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### **Intervention in the UN forum on Minority Issues**

#### **Description of a good practice, as an example, in the discussion on the Recommendations on Minorities and the Right to Education, proposed by the Secretariat**

Greece implemented for the past ten years a large-scale intervention project aiming at reforming the education of the Muslim minority in Western Thrace. The Project is co-financed by the European Union (80%) and the Greek Ministry of Education. Close to two hundred specialists from various disciplines led by a team from the University of Athens have been responsible for the overall design of the project, the development of new educational materials, teacher training and multi-focus work within the community.

#### **The target population**

The minority population lives in the province of Thrace, in the north-east of Greece bordering Bulgaria and Turkey. The student population currently consists of 7,500 children in primary school and 3,100 adolescents in the gymnasium (the three-year secondary school part of the Greek compulsory education system). They are Greek citizens of Muslim religion, some Slav-speaking and most Turkish-speaking and of Turkish ethnic identity. The Turkish language is taught in minority schools as maternal language so much to Turkophones as to ethnically and linguistically Muslim Pomaks (Slavic-speaking Muslims) and to Roma, several of whom speak Turkish while others speak Romani.

Almost 90% of the parents of this population choose to send their children to separate primary schools, called 'minority schools', which are regulated by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and bilateral agreements between Greece and Turkey. There is a double curriculum, in that teachers who respectively belong to the majority and the minority populations teach half of the subjects in Greek and the other half in Turkish.

A large number of children have been completing primary education with a very poor command of the Greek language. For secondary education, there are two minority gymnasia of the same structure such as in the case of minority primary schools. Twenty-five percent of students attend these minority gymnasia, while the other 75% enroll in mainstream state schools. The poor quality of schooling at primary level and limited knowledge of the Greek language lead to a dropout rate from the compulsory secondary level of almost four times higher than the national mean.

#### **Project Activities**

### **New school books and teaching materials**

Until 1997, minority schools employed the educational materials used all over the country and written for native Greek speakers. Forty new textbooks have been designed at primary level covering Greek as a second language, history, geography, the environment and civic education. Supplementary material such as an electronic method for teaching Greek as a second language, a 6,000-entry children's Greek-Turkish dictionary, interactive educational applications both conventional and electronic, and songs have also been produced. All the materials respect the children's ethnic identity and are interactive, playful, colorful, and 'user-friendly'.

At secondary education level, new materials have been developed for use in conjunction with existing ones covering Greek as a second language, literature, history, mathematics, physics and geography. The main thrust of the new material is active learning and the encouragement of critical thinking.

### **Extended teaching programme**

Spending more time in school is another way of fighting social exclusion. More teaching hours have been added to the standard secondary level program. Trained teachers offered afternoon classes to more than 1,000 students per year.

### **Teacher training**

For an average of 120 hours per year, both primary and secondary teachers were trained in bilingualism, didactic and pedagogic skills, use of the new materials, social and gender inequalities, classroom dynamics, identity issues, discriminations and the negotiation of differences. Trainers also systematically visited teachers at school premises.

New teacher-training materials have been developed on salient themes pertaining to minority education, broken down to 34 booklets. These are also available on the Internet. A documentary film on the dialectics of identity in Thrace has been prepared and was used as a teacher-training tool, offering trainees a way to break the silence over conflicting issues.

### **Research and work with the community**

Owing to the lack of reliable information and population statistics, a number of surveys and qualitative studies were carried out on pupils' and teachers' socio-educational profiles, the educational and social backgrounds of parents, language use and language assessment, Greek-language competence, dropout rates from the compulsory nine-year schooling period, attitudes towards education, and representations of ethnic identity.

Parents, teachers, and representatives of the community as a whole joined open children's workshops that marked the end of each school year.

International conferences brought together experts from other bilingual, multicultural and conflicting contexts. Members of both the majority and the minority have had the opportunity to realize that their situation, no matter how difficult, is not unique in the world, and changes may be difficult but are possible.

To keep the dialogue open meetings were held regularly with leaders of the minority, local MPs, local authorities and majority and minority teachers' associations. Press releases were regularly sent out to the community.

### **The Community Centers and the mobile units**

Eight community centers were gradually set up. They operate a lending library, offer afternoon classes and summer courses, the use of computers, Greek classes for parents and unemployed young women, and counselling for parents and teachers. The Centers have proved to be the best way of offering a learning context alternative to that of the minority schools. Being equally staffed by personnel belonging to both majority and minority, they represented a microcosm where different identities coexist and languages alternate, overcoming division and segregation.

One of the most important functions of the Centers was to provide physical, social and psychological space in which adolescents could run their own creative projects. The facilitators came from both the minority and the majority populations. For the very first time in Thrace, mixed groups of youngsters were working together.

Two mobile units have also been used to reach isolated communities in the remote areas. They are equipped with lap-tops, electronic learning materials, and a lending library, while they are accompanied by trained teachers and animators. Their success can be symbolized by a scene the project's personnel experienced in several minority settlements: the children waiting for the van at the village's entrance, jumping around it and accompanying it until the school yard, where it usually parks.

