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Организация
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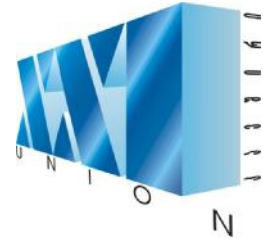
联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Document code: CLT/CPD/DIA/2008/RP/83

Title: Final Report of the Roundtable : Challenges of Education for Peace, Intercultural and Inter-religious Dialogue in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan

Date of publication: 2007

Sector of origin: CLT/CPD



Roundtable Meeting

CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION FOR PEACE, INTERCULTURAL AND INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN GEORGIA, ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN 27-28 June, 2007

Was organized in Tbilisi in June, (24 -27) 2007. The meeting gathered participants of the ToT course in all three countries of the Caucasus, which happened to be a sort of “première” given the region’s tensions. It was important to bring together teachers and social workers from 18 regions of Georgia as well as from the neighboring countries like Azerbaijan and Armenia (a total amount of 40 persons (some travelled at their own expenses). Civil Society was thus well represented and will be involved in project realization with a multiplier effect once they get back to the regions or countries. The tentative programme of the meeting identifies common challenges in this field and setting up of common action plan in addressing them. This was possible with the notable participation of a facilitator and the openness of those who attended this workshop. They were also keen to draw attention to the authorities from their educational systems to implement these grassroots activities so as to attract attention not only on a regional level but on the international level too and inform international organizations about the outcomes as well as the further steps planned.

The involvement of the UNESCO, as supporter of the ToT course and as an organization having such a rich experience in promoting pluralism and intercultural dialogue around the world, was considered by the participants as very important. While preparing the project proposal, partner organizations from all three countries have expressed their great interest of having the opportunity to meet with a representative of the UNESCO, particularly from the *Pluralism and Intercultural Dialogue Section*. That was indeed an opportunity for UNESCO to observe the recent developments in the region, to listen to the people involved in the same activities at national and regional levels, to meet with governmental and religious officials, participants of the ToT course and partner organizations and hear their concerns,

visions on further development and introduce to the local realities in terms of intercultural dialogue and even defining how Culture was considered.. The close cooperation with UNESCO was deemed necessary to establish “face to face” dialogue between the *Pluralism and Intercultural Dialogue Section* and governmental and non-governmental sectors from Caucasian countries.

Reporting and Follow-up in the different stages of the project.

Day-to-day tasks are managed by the project coordinator, the part of activities in regions are managed by the assistants. For UNESCO will be used the following ways of monitoring the project:

- All project activities will be documented on video and photo camera.
- Information about the project activities will be disseminated via internet.
- Final report will be prepared and presented to UNESCO;
- An evaluation meeting of the leadership team will be held to plan the project follow-up activities according to the Long Term Peace Education Programme developed by the Union “Century 21”.

The venue of the TOT course took place in Bakuraine, a small resort mountain place specially designed for this sort of meeting, although some cultural tourism was offered for the entire group to see mostly churches and monasteries of the region and reflect about what is common in cultural heritage by examining the various layers of art, how they flourished and were influenced by other cultures. This was a kind of “hors d’oeuvre” not only to bind the group but to get acquainted with each other. Interpreters of Russian language were available all the time for the guests from Azerbaijan and Armenia (by the way, between them, they spoke Russian which was already a way to communicate more closely). When in Bakuraine, ice breaking exercises took place from the beginning and presentations from both UNESCO and Century 21 were given.

The different stages went on in concentric circles, as for instance how to define Culture: is just art or goes beyond? It was agreed upon that it is a set of behavioral patterns, practices, aptitude to listen, ability of mind for openness. It needs skills and competence. Some Georgian participants depending on region from where they came added that culture had to take into account preserving ancient traditions such as ancient Georgian and alphabet (multilingualism was also discussed); religion was put on the same footing, many spoke of the power of music. Most of them envisaged Culture as communication among people. An anthropological approach to culture and cultural diversity was also discussed: it can be material as well as spiritual in terms of development of the human being; it can be different if one lives in a rural setting or urban one, if one had a traditional upbringing or not, with formal or informal education, it has to do with intergenerational relationships, it also strongly involves according to some, with the imaginary of culture. Nowadays, communication has changed this trend strongly, while in the past it was more about speaking to each other over the phone and meeting among neighbors and acquaintances while everybody felt

that presently it is a “virtual communication” that takes away the “emotional” side of relationships.

Other issue discussed was that of Human rights. An introductory course was given by Professor Paata Gachelchilqdze specialist on anti-discrimination provisions of the Law on general Education in Georgia. He also spoke on International Human Rights Standards. His introductory remarks fueled a lively discussion. Was it the European Concept of Human Rights? Each country presented the human rights provisions. Vivid discussions took place, mainly on migration questions, and very clearly, a transboundary minority was the target group most marginalized in all the three countries, the Roma people even though the migration in general was a case for fear of their “integrity”. Participants from certain regions of Georgia voiced out visibly that they tended to be xenophobic. Splitting in groups to discuss these issues was a way to understand more thoroughly how to fight with the educational system – although each country has its own – how to dispel trends of xenophobia and racism by examining the past: what was left of the past heritage in matters of beliefs and cultures pointing out that even in Georgia itself, each region had it’s own identity. The other two countries also reminded that territorial conflicts should be solved. The panel, as a whole, agreed upon that the best way to respect human rights was accepting cultural and religious diversity while a small minority believed that they had to “stick’ to their own identity.

