



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

CONFLICT PREVENTION: IS EDUCATION THE ANSWER?

Address by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the

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organized by
The Hague Institute for Global Justice

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Mr. Williams,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to join you today for the official launch of The Hague Institute for Global Justice's research project on the role of education in conflict prevention. I would like to congratulate you, Mr. Williams, and your remarkable team at the Institute for taking up such an important subject. Today is our starting point: we are pleased that the oft neglected connection between education and conflict prevention receives increased attention. Tomorrow is our aim: we are looking forward to further engage governments and other stakeholders to invest in education as a tool for conflict prevention.

I am pleased that you have already brought together leading agencies, education specialists and practitioners to join expertise and experience together in this important undertaking and I look forward to your comments and contributions to our discussions.

Ladies and Gentleman,

We are gathered here in the Hague Institute to consider our common aim: how can we improve our conflict-prevention tools? As you may know, my Institution was created at a time when large-scale violations of human rights were committed in the Balkans in the early 1990s. At the time, European leaders felt a sense of urgency to stop the atrocities. However, Europe lacked the tools to address inter-ethnic relations and defuse tensions. As a result, in 1992, the founding fathers and mothers of my Institution – the participating States of the then CSCE [Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe] – decided to establish the High Commissioner on National Minorities to provide early warning and, as appropriate, early action in regard to tensions involving

national-minority issues. This was and remains a unique mandate. Although the concept of preventive action had already been discussed in the field of refugee law in the early 1990s, this was the first time that such a concept was turned into reality, and this in the field of minority protection.

Since then, my Institution has been involved in a variety of situations involving inter-ethnic tensions in some of the 57 OSCE participating States. It has relentlessly promoted the concept of “integration with respect for diversity”. The concept is based on a twofold approach: first, all members of a society, whether majority or minority, should be able to maintain their own identity. Ethno-cultural differences should be recognized and protected according to international minority rights law. Second, we recognize that simply acknowledging and protecting diversity may not be sufficient to maintain peace. In some contexts, we need to work on decreasing the risk of political tensions linked to diversity. We can achieve this by promoting or building a shared sense of belonging to a common State and by having shared institutions that allow for the expression and negotiation of this diversity.

Education has proved central to efforts to promote this approach. For more than 20 years, the successive High Commissioners have mobilized their political capital and power of persuasion, engaged resources and established partnerships to ensure that education is not only seen as a human rights issue, but also as a security issue. This security dimension needs to be taken into account so we can work on ensuring that education is not a source of conflicts, but is rather a tool to prevent them.

Max van der Stoel, the first High Commissioner, said: “Capital invested in conflict prevention is capital well spent.” He relentlessly tried to ensure that capital was channelled to education because he believed in the role of education

in defusing tensions. To give you an example, in 2001, after Max van der Stoel had travelled countless times to Tetovo, the trilingual South East European University opened its doors. It did so thanks to the EUR 35 million that Max van der Stoel managed to collect from different sources. Education had been a source of grievances before the 2001 conflict. He hoped to both address these grievances while also providing multilingual and multicultural education to a generation of young leaders. Today, we are still working to promote multilingual and multicultural education in the places where integration is most needed. For example, together with the OSCE Mission to Serbia and the European Union, we have helped the Serbian Government to establish a bilingual Albanian-Serbian Department of Economics in southern Serbia.

My Institution has been most engaged in countries in democratic transition and consolidation, where ethnic mobilization is strong and shared institutions are weak. These include countries of the former Soviet Union space, including Central Asia, as well as in South Eastern Europe. I am aware that the Hague Institute's research project will include geographical areas that are far beyond the scope of the OSCE. Because the context in which education reforms are pursued is important, I am glad that there will be opportunities to examine some countries in depth as part of this project. At this stage, I would like to share a few observations based on the experience of my Institution in dealing with education issues and based on my own experience working with UNICEF.

Sustainable peace is built on quality education for all, with no discrimination or self-exclusion of segments of the population. The right to quality education is a recognized human right. States should promote equal opportunities for both boys and girls from ethnic minorities to have access to education at all levels.

In the preparatory work for this project, you reminded us of the UNESCO study pointing out that education can be used as a strategy of warfare: targeted attacks have been carried out on schools, pupils and teachers in more than 30 States during the past five years. We need to remember the importance of education in supporting sustainable peace.

Why are there disputes related to education? Why do we see attacks on schools teaching in minority languages and why do we have disputes about language education?

Based on my European perspective, I see that education was a very important part of nation building in 19th Century Europe – a pattern still seen in the countries we are working with. Previously, it was even possible to say that institutions training teachers were places where nationalism was nurtured; places where teachers were taught how to promote one identity to their future pupils.

But in today's diverse societies, the starting point should be to look at how civic identity is expressed in the curriculum. Are young people given the tools they need to form a diverse identity or are they pressed into one pattern?

When we look at the role of education in conflict prevention, it is clear we need to understand that this is a long-term goal, that there are not quick fixes and that there may be many questions surrounding education in the local context that need to be taken into account.

