

For its inaugural interview in the new monthly series of “UNESCO-CEPES in conversation with ...”, Diana Ruff talked with Yesim Oruc, the Acting UNDP Romania Resident Representative, about cultural tolerance, women in politics and highly-trained puppies!



©UNESCO-CEPES June 2010

Diana Ruff: *Thank you for agreeing to launch our series of conversations.*

Yesim Oruc: I'm very glad that UNESCO is taking this initiative. Based on my experience with UNDP, some of the most significant and valuable testimonies of good development and work come from conversations and informal exchanges with practitioners of development, be they from education, health or in other social inclusion field. Most of the time, it is not the experiences of things that have gone very well, but the honest admissions of lessons learned in things that did not work that give us the most important experiences to share.

DR: *Could you tell us a little about the current activities of the UN and UNDP in Romania and the Region?*

YO: The UN in Romania has entered into a new stage of programming for 2010-2012. Our new cooperation with the Government of Romania for 2010-2012 is built more on a notion of partnership, as opposed to development assistance. Romania is an EU Member State that no longer requires assistance in the traditional sense of development assistance. We are looking at a new model of cooperation which is essentially a partnership among equals and among development practitioners. In the region, the UN presence is moving in the same direction. I'm proud to say that Romania is sort of trail blazing in this partnership with the UN system. In other countries of our region, for instance Croatia which is expecting EU accession very soon, there is a similar trend towards knowledge partnership and development knowledge sharing. In this context, there is a need for renewed dialogue and partnerships between governments and civil societies. And I think that with Romania leading the way - I'm very proud to say - the UN system will achieve a new *modus operandi* with EU Member States, accession countries and neighboring countries.

DR: *The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 2010 International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures and designated UNESCO to play a leading role in the celebration of the Year. How do you see the role of the UN system as regards education in general and higher education in particular in addressing inter-culturality and diversity?*

YO: First of all, education is the formative element for populations at large to live with the UN ideals and principles of tolerance, respect for other cultures and diversity. The year 2010 presents us indeed with an opportunity to pursue with our national partners and civil society concerted actions towards implementing these ideals. I'm pleased to report that Romania is actually doing quite well in this. There have been several attempts at secondary school level through the Department of Interethnic Relations of the

Government to incorporate a scientific and objective history of minorities and different religions in Romania into the textbooks, and into the curriculum of Romanian national education system. We also collaborate with UNESCO in trying to ascertain how these principles are incorporated at tertiary education levels. Unfortunately, based on my experience, a lot of the prejudices that populations, groups and communities develop are enforced by bad education practices. So, we hope that Romania can play a role in setting a model for the region at large and in tertiary education in particular. It's critically important that scientific and objective knowledge about cultural diversity in countries and in the region are codified and disseminated so that university students who will be consequently entering life cycles of jobs as adult citizens, will have the opportunity to see more sensitive curricula developed through the good initiatives of UNESCO.

DR: *The Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) UN initiative was recently launched in Romania. What was the role of the UN agencies in the AoC?*

YO: Of the UN agencies, two UN agencies have taken the lead in promoting the AoC in Romania, UNESCO and UNDP, as part of our Country Team work plan. The AoC is obviously an initiative of the Secretary General together with the Governments of Spain and Turkey, and within this context, together with UNESCO, we have addressed large student bodies in several Romanian universities and also conducted some scientific surveys required to understand where Romania's tertiary education practice is with regard to the principles of the AoC, which are also those of cultural sensitivity and respect for cultural diversity. A national Charter of commitment to the AoC has been signed. The most important thing is for there to be follow-up at local levels of individual Alliance initiatives. I was personally invited by the Government of Romania to the region of Constanta to look at the practices of religious and intercultural dialogue, and my official report from the mission is that indeed in the area of Constanta the different religious communities and all the different cultures have a thriving environment of sharing their own traditions, participating in each others' events, and having a harmonious existence together. There are three parameters or structural factors, that allow for communities to live in harmony, in respect of each other's religion and culture, and in Constanta I was able to see them: first, constitutional guarantees: formal legal constitutional guarantees of freedom of worship, culture and expression for minorities; the second parameter is political representation of minorities; the third parameter is funding made available for cultural activities.

DR: *What is your understanding of cultural diversity in education? Is there a need for incorporating intercultural dialogue and intercultural literacy in today's education systems?*

YO: I'm not an expert in education. However, based on our own experiences of how formal education impacts peoples through deeply held beliefs, formal education has a tendency to exacerbate some of the sometimes bad beliefs or practices, or to promote good ones. The UN system is fully committed to incorporating best practices of cultural diversity and respect for cultural diversity into education. The institutional mechanisms require political commitment and political action of countries and also of the implementers at school and university levels, to make sure that cultural diversity is supported through legal, financial, and curricular institutional underpinnings of the education system. Intercultural literacy is a new concept, slowly being integrated, into many curricula at the secondary and tertiary levels of education. However, a stronger packaging of this and a stronger presentation of what's being done by university leadership and administrative education research would certainly help to disseminate it.

