

Web-Based Data Enter Classrooms in Countries in Transition: The UNICEF National Program of Education for Development in Slovakia

Introduction

The area of education has been a priority of the Slovak Committee for UNICEF's National Plan of Activities since its beginning, dating back to the independence of the Slovak Republic as a sovereign nation on the 1st January 1993.

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development objectives of the EFD have been to contribute as much as possible to achieving the following main objectives of the whole transition process in relation to the young generation and its preparation for a proper understanding and active support and readiness for the following main goals:

In this respect the main goal has been to contribute as much as possible to the whole educational process in Slovakia in such a way that education would become one of the driving forces of the country's transition to the multiparty democracy, functioning market economy, economic prosperity, social justice and a modern society with a due respect for human rights as it has been in all developed countries of the world. One of the common denominators of these challenging tasks of education has been to prepare the young generation for the future integration of the country into the systems of regional and global systems and in particular to the European Union. For the young people themselves it means to prepare them for their future role as full-fledged citizens of the future unified Europe with the same rights, duties, but also opportunities, as have their pals in the current European Union.

In this respect, the UNICEF world-wide „Education for Development“ (EFD) programme, part of UNESCO's „Education for All“, another global education programme, has become a welcomed source of know how and an efficient vehicle for our national activities in the area of education.

In the following parts of this paper we will be dealing in more details with some aspects but also problems of implementation of the EFD world-wide program in the specific conditions of the Slovak Republic as one of the countries in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in transition.

Some Background Information on the General Context for the Implementation of the EFD in Slovakia within Other CEE Countries in Transition

In Slovakia, as in all other CEE countries, the process of implementation of the EFD started in the early 90s, before 1993, as a part of the federal programme of the former Czecho-Slovak Federal Republic, and later as a part of its particular National Program. In this respect, the main

- To establish a democratic, multiparty parliamentary system which would replace the former system of the one-party domination;
- To create a civic society with the due respect for human rights, rights of children, minorities, etc. and general equality of all citizens irrespective of their national background, gender, social status, etc.;
- To develop an efficient modern market economy securing a social and economic justice and thus giving the same chances for all in a fair competition on a market similarly as it has already been e.g. in the countries of the European Union;
- To carry out modernization, restructuring, privatization and liberalization of all processes of the economic development internally and externally with the vital assistance of the know how and investments from the developed world and especially from the European Union;
- To overcome a long-year isolation from the outside world and to establish and develop new dimensions of a global as well as regional and cross-border cooperation, communication and trade; and
- To overcome even more evident isolation and underdevelopment in the field of the freedom and free flow of information, media, ideas but also a free movement of persons, etc.

In general, as it could be summed up, the main objective of the whole transition and the corresponding preparation of the young generation have been to prepare the whole country, and especially young people, for the future membership in the European Union and in other European and transnational integration structures.

This main objective has found its direct expression among others also in the so-called „Copenhagen criteria“ as a criteria to be met by all candidate countries from the CEE before they could become members of the European Union (EU). The substance of these criteria are as follows:

- Stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, a rule of law, human rights and a respect for rights of minorities;
- Functioning market economy and ability to withstand the pressure of competition and market forces; and
- Ability to take over obligations of the membership (in the EU) as well as dedication to the objectives of the political, economic and monetary union.

These main objectives, goals and criteria for the whole socio-economic development of the countries in transition have of course directly effected not only their whole further development but even more the whole system of education. It is then no surprise that also some articles of the particular association treaties between the EU and the countries in transition including Slovakia have directly been dedicated to the development and harmonization of education, to the technical and financial assistance in transforming the whole system of education according to the standards of the EU.

In this respect, the importance of education and, in particular, education for development has become even more important as it has to prepare the young generation for becoming citizens of the EU in equality with the same rights but also qualifications as needed for achieving such a challenging goal. Just for illustration, one of the four basic freedoms i.e. the free movement of persons is unthinkable without a mutual recognition of qualification, education certificates, diplomas, without a good knowledge of foreign languages, etc.

In general, the countries in transition and their education for development programs have to some respect, very similar or even identical features with the developed countries, such as:

- No illiteracy and the general level of education is relatively high and available for free to the whole population;
- No widespread poverty, famine, malnutrition and/or starvation of children or young people as it is existing in some developing countries;
- A relatively still good standard of medical services, hygiene and thus overall living conditions;

- No child work or other forms of exploitation of children;
- No discrimination due to the gender, race, religion, etc.; and
- No armed conflicts, violence or other similar hardship circumstances which would be directly negatively effecting the life and education opportunities of young people.

