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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Learning to Live Together:
a Shared Commitment to Democracy

Conference on the Future of Citizenship
and Human Rights Education in Europe

Strasbourg, 20 – 22 June 2017

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

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DIRECTOR OF DEMOCRATIC
CITIZENSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

Thank you, Chair

Deputy Secretary General, Deputy Minister, participants

As the Deputy Secretary General pointed out in her opening remarks, our work on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, in the form that we see it today, was launched at the 2nd Summit of Heads of State and Government in 1997.

We can therefore draw on 20 years of experience as we consider where we should focus in the future.

But let me first acknowledge here today some of those who were pioneers in this work: Dr Reinhild Otte, Mr Krzysztof Ostrowski and Mr Cesar Birzea.

And let me also place this work within the context of the Council of Europe's unique trinity of standard-setting, monitoring and co-operation.

As we have heard, the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, adopted by the Organisation's 47 member states following thorough negotiation by governments and civil society, set a new international standard in this field.

And we know from the survey recently conducted that the text continues to provide a common framework and impetus for action.

The Council of Europe Report on the State of Citizenship and Human Rights Education, informing this conference and shortly to be presented,

evaluates the past 5 years of work to provide an overview of the latest achievements and challenges.

And the Joint Programme of the Council of Europe and the European Union on “Human Rights and Democracy in Action” provides opportunities for countries to work together, developing practical tools in accordance with their needs and priorities, drawing on the experiences of other countries to integrate citizenship and human rights education in their education systems.

So where do we go from here?

The current challenges facing society point to a growing need for citizenship and human rights education, and we consider the Council of Europe uniquely-placed to support national-level activities.

Indeed, the overall trend of growing political support for the role of formal and non-formal education in supporting democracy is reassuring.

In attempting to harness this momentum, we continue to promote our tried and tested tools, such as Compass and Compasito, while developing new ideas and initiatives, such as the Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture.

Because we need both to overcome the barriers to the Charter’s implementation to make citizenship and human rights education a sustainable part of formal and non-formal education.

In this way we will increase the Charter's impact as requested by Ministers of Education when they met in Brussels in 2016.

And so we should use this conference to celebrate what has been achieved and identify best practice, and to determine how democracy and human rights can be nurtured, promoted and protected through education in the years to come, through the Charter and other Council of Europe tools.

We are delighted to have a diverse audience in this room today, including representatives of public authorities, education professionals from all forms of education, young people and youth organisations.

And I am pleased too that we are joined at this session by legal professionals. Your presence acknowledges the diversity of human rights education, and recognizes that it continues beyond basic and higher education.

Each of you has a different experience, a different perspective and vision. We want to draw on these, to help form a larger picture.

We hope that by working together successfully across sectors and themes at this event, you will be inspired to work together across sectors upon your return home.

We do not start this discussion from scratch. A wealth of data was collected in 2016-2017 and is now available through the Report.

In many respects, this conference is the last stage in a second review cycle of the Charter. But while it closes that review process, it launches a new phase of implementation.

For our goal over the next three days is to generate recommendations for action over the short-, medium- and long-term at international, national and local level. This is a very important task given to you, hence it will be the focus of our workshops.

These workshops have been designed to hear from you, in order to make sure that what we are planning for our future work in this area is relevant at national level, that it reflects the perspectives of key partners, and that it is effective in supporting your work.

We need to ensure that it is as relevant for policy-makers as practitioners.

Today expectations are high about education's role in helping us address the challenges to democracy and human rights. The priority given to education within the Council of Europe today is high.

This is a great opportunity, and a great responsibility. It is absolutely essential that we deliver tangible results – be it at national, European or global level.

It is also essential that we demonstrate very clearly how Education and Youth activities support and are consistent with the Council of Europe's core activities: democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Education for democratic citizenship and human rights cannot solve all the world's problems. Moreover, we have limited resources at our disposal, and need to be realistic and maintain clear focus, in order to use them in the best possible way.

But I was struck by the continuing strong emphasis placed by young people on the importance of education for democracy and human rights, at our Youth Partnership symposium on the challenges faced by young people, held last week in Prague.

Education for democratic citizenship and human rights is seen increasingly as a necessary part of any solutions to societies' problems.

But more than that – keeping it high on member states' agenda at all times – is the best defence against threats to democracy and human rights.

And so this conference, and its outcomes, are more important than ever.