



World Forum for Democracy  
"Democracy and Equality: Does Education Matter"  
Strasbourg, 7-9 November 2016

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## CONCLUSIONS

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### Summary

2200 participants from more than 100 countries, representing political institutions, academia, media, civil society organisations, democracy innovators and educators met in Strasbourg to offer perspectives and give recommendations on the two key questions on the role of education in creating, shaping and buttressing democracy and in helping to reduce inequalities.

### *Governance key*

Education is first and foremost the pursuit of knowledge, but it also clearly correlates with support for democratic principles. Values like freedom of the press, uncensored internet, and gender equality – all receive in surveys stronger support among people with more years of education. Education is also associated with the types of values that can help shape a more democratic society, such as tolerance and respect for pluralism. But is education really contributing to democracy and how "democratic" is it? No definite answers but a variety of perspectives and proposals were provided.

*Democracy education needs democratic schools*, schools that practice democracy by enabling pupils to produce knowledge together and with teachers, to critically assess it and take a position.

Co-decision by pupils and teachers, including on content, was seen as convincing in preparing students to become alert and active citizens. Participatory democracy needs participatory education. Different forms of democratic governance in education were reviewed such as the selection of students' bodies by lottery, the use of rotation systems and the use of jury-type deliberations. All these alternative governance models were seen as a very effective way to empower both students and teachers. Most initiatives still tended to be of experimental character, not institutionalised: was this the price to pay to remain innovative? How much institutionalization is needed for effectiveness? Small experimental projects had the potential to

grow, though they were often opposed to more traditional measurement and evaluations which, whilst needed, could get in the way of better education.

If participation can be a “school” for democracy and should therefore be practiced in the schools, can education be a democratizing force in and of itself? When political systems are not responsive to citizens’ concerns, can education help to bridge the gap? Here opinions diverged from those who felt that education was not the most powerful institution in society and that systemic changes were needed for those who believed that education was key to changing an entire nation in democratically challenging environments (Afghanistan, Tunisia).

The dilemma of systemic vs. incremental changes was not solved, but agreement emerged on the value of participatory democracy in the school and the classroom and on the need for a better linkage between different participatory models. Resistance factors were also identified in: the fast turnover (student body changes rapidly) and teachers’ and parents’ resistance to change.

### *Individual competences*

Critical thinking, the desire for freedom and individual self-esteem were considered crucial for engaging in education and becoming resilient to manipulation. Schools needed to develop the competences for living in a democratic society. In this respect, the Council of Europe (CoE) has developed a framework of competences for democratic culture, which will guide educationalists in the complex task of helping learners to develop values, attitudes and skills for living in diverse democratic societies. Though the richness and diversity in education systems was praised and considered very valuable to the development of individuals, the need for common, shared values and references was also highlighted. What was required was to switch from a knowledge-based approach to a competence-based approach in democracy education, engaging the entire education community nationally.

### *Levelling out inequalities*

Inequalities can vary dramatically between states and inside them; they are based on income, gender, digital knowledge, etc. For some participants, education could do little to reduce such gaps even once reformed, as its impact was very limited on the structural inequalities. Furthermore, the plenary debates emphasized how geographical differences still mattered, both in terms of prosperity gaps and of widely different world visions. Education could certainly be more effective at bridging the latter notably by encouraging the introduction of “international studies”.

Given the rapid pace of technological change and in a world shaped by internet, tackling the digital divide became an imperative. Equality of chances must be guaranteed from the start by ensuring that education functions not on a hierarchical but on a network basis “*en réseau*”. Citizens needed to learn to *share common codes* before they could act together. 21<sup>st</sup> century collaborative democracy required a collaborative classroom focused on creating knowledge together, rather than competing.

In this respect civil society initiatives reviewed at the Forum, empowered learners to create knowledge in peer-to-peer frameworks but also provided intergenerational mentoring. Such initiatives were also essential for building much needed media literacy.

*[Tested models of good practice for democratic schools and human rights education were also reviewed. A powerful example of this approach was KIRON Higher education – the German initiative which was voted by participants as the winner of the Council of Europe Democracy Award. Its rapid success in building partnerships with universities worldwide to offer refugees a chance to complete higher education will certainly inspire others to think bold in addressing the challenge of building more inclusive and more just societies. ]*

## Recommendations

### *To national authorities*

- ✓ CoE member States that have subscribed to a charter on citizenship education should ensure its full implementation.
- ✓ Encourage different governance models of education using participation, co-decision and peer-learning as guidance.
- ✓ Accelerate the introduction of sustainable development education, to which governments have signed and are accountable.
- ✓ Become better in instilling the values of diversity, freedom, equality and justice through education.
- ✓ Value more the role of teachers

### *To International Organisations*

- ✓ The CoE and other international organisations should help states (and cities) to reinvest in education as a priority
- ✓ Emphasise the role of education to be about shared knowledge, about values, about educational humanism.
- ✓ Recognize the long term role of education in preventing conflicts and in helping combat and prevent radicalisation

### *To civil society*

- ✓ Civil society organisations to further the implementation of Human Rights and Rule of Law standards through education, such as for instance by working on fighting corruption with teachers, students and the whole school governance
- ✓ Multiply self-organised learning environments initiatives for neighbourhood-based learning, [the Schools of Political Studies supported by the CoE are an excellent example].

### *Acting in partnership*

- ✓ Recognise the need for multistakeholder partnerships in realising the Sustainable Development Goals.

- ✓ All education systems should promote global citizenship, peace education and environment education.
- ✓ Activists should pressure the authorities to respect their commitments to the implementation of the Sustainable development goals through global partnership and a holistic approach when dealing with the complex challenges of development.