Patience is required to see the effects of education reform. Preventing conflict through the education system requires a combination of short- and long-term engagement. Some issues require immediate intervention, such as access to

education. Yet, to achieve an education system that provides quality education for all children, irrespective of their ethnicity, and allows for interaction between ethnic groups is a long-term strategic commitment. I advocate long-term investment in a stable and peaceful environment, rather than meeting short-term considerations. This is evolution, not revolution. And to achieve this, we need leaders with a vision that embraces the world's complexity and does not simplify it for short-term electoral gains.

An African proverb says: If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. We do not necessarily need to go fast. Education is not a business for the impatient. But we do want to go far, and we most certainly want to go together.

Can sound education policies alone ensure peace and security? No. Any education system is politically, culturally and economically intertwined with other sectors of society. I am looking forward to seeing the results of your research project so that we can further document the prominent role of education in conflict prevention.

Our challenge is to ensure that education can be a positive force for sustainable peace. Education can be used as a tool to prevent violent conflicts emerging in fragile States or States in democratic consolidation. This challenge can be especially complex in post-conflict societies struggling to overcome ethnic politics and dynamics that have caused wars. In many respects, the main enemy of Europe is its history; the ghosts of the past are still here. Education may not provide a complete answer, but it is an essential part of the equation.

And one essential part of conflict prevention is to ensure that the rights and needs of all groups are taken into account in the conflict settlement. The

right to education in one's mother tongue is such a right, enshrined in international treaties, such as the 1995 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

The *Hague Recommendations on the Education Rights of Minorities* published by my Institution in 1996 have been instrumental in detailing the content of minority rights in education, including minority-language education at all levels, decentralization and curriculum reform.

The Hague Recommendations intend to help States understand how they can reconcile the right of minorities to study and be educated in their mother tongue with the need for persons belonging to national minorities to learn the State language.

There is no set formula or one-size-fits-all solution to establish this balance. Based on The Hague Recommendations, my Institution suggests a progressive approach in which children are taught in their native language in the first years of education and are gradually introduced to teaching in the State language. Bilingual and multilingual education models are some of the ways forward. Yet, challenges and tensions may arise in practice. The status of the minority language in question, the habitation pattern of the minority, how much interaction there is in general with other groups, the capacity to implement language policies and the quality of policymaking processes all play a role. How involved are the parents in their children's education, what is the continuity in language programmes, what provisions are in place for teachers' education and to facilitate co-operation between teachers of different languages of instruction? These are some of the questions that will influence support for and the success of language-learning programmes.

Multilingual education alone may not be sufficient to defuse tensions. I have paid particular attention to situations where identity politics has condoned pupils to attend separate schools divided along ethnic lines, especially in post-conflict societies.

I am concerned about the effects on a society of a divided education system that limits the possibility for pupils from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to interact with each other and to learn from each other. I have warned about the effect separate schooling along ethnic lines can have on social cohesion. I have asked governments to develop policies that promote communication between ethnic groups through common activities inside and outside the classroom. I have encouraged them to develop adequate multicultural training for teachers but also to acknowledge reality: minority pupils need a special curriculum for learning the State language; they might really get lost if they are taught the State language in the same way as pupils who speak the State language as their mother tongue. This seems to be politically quite hard to acknowledge in some countries.

I cannot emphasize the importance of revising teaching materials enough. Textbooks need to eliminate stereotypes and acknowledge each community's contribution to a shared society. It is essential that pupils learn from a shared history curriculum and literature that does not provide one-sided information.

My last observations concern the need for inclusive decision-making. While the policies will be context specific, the need to ensure inclusive decision-making is universal. The right of persons belonging to national minorities to participate in decision-making, especially on issues concerning them, means a lot more than simply consulting them and asking for their opinion. It entails a positive obligation to involve national minorities in designing and implementing

education policies. Adequate mechanisms should be in place so their input and suggestions can be heard.

Decentralization can play an important role in engaging communities and enhancing their participation in governance, provided there is a match of resources and responsibility. Unfunded decentralization happens all too often – by which I mean responsibilities are given without resources to support them. Decentralization can be a necessary precondition for engaging civil society and helping people to appreciate the benefits of good governance and the consequences of bad governance. However, it is important to remember that delegating legislative powers to the local level might require even stronger safeguards for numerically smaller minorities.

An issue I see time and again is when education reform is imposed on schools, teachers and local communities with no consultation. Too often, reforms are developed in the capitals and then abruptly enforced, with no communication, meeting disbelief in the communities they are supposed to serve. Involving parents, school directors, teachers and local authorities is of tremendous importance if education reforms are to have genuinely transformative effects.

Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen

Conflict prevention and education reform are long-term endeavours. Neither can be easily quantified. The field of education and conflict prevention is still in its infancy and I am glad that more research and evaluation will help us to understand the complex relations and processes through which education may prevent rather than promote conflict. I therefore look forward to the start of this project as well as our discussions today.