



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
High Commissioner on National Minorities**

**BUILDING UNDERSTANDING AND TOLERANCE IN MULTI-ETHNIC  
SOCIETIES: PROMOTING INTEGRATION AND THE ROLE  
OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

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To the OSCE HCNM/Ministry of Education and  
Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan Conference

**“Education as a Means of Integration in Multi-ethnic Societies”**

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**BUILDING UNDERSTANDING AND TOLERANCE IN MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETIES:  
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Mr. President, Distinguished Participants,

The subject of education is of particular importance to me and I welcome the opportunity to address you on this issue and on the role of education in promoting integration in multi-ethnic societies.

As many of you are aware, the High Commissioner has had a close and warm relationship to Kyrgyzstan for many years. Since taking up my post, it has been my pleasure to visit Kyrgyzstan on three previous occasions. These visits have afforded me the opportunity to travel to different parts of the country, including the south, and to meet a wide variety of persons, including representatives from the authorities, from non-governmental organisations and from various national minority communities.

Throughout these travels and meetings I have been struck by the warmth of the people of Kyrgyzstan and by the readiness of different individuals and groups to talk openly about their hopes and aspirations for the future of the country. An important theme to emerge from my visits has been the idea that Kyrgyzstan is, indeed, a 'common home' to a wide variety of different ethnic groups; a place for communities to come together in peace and understanding. At the same time, I have also been struck by the need for all of us to intensify our work to foster an even stronger society and to promote greater integration.

The promotion of harmonious interethnic relations is an issue that requires careful attention from all sides. I would, therefore, like to express my gratitude to His Excellency President Akaev for his unwavering commitment to the fostering of positive relations between the different ethnic communities of Kyrgyzstan and for his encouragement to me to undertake an initiative in the area of education. Further, I would also like to offer my thanks to the Minister of Education and the Chairman of the Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan for their support in the preparation of this conference.

As you will know, the mandate of the High Commissioner is one of conflict prevention in the area of inter-ethnic relations. The mandate obligates me to address situations of short term concerns as well as the important long-term aspects of inter-ethnic relations. Indeed, a long-term perspective is essential if sustainable solutions are to be achieved.

The practical philosophy applied to achieve this end is one of the integration of different ethnic communities within the State. We should be clear, however, that integration does not mean the assimilation of minorities nor their separation from society. Rather, I am trying to find the middle ground, integration in harmony. As High Commissioner, I strive to identify the best ways to accommodate the legitimate concerns of majorities and minorities; seeking the means by which they can build the national society together in such a way that the State is the common home for all of them; where none are treated as second class citizens.

The basis of integration is, thus, the twin principles of equality and non-discrimination. By equality we do not mean a sterile measurement of human beings without sensitivity to special needs, or importantly, cultural differences. Rather, we mean, as Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts, that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” On this basis, there is a human right not to suffer discrimination, in other words, not to be treated in an arbitrary fashion; in a fashion that does not respect the equality of human beings. The composite of rights and freedoms has been spelled out in many instruments, including in the commitments made by all OSCE participating States.

Integration should, therefore, be viewed as a set of concrete measures that are designed to promote full freedom and dignity for all. The integration of diversity offers a way to ensure human rights, both of the majority and of minorities, and, thereby, to build more stable and harmonious societies. In this way, integration is a powerful means to overcome inter-ethnic tensions. Of course, the exact nature of the measures that constitute integration will vary from society to society. Nonetheless, reflecting the fundamental importance of education within all societies - not least because education is one of the principal means for the promotion of the identity of individuals and for the transmission of identity within cultural groups - this issue is usually a core element of successful policies of social integration.

Education is recognised as a fundamental human right; it provides the individual with the means to realise their potential and ambitions. At the same time, education also has a

number of additional dimensions. As the Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen has recently noted, basic education has a critical role in promoting development, and, thereby, security.<sup>1</sup> The first and most immediate contribution of successful school education is a direct reduction of deprivation through providing individuals with the skills of literacy, numeracy and analytical thinking. These are the primary elements that have proved necessary for economic and social development in a country and the successful integration of states into the global economy.

Today our common challenge is, thus, to ensure that every person has access to high quality education, both in order to respect human rights and to foster economic prosperity. At the same time, investment in education must be realised with close attention to the development of the right framework of educational policies and with consideration of how education can be designed simultaneously to promote the interests of the individual and of the broader community.

Bearing in mind the principle of education for all, it is essential to combat the uneven distribution of education. This is a special challenge in multi-ethnic societies where inequalities in the provision of education can lead to frustrations and tensions. It was recognition of this important dimension to education that led my office to elaborate the Hague Recommendations Regarding the Educational Rights of National Minorities. The Hague Recommendations have been developed to provide states with practical guidelines on an appropriate and coherent application of minority education rights in the OSCE

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<sup>1</sup> Amartya Sen: *The Importance of Basic Education*. Address to the Commonwealth education conference, (Edinburgh) 27<sup>th</sup> October 2003.

region. A representative of my office will be available later in the conference to talk in detail about these recommendations.

As is recognised in the Hague Recommendations, educational policies and practice are particularly important in multi-ethnic societies because they provide the means by which persons belonging to national minorities have the possibility to transmit their culture to future generations and, thus, to preserve, promote and develop their minority characteristics. For this reason, I believe that education should be viewed not only as a fundamental human right but also as a necessary tool to promote and develop identity, *inter alia* the identity of persons belonging to national minorities. Education can be a means to promote the diversity of cultural and linguistic experiences that make our societies such rewarding places in which to live.

