

## **Challenges for Education in Central Asia**

### **Keynote speech at the Ministerial Conference on Education in Central Asia**

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**by Dr. Andrea Berg, Centre for OSCE Research, Hamburg**

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to give a presentation on “Challenges for Education in Central Asia” and to share with you some views on this topic. This afternoon we will hear presentations on various aspects of education, including management reform, curriculum content and regional co-operation. Both basic and higher education attract a lot of attention from national governments as well as from donor organizations. But the number of students and would-be students by far exceeds the number of working places available. For this reason, I will focus in my presentation on an educational issue which is neglected throughout Central Asia: vocational training and adult education.

Approximately one year ago, 180 representatives of the countries of Central Asia, the CIS and the European Union gathered here in Tashkent at the first regional conference on Education for All – Life Long Learning. The main aim of the conference was to discuss the progress of adult education programmes within the context of life-long learning in the countries of Central Asia. The participants adopted a “Call to Action” mainly focusing on the promotion of life-long learning, the improvement of learning opportunities through formal and non-formal education and the allocation of additional resources to support adult learning programs.

Why is adult education so important? Life-long learning includes the continuous education of adults after the end of formal education. It is directly connected with raising the skills of the workforce, with active participation in society and with a person’s ability to participate fully in political life. Adult education is one of the most challenging tasks currently facing the

countries of Central Asia. The bulk of the population received their school-based education under completely different political, social and economic conditions. They were trained for a future that never appeared. Most of them have had very limited opportunities to modify their skills in line with the new demands. In addition, today's children are usually taught what they need to pass exams, not what they need in real life.

Let us have a look at three current trends characterizing the situation of the adult population in Central Asia:

First, *Unemployment and labour migration*: The economic reforms and structural changes in all five countries have led to an increasing number of people with no regular employment. They generally work as seasonal agricultural labourers or are engaged in labour migration. Hundreds of thousands of workers migrate seasonally from Tajikistan to Russia, from Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan or from Kyrgyzstan to China to earn money. Both men and women gather at the bazaars in the morning to look for jobs as day-labourers. People working in the public sector are not able to cover their living expenses from their official salaries and often need a second job in the informal economy to make ends meet.

The existing education systems do not prepare school-leavers to make a lasting and useful contribution to the economy. There is a wide gap between the needs of the market and the skills taught at schools. As a consequence, young people often find it difficult to get work. This lost generation represents a serious potential source of conflict. A recent ICG Report on Youth in Central Asia quotes the findings of a researcher who analysed domestic armed conflict between 1950 and 2000 all over the world. He wrote: "...if young people are left with no alternative but unemployment and poverty, they are likely to join a rebellion as an alternative way of generating an income."<sup>1</sup>

Second, *Widening gender gap*: While girls' enrolment in basic and secondary education tends to decline as they get older, the opposite trend can be observed in adult learning. Women show a strong commitment to professional training while men appear to lack interest. Men seem to be rather blind to the connection between ongoing learning and better knowledge on the one hand, and the prospect of a better job and a higher income on the other. Interviews with representatives of local NGOs show some evidence that women adapt more easily to a changing social and economic environment while men are often more attached to traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Henrik Urdal: The Devil in Demographics. The Effect of Youth Bulges on Domestic Armed Conflict, 1950-2000, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo.

role models. For this reason, it is very important to raise awareness among the population that human capital increasingly determines individual and family incomes and that life-long learning is an important mechanism for reducing and preventing poverty.

But we should take into account that the concept of life-long learning collides with gender norms in Central Asia. First of all, men are the breadwinners of the family. Even young boys are already expected to contribute to the household's income. Indeed, child labour is a survival strategy for many families. Higher drop-out rates among boys show that education is considered less important than income-generating activities that do not necessarily require formal schooling. This trend continues when boys become older and set up their own families. It is therefore important not only to focus on girls' access to education but to pay proper attention to the male population, too.

