

Education Policies for Inclusion in South Eastern Europe: Challenges and Opportunities **Issues paper for an international conference in Vienna (22 – 23 May 2007)**

The conference aims (1) to discuss the evaluation of the OECD activity on “Education Development for Students at Risk and those with Disabilities in South Eastern Europe” (2003 – 2007)” with national and international stakeholders to develop concrete perspectives for future strategic support; (2) to provide information about relevant international and European developments with regard to education for students with special needs, and to raise awareness for support of inclusive practices amongst policy makers at all levels; (3) to provide a platform for discussion between education Ministries, the donor community, International Organisations and NGOs. The conference is being co-organised by the Austrian Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (Task Force Education and Youth).

1. Background

The OECD activity on “**Education Development for Students at Risk and those with Disabilities in South Eastern Europe**” began in 2003¹ and is comprised of four components: (a) policy reviews; (b) pilot activities in the field of statistics and data collection; (c) capacity building activities for model schools and data collection. Education ministries from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, FYR of Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia are participating in the project. The activity is funded by voluntary contributions from the Flemish Community of Belgium, Norway and the World Bank and supported by the Austrian and Israeli Ministries of Education. This activity is a follow-up based on recommendations of the Reviews of National Policies for Education, which were carried out in the framework of the Task Force Education and Youth.

The component on policy reviews offers the first coherent inventory of national policies on special needs education since the disintegration of the former Republic of Yugoslavia and the armed conflicts in the region.² It organised dissemination of its recommendations by providing the policy reviews in English, French and languages of the region and was subsequently followed by a series of capacity building measures at Ministry and model school levels. To address important statistical issues, the activity also organised and supported a number of micro-projects on statistics and data gathering. Finally, the OECD evaluated the progress of project implementation and analysed key policy issues emerging during the OECD evaluation visits: a final evaluation report will be available in May 2007.³

The OECD project is carried out within the political framework of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and the Education Reform Initiative (ERI SEE): progress reports were discussed in regular regional meetings of senior officials from education ministries of the region. In 2006, the Stability Pact endorsed education and research as one of its core objectives, thus emphasising the importance of human capacity building in the region. This political framework will support pro-active planning and sustainable development in a lifelong learning perspective.

¹ The Reviews of National Policies for Education of South Eastern Europe (OECD, 2003) clearly state that “*in our surveys, however, two minorities are consistently at the bottom of the social and educational scale: First, the Roma (Gypsy) population [...] and second, children and young people with special educational needs. (Volume1, p.15)*”

² OECD (2006), *Education Policies for Students at Risk and those with Disabilities in South Eastern Europe: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, FYR of Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia*, OECD, Paris.

³ *Education Policies for Students at Risk and those with Disabilities in South Eastern Europe: Follow-up Visits, October 2006 – January 2007.*

2. International developments

International institutions, governments and NGOs have made considerable efforts to develop and implement inclusive policies on all levels. A trend towards inclusive policies can be observed and is addressed by a number of international agreements and activities. Public awareness on issues of disabled and disadvantaged children is growing and parents increasingly voice their concern about their children's rights for adequate education and care⁴. Examples of excellent co-operation between parents, schools and local authorities in the implementation of inclusive education are encouraging.

All countries in the region have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and almost all ministries refer to international documents including the CRC, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) and the Framework for Action of the World Education Forum in Dakar in their respective strategy and policy papers. In the course of recent or ongoing legislative changes in education, most countries focus in one way or another on "special needs education". **The United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)** requires states to collect appropriate statistical and research data enabling them to implement inclusive policies and have effective measures between and among the states. It reaffirms the necessity for further activities in the field, building upon previous international agreements in this area.

UNICEF is currently carrying out programmes for students with special education needs (SEN) in several countries of the region, namely FYR of Macedonia and Montenegro. Substantial work in this field has also been undertaken in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Moldova. A number of studies commissioned by UNICEF give evidence of the serious situation of children at risk⁵. A feasibility study on data gathering on students with SEN was carried out in 2006/2007. The OECD was invited by UNICEF to participate in the 5th Network Meeting of UNICEF representatives from CEE/CIS to discuss a possible framework, opportunities and modalities of co-operation.

The **IBE Council**, composed of 28 **UNESCO** Member States, has proposed that the 48th International Conference for Education (ICE) should focus on the theme "Inclusive Education: the Way of the Future" and be held in Geneva between 25 and 28 November 2008. In order to enrich and strengthen the debates that will take place during the 48th ICE, the International Bureau of Education (IBE UNESCO) plans to organise workshops in different UNESCO regions. The regional workshop for Europe will take place in Sinaia/Romania (June 2006) and also include representatives of countries of South Eastern Europe.

