



Regional Conference

“Human Rights Education for Active Citizenship in the Western Balkans – Challenges and Opportunities”

Belgrade, January 21-22, 2014

Report and Conclusions

Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia and its partner organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo organized the regional conference “Human Rights Education for Active Citizenship in the Western Balkans – Challenges and Opportunities” on 21st and 22nd January 2014. The conference made a part of the regional program “Human Rights Education for Active Citizenship in the Western Balkans” jointly implemented by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Center for Civic Education from Montenegro, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Community Building Mitrovica - Kosovo, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Republika Srpska and Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Participants in this conference were representatives of educational institutions, nongovernmental organizations, activists of the regional program and officials of international missions to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo. They discussed human rights education in formal education systems, as well as methods, accomplishments and opportunities arising from activities of the civil society in this field. Participants also talked about the role of human rights education in peace-building and regional reconciliation and about possibilities for cooperation between formal, non-formal and informal education for active citizenship.

Working in small groups participants from different sectors and countries further discussed the above-mentioned topics. The outcome of their work were recommendations for future activities meant to improve human rights education and active citizenship through regional networking and synergy of civil society and educational institutions.

Conclusions of the Work Groups:

Group 1: Education for human rights in the Western Balkans – knowledge and skills for democratic citizenship – an overview of the present situation of formal education systems.

The group primarily discussed the importance of teaching human rights to the youth and developing their skills for the implementation of this body of knowledge in everyday life. Participants analyzed current formal civic education courses to see whether their contents and methodology adequately transferred knowledge and skills crucial to encouraging active citizenship, political participation, non-violence and social activism.

Conclusions and suggested measures (Group 1 focused on regional cooperation):

- Initiate development of common history textbooks and civic education courses;
- Create a civic education curriculum whereby 60% of content would be identical;
- Advocate introduction of civic education as a mandatory course in elementary and secondary schools in the region;
- Create a mechanism for monitoring of the implementation of history and civic education courses and curricula in the region;
- Establish regular communication at the regional level through seminars, trainings and conferences.

Group 2: Civil society and education for human rights – methods, achievements, challenges and opportunities.

Participants in the work group looked into the effect of forms of education provided by the civil society and discussed the possibility for transferring these experiences to formal educational processes.

- Enhance methods and methodology of work through a practical teaching approach, using theater in the education, debates and independent researches;
- Establish inter-sector cooperation including exchanges between the governmental and nongovernmental sectors in the field of civic education;
- Create appropriate textbooks;
- Additionally educate and motivate professors of civic education;
- Change the evaluation system of civic education course in order to consider students' activism in the civil society as very important.

Group 3: Education for human rights as an instrument for establishing peace and reconciliation in the region – examples and lessons learnt.

Participants shared both the educational institutions' and civil society experiences in the implementation of educational programs focused on peace-building, as well as the role of youth in this process.

- Advocate introduction of civic education as a mandatory course in elementary and secondary schools in the region;
- Civic education courses should include classes relevant to peace-building process in the region such as transitional justice, dealing with the past, etc;

- Upgrade civic education teachers' capacity for transferring knowledge and skills in socially delicate topics;
- Advocate bigger participation of the civil society in the civic education processes.

Group 4: Formal, non-formal and informal education for human rights and active citizenship - possible models of integration and cooperation.

Participants addressed the need to integrate methods, methodology and contents of formal and non-formal education. They also discussed weaknesses in both sectors and possible ways to overcome them.

- Make a catalogue of accredited programs for professional training of civic education teachers;
- Encourage student councils to define their needs in the context of non-formal education;
- Encourage cooperation between schools and civil society organizations at the local level;
- Advocate regional networking of civic education actors with the help of international institutions such as Council of Europe, European Union, UN, etc.

General Recommendations of all Work Groups in the Context of Future

Activities:

Establish a regional and inter-sector work group which will supervise the following processes at the regional level:

- Analysis of the need to enhance the content and methods of civic education in the countries of the region, which will be implemented by formal education experts and representatives of the civil society;
- Identify contents that are missing in the current civic education programs and recognize examples of good practice in the region and in the international context;
- Examine the interests of youth, their attitudes and opinions and based on the results of this research create educational programs for teachers and students, as well as referential literature for identified programs, with the mandatory participation of civil society representatives;
- 60% of civic education curricula should be based on common, regional content and 40% should include topics which are particularly important for individual countries in the region;
- Advocate development of a common textbook for the civic education courses at the regional level, in accordance with the 60% - 40% ratio;
- Advocate introduction of civic education as a mandatory course in elementary and secondary schools in the countries of the region where this is still not the case, using the lessons learned from the countries that successfully implement this model.