

DUBROVNIK SPEECH – Michel Richter - SPARK

TITLE: “Higher Education Institutional Reforms – an Emergency Bridge between the Societies in Conflict”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to speak on this excellent conference.

Higher Education has a crucial role to play in rebuilding post-conflict societies. It is our belief that development agencies including NGOs such as Spark should therefore increasingly involve universities in their activities.

Let me briefly introduce our organisation SPARK, formerly known as the Academic Training Association (ATA).

Spark develops higher education and entrepreneurship so that young ambitious people are empowered to lead their societies into prosperity. In doing so, we strengthen the capacities of institutions representing business, government and education. Universities are involved in most of our projects such as the Summer Universities - the four of which educate over 1.500 students in this region every year - and in the five Business Start-Up Centres and Incubators we have established throughout the region. These centres train and assist over one thousand students every year in how to establish their own enterprise.

In post-conflict societies the future perspective of youth is at stake. It is no secret that a large proportion of youth and students in Southeast Europe considers emigrating. It is particularly the bright that do succeed. This could result in a dangerous brain-drain. Offering realistic perspectives to students is thus essential: where to find jobs after graduation?

Also, many of the riots and incidents in Southeast Europe over the last decade were fuelled by young men without a future perspective.

A World Bank report from 2004 on conflict and development in my view rightly notes that “countries affected by conflict face a two-way relationship between conflict and poverty – pervasive poverty makes societies more vulnerable to violent conflict, while conflict itself creates more poverty.”

In our view, institutional reforms in Higher Education in a post conflict situation should enable universities to play their crucial roles in reconstruction and development. Allow me to elaborate on how universities could play this role and address the preconditions to successfully perform this role.

- rebuilding human and professional capacities

One of the primary roles of universities for reconstruction and development concerns the delivery of architects, water sanitation engineers, business employees, government employees, legal advisors, medical doctors, NGO workers etc. Universities thereby contribute to economic development provided that society needs the human capital produced by them. In other words the employability of graduates is key.

Producing an employable work force that contributes to economic growth may not be enough in post conflict situations.

One of the professors that contributed to our projects, Gerd Junne from the University of Amsterdam emphasises “that it is not just economic growth that is important, but specific economic development that addresses the grievances of different groups” “Economic development gives different groups something to work on together. Orientation may change from looking at the past to focussing on the future.” The same could be said about educational development.

In addition, for education to effectively contribute to economic development it becomes part of an integrated and comprehensive approach towards development, including government, business support agencies and business alliances at all levels of society. The result of such an effective contribution could be that the improved quality and expansion of education is indeed met by an increase in job opportunities.

At Spark, we try to apply this in practice. Spark initiated BSCs are coordinated by partners from governmental or municipal SME agencies, business alliances and chambers of commerce and of course universities.

BSCs offer practically oriented business skills training intertwined with a business plan competition for mostly students or recent graduates. Winners receive additional training and credit to start their businesses. BSCs thus work on both: employability and job opportunities.

The BSC offers a platform for its partners to largely determine the content of the programme including the trainings. A related activity concerns curriculum reform aiming to bring entrepreneurship into the existing curricula of university partners. The BSC activities are inclusive to minorities.

- promoting good governance

In the aforementioned, I argue that educational reform, or more specifically, curriculum reform and modernisation are to reflect the specific needs of society and address a variation of interests of different groups.

This presupposes a great level of transparency and external accountability. It demands a largely democratic governance structure addressing the institution's main stakeholders' interests and involves them directly, while remaining independent of political authority and economic power.

This goes beyond structure requirements in which university management, administrators, academic staff, deans, students etc. are appropriately positioned in terms of decision making power, authority, supervision, conflicts of interest and so forth. It requires a society oriented accountability on the basis of measurable results.

Or as Wondem Degu, an education scientist put it: “If politicians and educators are determined to launch genuine education reform that can contribute to avoiding conflict and/or to breaking a cycle of conflict, there should be no reason to fear the people, their expressions and their effective participation. **Initiators of genuine mass-based educational reform must also be accountable to the people; they must speak frankly to the society of their achievements, shortcomings, miscalculations, and difficulties and, of course invite the people to submit their views and opinions.**

In short, they must make continuous effort to enhance the role of society....” At the same time of course, this also implies that a responsible pro-active role is to be taken up on the side of the members of society. For instance in curriculum development bodies and in evaluating the effectiveness of education offered.

- promoting the protection of human rights and the creation of critical citizens

In a post conflict situation there is a particular need to promote human rights and protect that of non-dominant groups in society. At the very basis is the right for education for all, which requires reforms to ensure that education is allocated to all groups in society, including non-majority groups.

In certain post-conflict situations these reforms have to deal with language issues, which I will not elaborate on here.

In post-conflict situations, Higher Education Institutions themselves can provide a platform for dialogue necessary to fill the gap that violent interaction left. Forums that allow freedom of speech and open discussions on topics that are of particular relevance in society and involve the groups of people or opinion makers related to a particular topic.

However, in encouraging open discussion and societal engagement among young people, action is also to be taken in the actual classroom.