In order to ensure accelerated progress towards the EFA Millennium Goal of universal primary education, the Education for All – **Fast Track Initiative (FTI)** was established as a partnership between donor and developing countries. The World Bank-managed FTI was created to serve as an instrument for increasing their capacity with respect to finance, policy, capacity and data; areas that are of crucial importance for education planning, especially in an overarching and complex field like SEN education. Currently an FTI project for pre-school and early intervention is being carried out in Moldova, which also addresses training modules for inclusive education. Furthermore, data collection in countries in Southeast Europe is to some

⁴ Inclusion International (2006), *Hear our voices – A Global Report: People with an Intellectual Disability and their Families Speak out on Poverty and Exclusion* Inclusion International, London.

⁵ UNICEF (2006), *Children on the Brink: A Focused Situation Analysis of Vulnerable, Excluded and Discriminated Children in Romania*, UNICEF, Bucharest.

extent building upon a World Bank financed data collection (Education Management Information System – EMIS) and provides basic data to be further developed with regards to students with SEN.

Ongoing initiatives of the **European Commission** indicate the growing awareness about the importance of equity issues in the European Union. The recent Communication of the European Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems⁶ clearly states that, whereas education and training policies can have a substantial impact on economic and social outcomes, inequities in education and training also cause important hidden costs in public accounting systems. The Education Reform Initiative for South Eastern Europe refers to these issues and emphasises equity and quality as one of the core issues of its ongoing work in 2007.

This European development is also reflected in the renewed **Memorandum of Understanding of Ministers of Education of South Eastern Europe (2007)**, which was signed on the occasion of the Council of Europe Conference of education Ministers in May 2007.⁷

3. Towards inclusive education

The efforts of education ministries of the region and national stakeholders supported by International Organisations like the OECD, UNICEF and the World Bank, and NGOs involved in these areas, such as Inclusion International, Handicap International or the Open Society Institute, give evidence of an international trend towards inclusive policies in education. Most education ministries in South Eastern Europe have developed new policies and practices towards inclusion. Valuable efforts to collect reliable data serving as a solid basis for educational planning have been undertaken. Education for students with special needs gains increasing attention by the donor community and international institutions.

Nevertheless, both the OECD review on SEN education policies and the UNICEF study on children and disability in transition in CEE/CIS⁸ state that there is a wide gap between official recognition of inclusive education (international treaties, legislative frameworks) and the actual situation of education for children with special needs. The causes for this distortion are manifold: the lack of co-ordination and collaboration between ministries providing services to children with special education needs (education, social welfare, health, employment), the influence of the still-existing concept of defectology on the design of education provision for SEN, an inconsistent and scarce network of social service providers, the high number of affected children due to the consequences of war and armed conflicts in the region, the lack of reliable and detailed data and indicators, scarce financial and human resources, the lack of public awareness, etc. Distorting efforts can be observed on all levels of education⁹.

Furthermore, the influence of current stakeholders on respective education reform is rather limited and financial, human and technical resources on the national level are scarce.

Despite these obstacles to further development of education with special needs in the region, efforts at both the international and national level are promising. To ensure outcome oriented development in this field, more action has to be taken. A coherent approach of both international organisations and bi- and multi-

⁶ COM(2006)481 final.

⁷ Council of Europe Conference of Ministers of Education : “How can education help integrate people into society?” Istanbul (Turkey), 4-5 May 2007.

⁸ UNICEF – Innocenti Research Center (2005), *Children and Disability in Transition in CEE/CIS and Baltic States*, UNICEF, Florence.

⁹ South East European Network of Youth and Students with Disabilities (2006), *Situation and Positions of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education*, GAUDEAMUS, Chisinau.

lateral donors on the one hand and national ministries and other stakeholders on regional and local level on the other hand could facilitate this process even more.

4. Perspectives

Systematic support would integrate the following elements: (a) efforts on the policy and administrative levels, (b) available financial resources, (c) practicable and result oriented research (data, indicators and policy recommendations) and (d) necessary technical assistance (establishment and monitoring of pilot projects and systematic teacher training). A continuous dialogue between national and international stakeholders including parents associations and other non governmental organisations could help to identify areas in which this process of enhanced co-operation is adding value to already existing efforts.