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**CONTRIBUTION TO THE REPORT
ON CURRENT TOPICS REGARDING
LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES**

- EDUCATION AND CULTURE -

(Rapporteur: Mrs Lund, Denmark)

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

INTRODUCTION

Statistics and information on local and regional tasks and policy planning in Central and Eastern Europe vary very much in availability, method, subject matter and degree of detail. This study will therefore not be a minute scrutiny of the situation in each individual country but instead will seek to draw out some common tendencies and only refer to specific countries for illustrative examples.

The one topic that seems to be the object of discussion and political debate in all European countries, East and West, is the subject of decentralisation of powers and division of competencies.

The prevailing attitude among local authorities of Central and Eastern Europe is that the central governments are progressing too slowly where reforms leading to increased local autonomy are concerned.

The main criticism is not necessarily that local governments find their functions and responsibilities too limited. On the contrary, many find that too much responsibility is pushed on to them without the sufficient means for them to finance acceptable solutions.

1. EDUCATION

1.1. Inadequate financial means

This is certainly true of the educational area. In most countries in Central and Eastern Europe the municipalities and/or towns are responsible for running and maintaining preschool facilities as well as primary schools.

Municipalities thus find themselves in a situation, where they are responsible for providing adequate school buildings and facilities as well as maintaining them.

In a situation where many buildings are run down, where equipment needs to be replaced or modernised etc., this becomes an almost impossible responsibility, when the devolution of the tasks is not accompanied by sufficient funds or means of funding.

In the **Baltic countries**, for example, the local authorities experience the paradox of an increasing decentralisation of responsibilities, but an equally increasing centralisation where possibilities of financing are concerned. Due to the very difficult economic situation of the country, the local authorities of **Estonia** had a great many responsibilities delegated to them in 1992 accompanied by means that covered from 10 to 40 % of the actual costs.

In **Belarus** municipalities depend to a considerable extent on local enterprises, as they are expected to pay for the building of nursery schools as well as the maintenance of schools.

1.2. Inadequate legislation

However, not only the lack of funding is seen as a problem of the many decentralised responsibilities. The lack of adequate legislation is also a problem shared by many local authorities of Central and Eastern Europe.

In **Lithuania**, local authorities are responsible for running and financing all educational institutions, including vocational, music, sports and arts schools. However, the draft of the new Law on Local Government has not taken into consideration changes in the education system as a result of Lithuania's independence.

In **Poland**, the municipalities should have taken over the management of primary schools by 1 January 1994. In fact only about 25 % of the municipalities have done so. This is not due to a lack of desire for self-government. It appears however, that the central government has failed to take sufficient steps to define the circumstances under which this transition was to take place. The property status is still unclear, as are the budget and self-government finance laws, and, the municipalities that have taken on the responsibility have had to spend considerable amounts in the process.

1.3. Lack of administration systems and qualified specialists

Taking over responsibilities require a great deal of expertise and experience. As all post-Communist countries were previously highly centralised, the lack of administrative knowledge and experience on the local and regional level constitutes a major problem.

Many countries are actively working to meet the demand for expertise. In **Latvia** two self-government training centres have been set up in co-operation with the PHARE programme. Latvia co-operates with several western countries in this field.

In **Ukraine**, the Association of Democratic Councils organises the training of local council members and arranges meetings with international experts.

In **Albania**, which suffers severe economic difficulties, the Council of Europe is helping to restore the infrastructure of the school system. In addition, Albania is supporting direct links with educational institutions abroad in order to meet the need for further skills and experience.

The CLRAE is actually promoting the establishment of an independent association for the Network of training organisations for local and regional authorities which will facilitate the exchange of experiences between trainers from all parts of Europe.

1.4. School curriculum and teacher qualifications

For four decades all curricula in Central and Eastern Europe were subordinated to a political ideology. With the changes, access to books that used to circulate secretly has become possible. Alternative school books have been published. Teachers are able to speak freely.

Simultaneously a new focus has evidently been put on education curriculum. Here, the situation is more varied in the Central and Eastern European countries than that in the case of the running of schools.

Curriculum is generally a national issue, with various degrees of local influence.

In **Albania, the Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovakia**, for example, curricula are exclusively ministerial matters.

In **Poland** a basic curriculum consists of a basic stock of general knowledge defined by the Ministry of Education. This is found necessary in order to facilitate school switches by pupils. However, each school can expand on this curriculum as far as the financial resources allow it.

In **Hungary** a rather opposite development is taking place giving rise to a heated educational debate. Following the Education Law of 1985, the Hungarian education system became highly decentralised. It was up to the individual schools to define their own curriculum. In 1992 regional education centres were established with the power of exercising statutory supervision over autonomous local authorities. In 1993 a bill was proposed to recentralise curriculum on a national basis monitored through a centralised examination system. This proposal has resulted in attempts by the opposition parties to introduce educational reform programmes contending the government's centralist proposals.

In all circumstances, much attention is given to the debate on curriculum and quality education in all the countries. Not least, methods of measuring, comparing and ensuring quality and relevance is undergoing intense investigation and research.