Third, *Increasing illiteracy*: Another alarming trend is the increasing illiteracy of the adult population. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have both introduced a new script without offering sufficient courses to help adults to learn it. In addition, the younger generation has a poor knowledge of the Cyrillic script. Thus, they have a very limited ability to read newspapers, fill out official documents or access literature. Bilingual education is a crucial element in raising quality standards and thus in increasing access to global markets – at least in the region of Central Asia.

To summarise these three trends: We see a serious need to bring adult education in Central Asia in line with the needs of the market. A recent World Bank report on education in transition countries states that: “The implications of a market economy for education are radically different from those of a planned economy, but they are fairly easy to see.” What are these implications?

First of all it is important to mention that market economies need highly skilled workers at least as much as university graduates. If we take a look at the number of university graduates in all parts of Central Asia, it is evident that nobody is able to offer them employment prospects. One problem is that some professions are much more prestigious than others. While enormous numbers of graduates in law, economics and accounting compete in an already saturated market, there is a lack of highly skilled and qualified farmers, medical personal, office workers, tradesmen, carpenters, plumbers and service personnel for hotels and restaurants. Walking through the bazaars and shops in Central Asia one finds far more imported goods than high-quality local products. Offering training for professions such as

those I have mentioned could contribute significantly to the prospects of local entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises.

Second, it is not enough just to establish professional colleges or vocational training courses. Content matters. Specific skills are required for every type of employment, whether in the public or the private sector, or even in the field of migrant labour. Recently, the lack of communication between enterprises and professional colleges has been reflected in curricula focusing mainly on theoretical rather than applied knowledge. It is therefore possible to speak of a gap between knowledge and abilities. To raise educationalists' awareness of what skills are required by businesses and the market, dialogue between entrepreneurs, consumers and vocational colleges should be strongly encouraged.

Third, ex-cathedra teaching dominates instead of interactive methodologies and practical training. This helps to reinforce the traditional respect for authority and the older generation but hinders youngsters from articulating their wants and needs. In a rapidly changing situation, it is particularly important that the focus of teaching and learning is shifted to solid and useful information, foundation skills such as problem-solving and interpretation, and on how to apply knowledge to unfamiliar problems and to act with greater individual initiative. A broad knowledge base is vital if future workers are to be able to respond flexibly to change and to have the ability to learn in the future.

Fourth, because adult education was poorly developed during the Soviet time many teachers are not used to dealing with adult learners expressing opinions of their own. To cope with this problem, it is of the utmost importance to provide teacher training with a particular focus on interactive methodology. In addition, teachers' motivation should be increased by raising their salaries to an appropriate level.

Fifth, the willingness of the population to invest in education depends to a high degree on the effect education has on job prospects. In Central Asia, it is usual to invest in employment – in other words, in buying a job – rather than in education. Indeed, when seeking a particular position, it is often more important to come from the right family, the right region or to know the right people than to have the right skills for the job. In addition, pay levels frequently bear no relationship to the level of skill and training required to perform a certain job. Real competition for apprenticeship places and for jobs could do a great deal to improve learners' motivation and thus the quality of services and production.

But these are not the only factors that make vocational training a crucial element of life-long learning. Coming back to the connection between unemployment, poverty and violent conflicts, we should keep in mind the security dimension of vocational training and of education in general. Analyses from all over the world provide strong evidence that quality education is one of the key elements of long-lasting security building. Employed workers are less at risk of joining rebellions to improve their situation. Adequately trained people are able to find civil means to solve conflicts and to develop alternative strategies in a difficult situation. People who see that their prospects could improve through learning are more willing to invest time and money in the education of their children.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

For all these reasons I appeal to you, the participants of this conference, to pool your experience and your resources to strengthen vocational training throughout Central Asia and to encourage the younger generation to take an active part in the economic, social and political life of their countries. Education does not finish at the school gates. Life-long learning is an important tool for ensuring sustainable development and a secure future.