Mass-media was also discussed as a conveyer of values, in particular regarding children and youth. Mass-media must give a positive view on religions even though Georgian participants underlined the special influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church including in the government and in the shaping of education, thus many of these participants thought that people coming from abroad should embrace Georgian values, culture and beliefs, while Professor Paata Gachelchilqdze underlined that one single religion should not hold all the privileges. As debates in small groups followed, it could be noticed that some teachers were either very secular/open or rather radical. It was very impressive to observe the role devoted to the Church in all spheres of life.

The Armenian as the Azerbaijani participants thought that what unites us all is a commonality in behaviors and mindsets and that we have to be mindful of the psychological aspects in cultural understanding to overcome differences of views and thus broaden the vision of culture from a country’s view (in this case Georgia) towards a more universal vision; from theory to a more practical insight.

There is the need to feel our own evolution, from the past to the present, and for this exercise the facilitator gave the example of the “iceberg”, what is visible and what is not, for instance, from the outside one can see the empathy in personal relations whereas inside we can conceal fear, prejudice and stereotypes.

The participants were invited to give specific examples of Human rights violations in the past that have struck them from history past and present.

During the second day, groups were formed, mingling all participants to identify obstacles to dialogue and how to step forward. Each group presented their work and reflections according to their experience. Of course, political problems, though not insurmountable, were pointed out by Armenian and Azerbaijani participants: they should work harder with each other to acknowledge human and spiritual values and how to teach them; they realized they had a common emblem the eagle and the sun; they committed to work together against discrimination, how to be more tolerant learning lessons from the past like finding out the reasons of conflicts in the most practical way, and for this end, maybe organize associations between Caucasian countries.

The 3rd group discussed about discrimination issues that can appear because of a way of life, a belief, a generational gap, gender (a family is happier when a boy is born) and the Georgians participants admitted that discrimination exist in many of the regions of the country. Therefore, education against stereotypes is paramount, first instructing the teachers themselves.

The 4th group discussed the issues of migration coupled with Human Rights recalling that kings of Georgia in the past decided to convert people to orthodoxy for the sake of the nation's integrity.

After these vivid debates in groups, there were several conclusions made in two directions:

- All different and all equal
- We are naturally different just like bio-diversity (different languages, ways of life, beliefs, upbringings)

Yet equality meant: same rights for a better education, freedom to express ourselves ideologically, sexually, etc, aspiration for well being and personal fulfillment. Some interpret equality in a different manner: is an Eurocentric idea and an universal concept? Participants question if immigrants do not tend to discriminate as well local people or tend to reject a mainstream culture/belief/ way of life? A debate issued on these reciprocal rejections: less access to education, misemployment, bad housing conditions. A wreath of conditions that lead towards the fear of the other (the Chechens for instances were very much feared by all the groups as viewed as radicals, as a potential danger).

The discussion moved towards the concept of multiculturalism and interculturality: is Caucasus to be a model? Integration or juxtaposition? Many considered the anglo-saxon model as a failure.

The facilitator summed up:

Minimal tolerance – static = juxtaposition

Maximal – recognition + interaction

Adaptation: language, ways of life

Integration: double identity = you keep your roots but you
are totally part of the society

Again, panels split to discuss different processes of transformation, after a session of meditation looking into their sufferings – emotions that led some to tears – the perception of a change in the atmosphere was palpable when all hoped for more tolerance, including between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. It was without doubt a strong and compelling moment. They displayed their drawings one of which showed that the Caucasus region was like a Caucasian carpet with different symbols of the countries as patterns. Ultimately they agreed that, as neighbors, they should protect each other and instill these feeling in their students as well as share what they have in common: from values to gastronomy.

When it came to define interreligious dialogue as a process of transformation, a majority came up with very similar ideas: freedom and Human rights, purity, prayers, respect, kindness, peace, tolerance, compassion, hospitality, think about other people, care for them, etc.

The exercises given and realized were extremely helpful to bring the participants together. They could be replicated in other situations and regions. It leads to discussion but also to a better understanding of oneself, why we think and behave or act in such a way rather than another? The understanding was not only a problem of politics, which was not overviewed, but in the stereotypes we bear in ourselves partially because of our upbringing, partially because of particular contexts (political, sociological, and economical).

The atmosphere was friendly which did not mean that lively debates were not allowed. Freedom of thought was the rule and this is why extremely interesting conclusions and recommendations were put forward in agreement with all the participants, as follows:

Specific recommendations:

- Implement TOT at a local, national and trans-border level.
- Strengthen this group of committed trainers and teachers for them to share constantly their experiences in the field of education for peace and dialogue, both intercultural and interreligious.
- Encourage the production of educational materials (Books or ICTs) to ensure a neutral and objective teaching for children and youngsters on topics of tolerance,

mutual recognition and acceptance based on reciprocal knowledge of beliefs, cultures and ways of life of the country's regions and of the neighbouring countries.

- Favour every occasion when young people from different confessions and cultures can gather to know each other better and build friendship ties among them, dispelling stereotypes and prejudices.
- Develop skills and competence for intercultural and interreligious dialogue as well as peace education among teachers, social workers and others so they will be able to train and share their knowledge.
- Restore hope and trust among different confessional and cultural communities at a local, national and regional level so that a new educational policy ensuring values of peace and dialogue can be fully supported by the competent authorities.