On the other hand it is fair to mention that there are also some specific conditions and/or features which to some extent differ the countries in transition from the developed countries of the EU and make them a relatively special group of countries regarding their education systems as e.g.:

- A relatively lower level of the overall socio-economic development which in the terms of the GDP per capita represents only about 20-50% of the average of the EU.
- Due to the above low level of the development, most of the countries in transition have not yet – even after the ten year period - achieved their pre-transition level of the year 1989.
- It is quite evident that there has not been enough budget resources for any significant development of education in general not to mention its pro-development orientation, innovations, etc.
- The curricula at all levels of schools have not yet been fully corresponding to the needs of the challenges of the contemporary modern education methods, techniques, etc. There is an evident lack of modern didactic and computing technology. Thus in the whole system of education has been prevailing an extensive system of memorizing instead of applying a modern principle of „learning by doing and doing while learning“ e.g. in relation to the utilization of modern information technologies, foreign languages labs, etc.
- There is a lack of qualified teachers for some subjects related e.g. to foreign languages, information technologies, but also to human rights, civic society, etc.; and a lack of development issues in the national curriculum, a lack of alternative education, variability, etc.

In the specific conditions of Slovakia as a new independent nation, we have – in addition – to take into account that all these common development issues have been further effected by the necessity to solve some specific problems related to the new country i.e. to develop the necessary

institutional framework, to introduce a new national curriculum better corresponding to its new statehood, independent identity, etc.

Preparation Of The National EFD Program In Slovakia

In addition to the above general regional context of an economic and social transition as well as some specifics of Slovakia as a new country, the whole process of preparation of the National Program for the EFD has been a rather complex and relatively long-term process .

In order to contribute as much as possible to this process, the Slovak National Committee for UNICEF has been very active in supporting the rights for education as an integral part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child and its implementation and monitoring in Slovakia. Among various other activities in support of their implementation, the National Committee for UNICEF has – during the ten year period since its adoption – conducted two Situation Analyses viz. in years 1995 and in 1999.

The first one in 1995 was the very first of that kind of analysis of children in the independent Slovak Republic. The second one was conducted in 1998-1999, and completed in the year of the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention.

The second analysis in the area of education has shown that in spite of some progress achieved in comparison with the results of the similar analysis in 1995, there are still areas where the progress in the field of education has not been as expected. According to the individual conclusions and recommendations from the previous analysis, the achieved status in 1999 according to the particular situation analysis has been as follows:

- There still has not been prepared a long-term national strategy for education with the time horizon for next 10-20 years which would reflect the needs for preparation of the young generation for the future membership of Slovakia in the EU with the horizon for accession in years 2004-5 or shortly afterwards;
- Accordingly, also the process of transformation of individual levels of education has been proceeding relatively slowly and as a consequence there has been a growing number of unemployed graduates of individual types of schools. Among others it is also one of the indicators that their qualification has not fully corresponded to the needs of the current labour market. For example the trend in unemployed graduates of different types of high schools has increased from 11.4%, 17.9%, 7.2% in 1994 to 15.02%, 22.63%, 8.23% in 1997 and has a tendency to grow further. In the case of university graduates it has increased even more dramatically from 3.0% in 1994 to 13.2% in 1997 and it is mostly due to the lack of

structural adjustments of education to the needs of the labour market;

- There has not been achieved any significant progress in bringing the modern information and computing technology into the schools, classrooms, etc. The situation has to some extent even become worse now than before as the available computers are mostly older types unsuitable for the current networking opportunities, do not have parameters for modern software packages, etc. The whole this process has been negatively effected mainly by two reasons:

- the lack of funding for the procurement of the modern information technology; and

- the lack of qualified teachers and instructors for the particular subjects as they find much better financial and career opportunities outside the education system and in particular in the newly arising private sector.

- The harmonization of the legislation in the area of education with the legislation of the EU has been in progress but to some extent it has been negatively effected by the fact that Slovakia has not yet been selected for the direct accession negotiations with the EU. It is possible to expect that the Helsinki summit of the EU in December 1999 and a subsequent start of the particular accession negotiations also with Slovakia will bring the necessary acceleration also to this important problem area if we realize that pupils of current elementary schools could complete their high-school and/or university education already as citizens of the EU and to find their full utilization on the particular common labour market.

- In the area of the development of the alternative education only very little has been achieved in comparison with the results of the situation analysis of 1995. The main problem has again been a lack of funding. Some progress has been achieved in the extension of the network of schools according to individual sectors and/or type of ownership (state, private, religious) or according to the main language of instruction, etc., but the further development has again been negatively effected by the worsening social and financial situation of the society as many families could hardly afford to pay for the high-school education at a private school, etc. A specific case of an alternative education regarding the minority education has not succeeded due to the objections of some minorities as they did not realized that improving their knowledge of the official language of the country could improve their chances for employment on the more and more competitive labour market.

- In spite of various mainly budgetary problems so far it has been successfully secured that the whole system of education for the young generation has been free and thus the particular right as stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of Child has fully been respected. But there has already been an existing trend to introduce some nominal fees for some kinds of schools, first of all at the university levels what to some extent could mean a kind of discrimination for students from social weaker families.