The political changes also put new demands on the teachers. In any culture, teachers are central to the promotion of democracy and citizenship. In Central and Eastern Europe a rising need is seen for training and in-service training of teachers as considerable parts of the curriculum of traditional school subjects have undergone rapid changes. Not least the lack of foreign language teachers is considered a problem. Also, subjects such as modern history, literature and social sciences, have acquired new contents requiring an increased need for revised training courses. It is generally found difficult to both keep up with the speed of the changes as well as to create a suitable methodology and to find fundings for adequate courses.

1.5. Private schools

Private schools are a new phenomenon in post-Communist countries. It is still a small phenomenon, only a few percent, but rising. Most private schools are run by churches and religious orders. Educationalist opinions vary on private schools. Some find them a welcome contribution to the school world, seeing an academic advantage in the qualitative competition. Others regret the drain in the public resources constituted by these schools, which are subsidised by the state and thus obliged to meet the academic requirements of the public school system.

In **Albania** several foreign, religious groups are setting up and financing private schools, which, because of a very serious financial situation, is welcomed. Nonetheless some educationalists express concern at the heavy religious influence on a democracy.

1.6 Responsibility - formal or not

Almost all the local representatives of Central and Eastern Europe express concern at the severe unemployment situation which especially affects the young. Combatting unemployment is not a local responsibility in any of the countries. However, all those in touch with the education system attempt to find ways of improving the situation through education and training. This is not an easy task as central legislation or lack of local finances often hinder special, local, educational measures. Nevertheless, local politicians see it as their obligation to service the population where the central level fails, whether they have the formal competence or not. This is done through establishing special courses or by retraining the unemployed for other occupations.

2. CULTURE

Almost all the local authorities of Central and Eastern Europe have a high degree of responsibility in the cultural area. In **Bulgaria**, the municipality is responsible for municipal theatres, libraries and sports facilities. In **Croatia** they must ensure that the needs of the local population are met in culture and sports. Likewise in **Estonia**. In **Hungary** libraries and cultural institutions are financed locally. **Latvian** local authorities are responsible for all culture institutions. In **Rumania** and **Slovakia** they must ensure cultural and youth facilities as well as sports services.

Again, the problem does not lie in centralisation of competence but in centralisation of funds. In view of the heavy responsibilities weighing on the local authorities where cultural facilities are concerned, many find that very little is actually realised because of the drain on the funds imposed by heavy expenditure on social and educational measures.

In many of the countries an increasing co-operation with the private sector, in the form of sponsorship, is highly welcomed.

3. CONCLUSION

It seems that, in most former communist countries it is the local level that has responsibility for the allocation of education and culture facilities and it is a regional level of authority that supervises or co-ordinates the work done by municipalities.

It is obvious that the educational situation of local and regional authorities of Central and Eastern Europe is undergoing rapid changes and development. It is equally obvious that they are faced with many difficulties.

The awareness of the importance of local, cultural participation as an introduction to citizenship, democracy and local identity as well as a means of combatting social exclusion is very much present in all local representatives. The cultural field is thus facing serious and vital challenges.

First of all, an adequate system of finance and equalisation needs to be developed in all the countries enabling them to find satisfactory solutions to the many responsibilities delegated to local and regional authorities.

Secondly, legislation needs to be established for local and regional government making the division of responsibility and competence clear.

It must be underlined that decentralisation of competence and responsibility must always be accompanied by suitable resources, or powers to raise suitable resources. Otherwise, decentralisation becomes meaningless.

European co-operation, assistance, exchange of experience and mutual inspiration is very much needed.

Existing CLRAE and CDCC projects need hence to be developed further, and new projects need to be set up in order to create forum for exchange of experience and expertise.

In the educational field, projects of school twinning and exchange of pupils, teachers and educational material have proved very valuable. Not least the CLRAE "Local History Project" has been very successful. The twinning of Albanian schools with schools in the rest of Europe as well as the USA will also be an important contribution to European school co-operation.

The Conference organized by the CLRAE in co-operation with the CDCC on "Sharing of Responsibilities and Powers between Local, Regional and National Authorities in the Field of Education" recently held in Czeszochowa, Poland (19-21 April 1994) proved a valuable contribution to the gathering of insight into the development of education systems all over Europe. The participants at this Conference called for further contacts and discussions on this issue.

The Polish proposal to set up a European Information Centre in Warsaw for Civic Education is an excellent initiative and needs to be closely followed and to receive all the support possible. It will create a very good forum for exchange of, for example, civics curricula and teaching resources as well as the promotion of education for democratic citizenship in schools and teacher training.

Democratic citizenship should also be the key word for the field of culture. Projects need to be set up in support of culture as a means of combatting social exclusion and promoting active participation.

To encourage active participation in voluntary organisations, associations and social activities the CLRAE is planning a conference on sport in the municipality of Gödöllő, Hungary, early in 1995. This conference will have two main themes: financing sports activities and promoting participation. Sport is also an element of democratisation and civic education.

The project proposed by the CDCC on setting up a European Centre for Cultural Development and Co-operation in Spain must be followed very closely and given all possible support. In the feasibility study prepared by the CDCC expert, Mr Eduard Delgado, it is proposed to set up a cultural centre to facilitate dissemination of cultural information, to promote assessment of cultural policy making, training and debate as well as support internetworking. Such a cultural forum could prove an invaluable contribution to the promotion of local and regional cultural activities in all the European countries.

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