As opposite to docile people, students should be helped to develop themselves into critically thinking citizens, continuously questioning their environment and seeking constructive dialogues as a means to work towards a solution together.

This is about an attitude that could be provoked by more interactive and participatory teaching and learning, applied whenever appropriate. Degu rightly states that “The development of such an attitude in the minds of the society and especially in the youth must be taken as a responsibility of the structured education system.”

Illustrative is the rapid expansion of the US and Romania based NGO, Critical Thinking International, to a great number of post-conflict areas around the world. Their activities on teaching methods combined with quality assurance are very much society oriented and clearly aimed at the creation of critically thinking citizens.

Spark's summer courses strongly incorporate interactive teaching methods and encourage discussion in the classrooms.

Moreover, together with hosting universities public discussions are organised as part of an extra-curricular summer programme. Topics included are, among

others, minority rights, regional & EU integration, higher education reforms and Bologna, private sector development and youth unemployment.

- becoming an attractive employer

The aforementioned implies that there is a huge responsibility in the hands of policy makers, university management and teaching faculty. So far, I have focussed on the perspectives of youth. But it is in their interest that their teachers too have good professional and socio-economic perspectives.

This requires university management and policy makers to enable them to teach good courses and conduct relevant research. It means that faculty is appropriately remunerated for research and teaching results, and are offered sufficient opportunities to learn themselves.

Particularly after a period of stagnation or isolation due to conflict, teacher development programmes should become a priority. If not, the institution may run the risk to loose credibility and prestige in society, as poorly educated youth is delivered to the labour market and good teaching faculty have left.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are here today on a regional conference. The reason Spark supports this conference is because we have become firm believers in the importance of thinking and working regionally in Southeast Europe.

Although plenty of new physical and psychological borders have been drawn over the past decades, the challenges of Higher Education reform can be best tackled through strong regional cooperation and sharing of expertise.

It only makes sense to work on Higher Education Reform within Southeast Europe if this is a joined effort.

All Higher Education Systems share the same heritage. And all are moving towards the same objective: European Integration through the implementation of the Bologna Action Lines.

For us, regional cooperation is thus primarily logical from both an efficiency and effectiveness point of view.

But in our view, there is one more argument that especially applies to Southeast Europe still today. In Southeast Europe education can serve as a bridge between communities when political relations are tense.

This is in the spirit of the Magna Charta which emphasises that “research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power”. And are –and I quote again -“Rejecting intolerance and always open to dialogue”.

Regional cooperation also makes clear economic sense. The economies of Southeast Europe have been joined together in a free trade zone through the CEFTA agreement, driven forward by the Stability Pact of Erhard Busek.

Especially in a time when the CEFTA regional free trade agreement has entered into force, the universities in Southeast Europe should elaborate the important role they could play in stimulating economic development. It is our belief that only then substantial steps can be made towards membership of the European Union.

Two weeks ago, in a speech, the OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría, made a very important point “In a highly competitive globalised economy, knowledge, skills and know-how are key factors for productivity, economic growth and better living conditions. The good news is that effective and innovative education policies open enormous opportunities for individuals; the bad news is that weak

educational systems result in declining standards, social exclusion and unemployment. There is no middle ground. So we must strive for excellence.”

The existence of a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union is one of the three main so-called Copenhagen criteria for joining the European Union. This implies the creation of knowledge economies in Southeast Europe, which cannot be realised without a strong Higher Education sector.

This might require that universities specialize themselves into disciplines of special importance for their geographical region. To determine what the competitive advantage of your university is, and focus your energy on getting better at that. A tendency we have observed is that many universities want to be doing almost everything. A sign of strength, we have been told more than a few times, is when a university can offer all disciplines. I would argue the opposite here today: in an increasingly open Southeast European market, it is important to focus universities on a few core-competences, and become centres of excellence in them. It is only then that scarce financial resources are being put to a maximum use and that a university can withstand increased competition from a proliferation of universities within the SEE states and between them

And there is one final good reason for universities to think regional. All major donors are starting to think regional. Regional cooperation is quickly moving from being an advantage in a grant application to becoming a pre-condition for an application. The institutions that make an optimum use of this will be most successful.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I was invited to this conference to share my organisation's view on the role of higher education in post conflict situations. For us, this is closely related to the

socio-economic perspectives of young people, as well as to their potential to contribute to the development of their societies.

Higher education institutions hold an important contingent of young people. The institutions have an auxiliary function towards society, and indeed today, the idea that they have to be highly responsive to society is widely accepted.

However, the necessity to be responsive might be particularly urgent in a post-conflict situation, which is usually characterised by a very delicate balance of different interests in society – or even in a region as a whole.

At Spark we sense that better times are ahead in terms of the appreciation of Higher Education. Through the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All Initiative, the bulk of support gravitated towards primary education.

The tide, we feel, is slowly turning. More and more international actors, such as the World Bank and our own government, are recognising the enormous importance of a strong tertiary educational system.

Investing in Education makes perfectly sense. I recently heard that OECD estimates that adding one extra year to the average years of schooling increases GDP per capita by 4 to 6 per cent. What more evidence do we need to increase our support to Education Reform in Southeast Europe?

Thank you