### **The Project as part of a radically new policy**

The years since 1997 have been marked by a string of opposition and controversies from all sides, which have gradually been tempered. Biased information, open hostility and accusations on the part of the local majority and its press that the Project 'jeopardizes fundamental national interests', and opposition on the part of minority representatives and the local Turkish-speaking press, have characterized this struggle.

Framed in their historical context, the above reactions acquire meaning. The 1923 Lausanne Treaty regulates the rights of the Christian Orthodox minority in Turkey and of the Muslim minority in the Greek province of Thrace. The frictional relations between the two countries have produced state policies that have had very negative effects on the lives of the respective minorities. As a result of these policies, the minority in Istanbul has been reduced to a currently fading community of a couple of thousand. At the same time, restrictive and discriminatory policies against the minority in Greece have excluded its members from the fruits of development, which was particularly rapid in the 1970s and 1980s, leaving it in a marginal position both economically and educationally.

A further complication concerns the internal dynamics of the Muslim minority. The 1923 Lausanne Treaty described the minority in only religious terms. It consequently lumped together diverse ethnic groups that had only in common their Muslim faith. Thus, while religious identity is recognized by the Greek state, whereas ethnic status is not acknowledged. In the power game of minority politics, the largest and strongest group is that of Turkish ethnic identity. Smaller groups within the larger one are frequently omitted in the category shuffle, creating "injustices of recognition". Identity politics and their ugly consequences torment all three ethnic groups; the majority being reluctant to accept the Turkish ethnic identity of the largest and politically strongest minority group, and the latter being reluctant to accept the fact that the minority is not ethnically homogeneous.

### **The new policy**

Based on a political consensus, the Greek state's policy towards the minority changed radically in the 1990s. Several social changes signal a new era. The prevalent nationalist

myth that Greece is a monocultural and homogeneous society has been strongly challenged by the high numbers of migrants currently composing ten per cent of the country's population. In the 1990s, after decades of economic difficulties and authoritarian government, Greece completed a very long and difficult trajectory towards becoming a democratic European society. Respect for human rights, educational policies against social exclusion and the protection of minority cultural differences are part of the new agenda.

These changes are reflected in the education of the Muslim minority. The most significant innovation is the 1996 affirmative action taken by the government to allow a 0.5% minority quota to enter Greek universities by special examination. This affirmative action was in 2005 extended to the students of technical secondary education. A major innovation was also the introduction of the instruction of Turkish in secondary state schools in 2006. As part of the overall changes the Project was to change the scene drastically.

### **The achievements of the Project**

In a nutshell, there are definite improvements in the day-to-day lives of the people, as a result of region specific political measures and of the overall process of modernization. The affirmative measure concerning the university entrance examination has visibly strengthened the minority's motivation to attend secondary education.

The Project's new educational materials have contributed significantly to high quality improvements in schooling, although the biggest changes have come from the heightened awareness of a small number of teachers. Teacher training proved to be the most difficult task. Several of the teachers have started to see things differently, while a few have performed miracles.

Drop out rates from the 9-year compulsory school in the year 2000 was 65%. In less than ten years they dropped by more than a half. While still high, the trends are definitely promising. Gymnasium attendance has almost quadrupled over less than 15 years and girls' school attendance, although still low, is rapidly increasing. Similarly, Lyceum (the last three years of secondary education) attendance is growing as well. In three years it increased by 60%. These figures are very promising.

The most successful measure introduced by the Project was the Community Centers. Being outside the school structure and equally staffed by majority and minority workers they were somewhat free from inter-ethnic antagonism and power structures, whereas change within the school system represents a longer and more arduous process.

Parents have changed. Many have started showing trust. The local press acknowledged the progress achieved. There is a higher consensus on the part of the majority that society in its entirety benefits from the equality of opportunity for minority children. An increasing number of Greek-speaking teachers are eager to learn Turkish, the first language of most of their pupils.

The 'patriotic' discourse, prevalent in the local society, has weakened. There is a higher consensus on the part of the majority that society in its entirety benefits from the equality of opportunity for minority children.

There is an ongoing process of transformation of the rigid identification between 'Us' and 'the Others' in the local society. The division between Christian and Muslim, Greeks and Turks, Us and Them is starting to include other social identities, such as men and women, modernists and traditionalists, individuals resistant to or in favour of social change, Europeanists and isolationists... This process seems to be one among the most important changes of all.

An optimistic final note may be that children and adolescents in the Project's Centers have appeared to be much more competent than the adults in learning to live together. They have appeared a lot more capable in building bridges across differences, negotiating conflicts, and inventing successful compromises. Thus they have practiced the big challenge ahead, represented in the logo of the project: *"Addition, not Subtraction / Multiplication not Division"*.

### **What next?**

There are pending political decisions to be endorsed by all political parties involved. They concern (a) the initial training of minority teachers, (b) bilingual preschool education, and (c) transformation of state schools, such as to accommodate the needs of the minority and to contribute to a process of social cohesion.

Finally, funds need to be secured to this end. Unfortunately, at this stage, funds have been severely cut down. Just to give an example, the number of Community Centers, described, is to be reduced by 60 per cent.