciate our local businesses. It is as clear as crystal that in circumstances such as the pandemic it is only the local agriculture and fisheries, the local crop and livestock, the local artisanal goods, the local manufacturing that we can resort to when in need. From this should stem our strong support in favour of our local island businesses that guarantee the supply chain in dire times. This would help us recreate a sustainable and resilient economy on our islands.

What is the way forward? In my letter to all the members of INSULEUR of the 14 April 2020 related to this pandemic I stated that, “After the world emerges from this crisis there are a lot of lessons that we have to learn and that we have to share together. This pandemic is clearly showing that we cannot continue to plod ahead as if nothing has happened. We need to do things differently”.¹

As I see things our islands must march forward on a binary trail that of an economic model which focuses on the digital transformation of our islands and by making our islands more sustainable through a circular economic model. The first was the subject of our annual forum in October 2019 in Gozo and on the second we have just heard some remarks in the webinar which has just closed. This binary approach is itself confirmed in the Temporary Framework of last 8 May which states that, “The green transition and the digital transformation will play a central and priority role in ensuring a successful recovery”.²

My appeal today is repeating again what I stated in my concluding address at the INSULEUR forum in October. We can only perform well if we as islands unite our resources, our strengths, our ideas. Islands need to collaborate together because of many issues but moreso in the aftermath of this pandemic. It is to be a collaboration based on solidarity. “This solidarity must continue. We can only defeat this virus if we take responsibility for each other”,³ stressed President of the European Commission Ursula van der Leyen on Europe Day. In the end it is a reality where we seek the common good above all else. Thank you.

¹ Joseph Borg. 2020. Letter to members of INSULEUR, 14 April 2020 [ONLINE] in <https://www.gozobusinesschamber.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/INSULEUR-President-COVID-19.pdf>

² European Commission, *Communication from the Commission. Amendment to the Temporary Framework for State Aid measures to support the economy in the current COVID-19 outbreak*, Brussels 8 May 2020, in https://ec.europa.eu/competition/state_aid/what_is_new/sa_covid19_2nd_amendment_temporary_framework_en.pdf page 2, paragraph 9

³ European Commission, *Van der Leyen on Europe Day: What does Europe mean to me and why is solidarity more valid than ever*, Brussels 9 May 2020 in https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/AC_20_844

Concluding address

I want to conclude this meeting by thanking you all for your presence. As I stated in my initial address we must help each other, work together and use Insuleur to arrive to places like the European Commission where our individual Chambers would not arrive.

I thank again George Assonitis for the organization of this meeting, the Board of Directors and the Technical Committee of Insuleur. The pandemic has shown us that we can hold meetings remotely and I will be calling occasional short meetings to discuss ways how we can move Insuleur forward. Thank you also Gianni and Greening the Islands for providing the platform for both well attended meetings today.

This meeting marks the end of the two year period of the presidency of the Gozo Business Chamber of Insuleur and the start of a new term. We at the Gozo Business Chamber have tried our very best to keep alive the Insuleur spirit and we undertake to carry on with the same verve, with the same energy, that we have done over these past two years. May I at this point remember president Joseph Grech who served Insuleur for the first six months of our presidency. It is our duty to acknowledge his dedication. I would also like to remind you of Mr Vidoje Vucij, a member of the Board of Directors of Insuleur, who has left us for a better life.

I again thank you all for your presence today, and we look forward to meet again soon, hopefully in person, but if not on the screen. Good afternoon and have a nice weekend.