DR: *Do you believe multilingualism is an asset?*

YO: Of course. My child for instance is bilingual. Recent research shows that bilingual children have a better ability to understand or to communicate complex thoughts because they are thinking in different languages and they have to communicate things. It is also proven that people feel much more comfortable in their mother tongue. In my opinion, promoting multilingualism is a wealth of a national education system. We see that the countries having diverse cultures within them and promoting

multilingualism can enable a broader range of options for students and citizens to express and participate in political life. In this part of the world, close to the Balkans, there has been a difficult past of ethnic relations. Based on the experience of our programming we really promote that governments in this region work towards addressing vulnerabilities, no matter which cultural or ethnic group is experiencing them the most, and to put vulnerability at the forefront as opposed to making ethnic based programming. This is one of the lessons learned by UNDP in its work in poverty and which is published in our most recent analysis of vulnerability in this region, which is focused on Roma groups and internally displaced persons of different ethnic groups and minorities in the Balkan region particularly.

DR: Could you please comment on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for Romania and for the region?

YO: First, allow me to comment on Romania. Romania is an EU Member State, therefore, a lot of the MDGs have already been achieved or exceeded by Romania. I'm pleased to report that the Government of Romania is preparing an MDG Report for the September 2010 MDG Summit in New York, which I believe will be presented by the Prime Minister. In this report we are working on a draft together with all the UN agencies. A lot of the EU instruments have been very supportive and have allowed Romania to overtake the MDG targets. There is the MDG target of international cooperation concerning Romania's official development assistance, which Romania, I hope, will maintain. Allow me one comment on the MDG 3. MDG 3 is about gender equality and unfortunately, this is one area where Romania and many of the neighboring countries in the Region have not been able to achieve, especially the target concerning political representation of women. Political representation of women in Romania is way below the desired levels, way below Western European standards, and at the local level is almost non-existent. We are now working on a campaign with the government to promote women in politics.

DR: Speaking about this, how do you explain the lack of visibility of women in politics in Romania and in the Region, considering their high level of education?

YO: Indeed. I have been personally struggling to understand what's happening. Romania has very highly educated women. Women are very well represented also in managerial positions in the private sector however, they are not in politics. One of the messages we have from our experience in many other countries, is that if there is a perception that politics is not a trustworthy profession, and that corruption may be part of the political dynamics, it turns out that women do not enter into politics. So one of the campaign messages that for instance has been put together by activists in the field, and that we are encouraging, is that "clean" politics attract more women. Unfortunately I have the feeling that this is probably a shared issue across the borders of Eastern Europe where politics is perceived as being unclean, and not merit based.

DR: What do you see as the contribution of education and particularly of higher education to the MDGs?

YO: The MDGs are not very linked to the tertiary education. But you have to understand also that MDGs are prepared for the developing countries so we are not necessarily talking about the specific developmental needs of the countries in Eastern Europe or in our region at large. There is increased evidence that first of all economic competitiveness is hugely linked to good quality tertiary education which is linked to market needs. I was looking at a cartoon the other day, in which two puppies are talking to each other and one goes: I'm trained, and the other one goes: I'm highly trained ! So, there is a big difference between them. The most important from the perspective of the UN is the human development aspect in which tertiary education is critical. The UN, and UNDP in particular, look at development as the range of choices available to a person to achieve what he or she thinks is reasonable to achieve. Talking about individual liberties, any person has all the right to wish the best for his or her own child, for advancement and basic comforts in life. We believe that tertiary education, regardless of your economic activity, will allow a person to have more options in life, and therefore deepen his or her liberty to choose what he or she wants to be, and a person can only achieve that if he or she has all the qualifications that a system may provide. Tertiary education unfortunately is the area where the largest inequalities are

experienced. The very good universities have only limited number of students and graduates. In many countries only about 5% of young people can access this type of high quality education, which gives them exponential advantages in the future. So, to broaden the capacities that tertiary education provides to a broader range of citizens and communities, will allow a larger number of people to have this growth of opportunities. In the meantime, to ensure that the institutional education, postsecondary or tertiary, can provide higher standards and therefore endow individuals with more opportunities is critical for social harmony and to make sure that inequalities do not deepen in any given country.

DR: *Finally, do you believe that the links between Europe and Asia are getting stronger? If yes, in what ways?*

YO: I think links are growing across the board since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Cold War. All the assumptions of blocks have now been radically changed and communications have radically erased these borders. Of course, much more closeness and ties exist between Europe and Asia whichever way we define it. Obviously, China is a world economy, and so is India. These are huge entities that are practically individual continents to themselves. And the trade and the economic relations between these countries and the other emerging economies in Asia and Europe are huge. But the pull of integration is not only economic. . Ultimately, as we share the economy, the air that we breathe or the environment that is changing, there is greater need for the East and the West to identify more areas of commonality than differences not only for economic prosperity but for sustainability of our planet and for peace. In this context, I would mention the EU enlargement process. The EU was first established among a small number of countries, and then was expanded with Southern Europe and Mediterranean countries, and now with Eastern Europe. With the possible inclusion of Turkey into the EU, suddenly a country which is predominantly Muslim in faith may become part of the European club of nations. So all of this is already pointing to a huge shift of paradigm about what Europe and Asia mean. I think our children or our children's children will probably have less of these notions of Europe and Asia as cultural entities, but rather look at them as geographical differences. I hope, at least, that will be the case.

DR: *Thank you very much for sharing your opinions with UNESCO-CEPES.*