- The same situation as in the case of education in modern information technologies has been in the education of foreign languages i.e. the lack of funding for establishing modern foreign languages labs and the lack of qualified lecturers, teachers, instructors, etc. who again are lured by much better conditions in the private sector. Thus, a big part of classes has to be carried out by external teachers what to some extent negatively affects the standard of the whole education. One solution could be to invite foreign instructors who are quite interested to come also to Slovakia, but unfortunately the particular employment legislation regarding foreigners is so complex and unfavorable to foreign instructors that finally they usually start their assignments in the neighboring countries.

- In general, the situation in the foreign languages education has not improved but rather deteriorated in comparison with the past as now about one third of pupils of elementary schools have no foreign language classes at all. In the past at least Russian has been a foreign language available for every pupil. Now, one third of pupils of elementary schools has no such opportunity although otherwise there is formally much more opportunities to choose among six foreign languages (English, French, German, Russian, Spanish, Italian), but again the problem is with the availability of teachers.

- As we have already mentioned, one of the main problems of education has been a lack of qualified teachers. This problem has been further deteriorating. Not only that teachers have been underpaid and thus forced to seek better opportunities for employment in other sectors but even under such unfavorable conditions, there has been another threat to teachers. Under the current plans of the government to reduce the state administration by 10%, the same reduction has to apply also to all types of schools. Such a reduction would of course effect also teachers and especially those of the older generation i.e. those who in many cases are the only teaching staff as it is not at all attractive for young graduates to become teachers.

- One of the negative outcomes from the last Situation analysis has been the fact that Slovakia has

still been one of the countries that has not yet introduced a post of an Ombudsman for monitoring the rights of children including those for education.

In view of the above problems of the existing system of education in Slovakia as revealed by the last Situation Analysis conducted by the Slovak Committee for UNICEF, the following main conclusions and recommendations for the further development of the EFD have been formulated, which at the same time are also the main challenges for education in the forthcoming 21st century in general:

- To prepare and implement as soon as possible a comprehensive national strategy for the education on the principles of the Education for All and for Development and as a part of the system of the whole-life education process;

- To harmonize the education system according to the standards, rules and regulations in the countries of the EU and thus prepare the whole education system for its place in the unified Europe. It concerns not only of the legislation, organization but also of all budget and financial implications, a direct support for research and development in the area of education;

- To participate actively in all education programs of the EU as e.g. TEMPUS, SOCRATES, LEONARDO, YOUTH FOR EUROPE, etc. and create all necessary conditions for the maximal mobility of teachers and students with the countries of the EU;

- To introduce and develop all kinds of European studies and thus to support the knowledge and true feeling of the common European identity, history, culture, cooperation, etc.;

- To develop and further promote all forms of education in the areas of human rights, child rights, minority rights, etc. as cornerstones of the common European citizenship, free movement of persons, etc.;

- To maximize education, practical training and utilization of the modern information and communications technologies in all types of schools as there is already now existing an evident handicap in comparison with the situation in the EU. Especially, it is necessary to enable young people an unrestricted access to Internet and thus participate in various world-wide educational programs such as a Voice of Youth, etc.;

- To promote and further develop education in various global issues such as environmental protection, a healthy life style without drugs, smoking, alcoholism, protection against sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, etc. To the same category also

belongs education in the field of international cooperation and understanding and against any forms of intolerance, xenophobia, racism, stereotypes and prejudices in relation to other cultures, nations, etc.;

- To prepare the young generation in such a way that every young person will be able to master at least one of the official languages of the EU and in particular English as a language of the current globalization; and

- To modernize the whole educational system in the direction towards its further differentiation and pluralism, free and individual choice for an educational pattern, a whole-the-life education and an active participation of citizens and especially parents in the education of their children, etc.

Conclusion

In order to actively contribute to the implementation of the above challenging tasks, the Slovak Committee for UNICEF has also launched - in cooperation and with funding from the Regional Office for CEE/CIS and the Baltics of the UNICEF Geneva –its CMIS – Computerized Monitoring Information System in the area of Education as one of the projects commemorating the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child. Technically, the CMIS project has been designed, developed and implemented at the Department of Information System of the Faculty of Management of the Comenius University at Bratislava. Primarily, it has been formulated as a system for monitoring of the rights of minorities for education in the Slovak Republic, but, as a modern www based system (<http://www.fm.uniba.sk/projekty/cmis>), it is open and available for monitoring of the rights for education in general. In addition to this, its main monitoring oriented development and implementation strategy, it is also, at the same time, a system which is directly serving various EFD-related goals:

- To enable young people a practical use of the modern computing and communication technology in the environment of the contemporary WWW;

- To use that technology for monitoring their own rights not only in education but also in general according to the particular Convention on the Rights of Child and thus to contribute to their knowledge in that area;

- To learn directly about the situation regarding the same rights in other countries and thus to better understand the current globalized and ever more inter-related world and overcome some of existing stereotypes, misunderstandings, etc.

- To communicate directly with their partners in foreign countries and thus in many cases to acquire practical experiences in establishing and developing their own „foreign relations“, to increase their knowledge on globalization, on the world and foreign countries, foreign cultures, etc.; and

- To have an opportunity for practical utilization and improvement of their skills in foreign language modern on-line communications, etc.

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