In this way, education goes far beyond equipping young people with how to survive in an increasingly competitive world. It should be about more than training individuals with a particular set of skills, although this is of course one important component of education. Good education can and must aim higher, seeking to shape future generations for responsible citizenship. It must direct us in our attitudes and experiences, teaching us to learn, and thereby to understand and even to enjoy different cultures, languages and traditions. Fostering the values of tolerance and mutual understanding has now become even more important as so many of our societies face a struggle with scourges of xenophobia and racism.

Such an approach to education is also essential because when one looks at issues of identity, many groups can be in the position of a minority. Sometimes even numerical majorities can face the problems of being a minority, for example if the majority language has been held back or underdeveloped in the past. It is, therefore, in everyone's interest to develop a comprehensive approach to education; one that aims to meet the range of needs and concerns, both of majorities and of minorities.

Such a project can and must recognise and build upon the richness of our collective cultural wealth, not only as a matter of mutual respect, but foremost as a matter of developing our societies, of preserving and even increasing the diversity we enjoy and drawing from it. In my view, this implies not only multi-cultural education in terms of content, but also inter-cultural education in terms of approach and process. What, then, constitute the elements of such an approach to education?

A key issue in education in almost all of the societies where I am engaged is the issue of language. It has been my experience that the right of persons belonging to national minorities to maintain their identity can only be realized if they acquire a proper knowledge of their mother tongue during the educational process. At the same time, persons belonging to national minorities have a responsibility to integrate into the wider national society through the acquisition of a proper knowledge of the State language.

This is sometimes a difficult balance to ensure, but I believe that there are practical approaches to attain this balance. Earlier this year I sponsored, together with the NGO

Cimera, a roundtable on the issue of multilingual and mother-tongue education in the city of Osh. This event highlighted the concrete ways in which schooling can be organised to foster the integration of children from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds through multilingual education. It is my belief that there is considerable scope to expand such initiatives in our societies.

While language is clearly a crucial element in education, multi-cultural education should not be confined to this issue. In my understanding, education in multiethnic contexts should be concerned with the teaching of different languages but it should also involve teaching the history and culture of the diversity of ethnic communities within the State, not just that of the national majority. It has been my experience that the development of curricula that includes the teaching of the history, cultures and traditions of national minorities as well as of national majorities can serve as a powerful means to promote integration. This effect can be further enhanced when the curriculum content related to minorities is developed with the active participation of bodies that are representative of national minorities.

Indeed, broadening participation in the development and implementation of educational policies has proved to be an important means to enhance the educational system and to promote the greater engagement of national minorities in the State. The creation by governments of institutions that are representative of members of national minorities to participate in the development and implementation of programmes related to education has, in many instances, proved to be a positive step and a means to broaden dialogue.



Further, it has been my experience that the endowment of regional and local authorities with appropriate competencies in the area of education, and measures to facilitate the participation of members of national minorities in the process of policy formation at a regional and local level has successfully served to facilitate greater integration. Steps to encourage parental involvement in the education process have also proven to be a stimulus to raising the quality of education as well as increasing social cohesion.

While it is important to ensure that persons belonging to different ethnic communities have the opportunity to protect and develop their language, history and cultures through the educational process, education must also function to bring individuals together. Education is a means to build the common society. An insistence on seeing human beings in terms of one dimension, regarding them just as members of one group or another can lead to separation. Every human being's identity has many different components, related to ethnicity, language, and place of origin, to occupation, history, religion and beliefs. I have already spoken of the importance of non-sectarian and non-parochial curricula that expand, rather than reduce, children's horizons. I also believe that there should be places in the school system to bring children from different backgrounds together to learn from each other, rather than separating them on the basis of one particular identity.

Developing education systems that can achieve equality in fact as well as equality in law is a challenge for all of us. I understand that some governments may not be in a financial position to uphold all aspects of multicultural education. The mere lack of funds cannot,

however, lead to the conclusion that commitments are no longer relevant, or that such commitments ought not to be accepted as a basis for future educational policies. At the same time, the international community has a considerable role to play in supporting governments that seek to develop and implement new and progressive approaches to education.

As High Commissioner, I have been engaged in a range of activities in different OSCE participating States designed to assist governments with particular aspects of multicultural education. My engagement has involved support for the development of pluralism in the curriculum, for the provision of diversity in textbooks, and for assisting teachers to develop new skills appropriate for working in multicultural contexts. I have also offered encouragement for the development of materials that reflect the views of all groups in society and to initiatives that seek to raise awareness from an early age on the need for tolerance and understanding of other cultures.

A multicultural approach to education is important for all of the OSCE participating States that are home to a variety of ethnic communities. I would, therefore, like to welcome the opportunity afforded by this conference to consider in a comprehensive fashion the role that education can play in promoting integration in multi-ethnic societies. I am also greatly encouraged by the proposal of the Kyrgyzstani authorities to establish, following the conclusion of this conference, a working group composed of representatives of different organisations and groups, including representatives of

national minorities, with the purpose of developing a series of concrete recommendations for Kyrgyzstan in the area of educational policy based upon the philosophy of integration.

The creation of this working group provides a unique opportunity to elaborate a set of recommendations for the authorities, for national minorities, for non-governmental organisations and for the international community to help to promote integration, and thereby social harmony. I believe that these recommendations could serve as a positive example for all states of what can be achieved in this important area. I look forward to working with the members of the working group to facilitate this important undertaking. I believe that there will be considerable scope for other representatives of the international community to assist with the implementation of some of the key recommendations of the working group. Finally, I would like to wish all participants success with the rest of the conference.