

**Learning Democracy and Human Rights  
Evaluation 2006-2009 and the way ahead**

**Strasbourg, 15-16 April 2010**

Opening speech by Ólöf Ólafsdóttir  
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Monsieur le Ministre,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

On behalf of the Council of Europe, I would like to warmly welcome all of you to Strasbourg for this conference on Learning Democracy and Human Rights. I am delighted to see so many people from throughout Europe - and even farther afield - assembled here today. I believe that such a turnout is indicative of the growing interest in democratic citizenship and human rights education, a reform process that the Council of Europe fully intends to continue supporting over the coming years.

In fact, I can assure you that the Council of Europe's project on Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education is one of the most important projects in the Education and Languages Directorate. For democratic citizenship and human rights education is no longer considered 'extra' or 'supplementary' but has, in fact, to borrow a phrase from a Council of Europe publication on cultural policy been brought "in from the margins". Increasingly, countries are realising that people are not born with the knowledge of human rights and democracy, but they have to learn it, they have to experience it, practice it, and not only in the school system but throughout life.

At the Council of Europe, we are seeing that countries are consistently integrating the objectives of democratic citizenship and human rights education into their education systems. We see this in individual countries, where civic competences are becoming a full and integral part of learning objectives. We also observe this phenomenon in the work of other international organisations, for instance in the EU's key competences for lifelong learning in which civic and social competences are specifically mentioned.

But before I continue with my remarks, allow me to first convey some words of thanks. For indeed, we would not be at this point without the unfailing help from many, many people. First of all, I would like to thank the Swiss government. This conference, as you can see from conference materials, is organised in the framework of the Swiss Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. This political support from our executive body is crucial and we will all have the pleasure of convening together at the end of today at a reception hosted by the Swiss Chairmanship. The project as such has had great support over the years from Switzerland, through conferences hosted in Switzerland, experts from Switzerland and large Swiss delegation here today, including Mr Klaus Fischer.

My thanks also go to our ad hoc advisory group on democratic citizenship and human rights education. This group is composed of experts from the many sectors of the Council of Europe, youth, higher education, human rights, and this multi-disciplinary approach made it no doubt more efficient. Without the tireless commitment of the members of this group, our work would not be nearly as rich or relevant. Thank you very much

to all the members, and a particular word of thanks to its Chair, Ms Reinhild Otte.

The work of this advisory group has indeed come to a close - for now - and as the conference title would suggest, part of these two days will be focused on evaluating the programme from 2006-2009. Yet let me stress that this is simply the end of a process and the beginning of an exciting new era during which, together with you, the Council of Europe hopes to take this work even further.

Why is this the end of a process? Besides the formal ending of the 2006-2009 programme, I would suggest that we now have a set of standards and materials that fit together as a coherent whole – or as one of our advisory members put it, we do not just have a foot, a head and a hand but rather a full-fledged body with all its relevant parts put together. Allow me to explain this rather creative metaphor:

The Council of Europe has managed to codify – or define – if you rather wish to use that word - what democratic citizenship and human rights education means through the draft Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education. The Steering Committee for Education approved the draft text in February of this year. It will be presented for consideration to the Committee of Ministers next week in the framework of a recommendation to member states and hopefully adopted by the Committee of Ministers in May. This non-binding Charter will be **the** European standard in this domain and we are quite excited to have such an important text in the pipeline.

Tools that have the potential of making the Charter a living and breathing instrument have also been finalised. From a tool specifically designed for policy makers to teacher training materials, a rich array of instruments now exists to support ministry officials, practitioners and school staff to put democratic citizenship and human rights into practice - adapting, of course, the materials to each country's own particular situation and needs. There is no doubt that we will need to rely more and more on the Coordinators to make use of these materials as they see fit in their own countries and to disseminate them widely.

Since I just mentioned the Coordinators, I cannot resist to say that what we are most pleased about in the Secretariat, is that all this work has been done through very close cooperation with member states. In addition to our advisory group, the 47 Co-ordinators contributed greatly to both developing the instruments and materials and introducing them into their respective countries. I would like to give them all a warm word of gratitude. I believe that after eight years this network is truly sustainable and has even created its own sub-networks. At the Secretariat, we look forward to working with you in the coming years to deepen even further our co-operation.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention the co-operation with other international organisations, both international NGOs and intergovernmental organisations, working in the field of democratic citizenship and human rights education; this co-operation is in fact exemplary. By making it so, not only has duplication and overlap been avoided, but positive results have been constructed together: to give a few examples, the OSCE/ODIHR, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNESCO and the CoE published last year the

Compendium of Good Practice in Human Rights Education. The excellent co-operation with the UN in the framework of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, and in particular the Regional European meeting that was organised in Strasbourg in November 2007 should also be mentioned.

In a few minutes, we will hear in more detail the results of our programme from Sarah and Yulia. So allow me to focus on the future now. One thing I am sure about is that the realisation of our goals will take time, that is without a doubt. And why is that so? One reason is that democratic citizenship and human rights education need to involve many partners in order to have an impact – from ministries, to school directors, to parents, the community and of course not to forget the teachers themselves. This is why the Council of Europe hopes to foster more and better partnerships with NGOs and local authorities and this is why we have devoted a workshop on this theme tomorrow.

In our future work, one area where there would certainly be much to do is learner competences. We know now what policies will support democratic citizenship and human rights education, we know in theory how a school can function to support EDC/HRE and also what competences teachers need to introduce democratic citizenship and human rights education in schools. But what is less explored is the definition of student competences. We look forward to defining with you, clear goals for learners as a part of the next phase of the programme from 2010-2014.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is often said that the future depends on how well we educate our young people and on what we teach them. This is certainly true when it comes to democratic citizenship and human rights learning. By introducing such education, our societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are more likely to be democratic, peaceful and prosperous, respectful of human rights.

I would like to leave you with a remark made by President Obama, on education, in March 2009. He said that there was a need to develop standards and assessments which did not “simply measure whether students can fill in a bubble on a test, but whether they possess 21<sup>st</sup> century skills like problem-solving and critical thinking, entrepreneurship and creativity”. I venture to say that our EDC/HRE project is already trying to do this.

Thank you all for being here. I look forward to embarking together on exploring ways to support and foster democratic citizenship and human rights education in Europe and even beyond.

Thank you for your attention and have a very successful conference.