

EDUCATION FOR INTER-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

The European Wergeland Centre Inauguration, 29 May 2009

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During my years in Secretary General Kofi Annan's senior management team I saw, first hand, how effective multilateral action with local and regional partners, helped build progress and peace. Wars ended and hope was provided in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Angola and Burundi, South Sudan and Northern Uganda, Kosovo and Nepal.

We also coordinated through the United Nations massive, life saving international relief in the Indian Ocean tsunami, the South Asian earthquake, the Horn of Africa, Southern Africa, the Lebanon war and the Darfur crisis. In several of these overwhelming emergencies hundreds of thousands of lives were predicted to perish. The sombre predictions were averted because multilateral action, building on local capacities, is today infinitely more effective than what is recognized in much of world media and national parliaments.

Europe has seen greater progress for standards of living, for human rights protection and for peace and reconciliation than perhaps any other continent. But there is a darker side: the world is also more unjust. The affluent has become rich beyond the wildest imaginations - while the poor live in the same abject misery as before. The divide between the worlds richest and poorest have become much greater during the last 50 years or so.

When Henrik Wergeland lived some 200 years ago the ratio between the richest and poorest nations was around one to three. We were among the poorest in Europe. Now, some centuries later we are on the top three richest countries in the world measured in GDP and more than hundred times richer than the poorest. The ratio is a hundred to one.

To contrast this even further; the richest individuals are richer than several of the poorest nations combined – a few rich Westerners are richer than the poorest one billion in the South.

The contrasts are many: the distance between those of us who have populations generally going for 15 – 20 years to school and university and those who still struggle to get primary education is greater.

We now have many complicated medical treatments per person and lifetime in the north-west, whereas others do not even have access to primary health care. When I grew up I was provided with free education, health care, enough food and I did not have to worry about not getting work. There are so many today who lack all of these benefits.

However, there is reason for great optimism,
- but also for great anger....

The new element is that we now live in a time where we may surf ourselves to any kind of information from anywhere on the internet.

The world is not necessarily more unjust, but it is perceived as such because we **know** and **they all know** how enormous the distance in standard of life and quality of life.

There are worldwide 1, 6 billion youngsters between 12 and 24. They should all be in school or entering professional opportunities. So many are deprived of precisely this that a volcanic sense of injustice is building, because the playing field is not fair – the opportunities are not equal.

In this climate – global winds of social change and unrest – we have seen in recent years the building of **stereotypes** with strongly biased and dangerous prejudice.

It underscores the need for not only education for intercultural understanding but also and first and foremost action for social justice.

It may seem a paradox that in the midst of our advancements in terms of new technology and communications that make us do unbelievably sophisticated things, we see **Medieval racism, hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islam phobia and anti-western and anti-American sentiments** which is beyond reason and control in many countries and age groups.

We know for a fact that **all world religions promote ideals of compassion, justice and respect for the dignity of life.**

No religion condones or approves the killing of innocents. But all major religions have been exploited to justify violence and intolerance by extremist groups. In this generation there have been many violent extremists on the fringes of some Islamic groups and sects. This has led to a wave of accusations that Islam is an inherently violent religion – which is as manifestly wrong as the generalisation that all Christians are killers because the Crusaders did what they once did. All of this deepens divides and reinforces dangerous mutual animosity among societies.

Recent public opinion polls show a majority with unfavourable views on westerners in many Muslim societies as there are equally big majorities with unfavourable views of Muslims in many western societies.

It is a dangerous course. Clear majorities of Westerners, according to the Pew Global Attitudes Project see Muslims as violent, fanatical and arrogant – whereas Muslims associate Westerners with being selfish, arrogant and violent.

These are figures from 2006 when the controversies surrounding the terror of September 11, the Iraq war, and waves of suicide bombings were at their heights.

That was also the year when a high level group initiated by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, and the prime ministers of Spain and Turkey, launched their report in favour of an Alliance of Civilizations – which in turn argued against the famous “clash of Civilisations” theory advanced by Samuel Huntington in the early 1990s.

In this report the eminent group of global leaders have several ideas on intercultural education and rightly observes the following:

Education systems today face the challenge of preparing young people for an interdependent world that is unsettling to individual and collective identities. Education about one's own history fosters a sense of community and solidarity, but it must be balanced by the knowledge of global issues and an understanding and appreciation of other societies and cultures.

At the same time we can all agree that there are some common – basic – universal values that here in Europe is advanced by the Council of Europe and will be by the Wergeland Centre that have to be or become part of our own civilisation and value system. We have to make space for basic human rights and fundamental freedoms.

So how come that something we as Europeans with all our human rights law and our Council of Europe tradition could let one of the worst crimes against humanity: torture blossom right in front of our eyes in the so-called “war on terror” after the horrors of September 11.

Since 2001 very high officials in the former US administration did not hide their intention to legitimize and make use of torture of detainees held beyond national and international law – including the Geneva Conventions.

This was done as part of the war on terror where very most European countries provided money, soldiers, intelligence and logistics. Some European countries helped in transporting and in detaining the anonymous torture victims who were denied the ancient right of habeas corpus.

How could this happen with so little resistance from within our own continent? And what does this tell future generations about our own protection of fundamental freedoms and prevention of crimes against humanity?

If we are, as we should, to go from “policy to practice” intercultural education should foster a sense that we have made global human progress, that much more remains to be done and that the generation now in school is the one that can make the progress that we in the generation here present failed to make.

They have greater resources, public and private – in spite of the temporary economic crisis – at hand than any generation before them and us.

They have technology that can be used to promote good, disseminate facts and values in all countries and balance out the hate propaganda that may be projected in the school yard, in the news media or by politicians and populists.

And they have organisations, institutions and movements like never before: non-governmental, informal, governmental or inter-governmental that can be used as forces for good.

Through the class room, the sports field, social movements and cultural expression there is great scope for intercultural action and colourful coexistence.

So I'm an optimist and think the ideals from Henrik Wergeland and so many other leaders from different civilisations will indeed prevail as we hand over to a new generation.