

Finding Long-Term Solutions For the Elimination of Discrimination, Assimilation and Segregation

Justification

The international community is facing a particularly complex situation in its work against the assimilation and segregation of returnee children in BiH schools. At the time of post-war mass return, returnees in many places saw their children refused access to schools. Subsequent temporary solutions included access for returnee schools to local school buildings. However, local authorities blocked further integration, the result being the notorious “Two schools under one roof”.¹ However, this type of school is only one problematic area. Curricula, school environments and practices in many or all parts of the country ensure that schools continue to cater largely or solely for the ethnic majority, with parents forced to choose between having their children face assimilation in the local school, or bussing their children to a distant school with a different ethnic majority. For parents who lack these options, the introduction of alternatives for the ‘National Group of Subjects’ became a possibility after the signing of the Interim Agreement on the Accommodation of the Specific Needs and Rights of Returnee Children, in 2002. However, despite the insistence of this document that solutions should be found for all children, alternatives to the National Group of Subjects are in practice only offered in the rare locations where high numbers of returnee children and parents are present (the exception being Brcko District). Thus the permanent solutions required by the Interim Agreement remain to be found.

Groundwork

One of the key achievements of the Mission and its partners was the creation of the Common Core Curriculum, a list of common curricular content which all Ministers of Education bound themselves to introduce in their area of responsibility as of the 2003-4 school year. However, this curriculum, compiled by subject specific expert working groups, has only limited non-controversial content for the National Group of Subjects, so that its implementation, while solving the vexed issue of student mobility between schools has not addressed the controversial differences of the National Group of Subjects.

Another major step was the signing of the Interim Agreement on Accommodation of Specific Needs and Rights of Returnee Children in 2002, and the subsequent adoption of the implementation plan by all Ministries of Education. The Entity Ministries of Education, by signing this agreement, bound themselves to “immediately engage in finding more permanent solutions for the education of returnees and accommodation of the specific needs and rights of all constituent peoples and national minorities that will require e.g. the adoption of new education legislation, the production of new curricula and textbooks without any

¹ Two schools (one Bosniak majority and one Croat majority) using the same building: two sets of administrations, teachers, students etc. These schools exist only in three Cantons of the Federation of BiH, in municipalities with mixed Bosniak/Croat population. Returnees can be either Bosniak or Croat in the Central Bosnia Canton, depending on the municipality, whereas in the case of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, returnees are mainly Bosniaks. Serbs and national minority children in both cantons simply have no other choice but to be assimilated into one or the other school, or cross the Entity boundary if they have the possibility to do so. There are still about 54 schools working under this system in the Federation, but 16 of them have been administratively unified under pressure from the international community.

objectionable material, general respect of pupils' / students', parents' and teachers' human rights and re-employment of teachers in their pre-war schools".

Since then, a Co-ordination Board established to supervise the implementation of the agreement has been tasked with identifying long-term solutions to eradicate discrimination, assimilation and segregation of minority returnee children in schools. This Board, composed of representatives of Entity and Cantonal ministries of education and the international community, has been monitoring and raising cases of violation of the Criteria on School Names, Symbols and Manifestations (adopted in 2004) to make sure that schools offer an inclusive environment for each student, whatever his/her background. The level of implementation of the Criteria is still unsatisfactory despite changes in some cases (for example, religious symbols removed from some school buildings and some school names changed). Practices of particular concern, prohibited by the Criteria, include organized events in commemoration of war involving primary school children. However, these continue in many areas.

Current Activities

The Mission provides support to the Co-ordination Board and assists it in the organization of meetings. However, the Mission is seeking full local ownership of this body, at the level of the Conference of Ministers of Education, to assure that implementation of the Interim Agreement receives full recognition as a local responsibility.