

Education in Central Asia – Current Developments and Opportunities for Comprehensive Security

The Bulgarian Chairmanship declared education to be one of the OSCE's top priorities for 2004. On 5 April, 2004, the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Solomon Passy, opened a day-long conference in Tashkent on the topic of "Education as an Investment in the Future". The conference was attended by the education ministers of Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan,¹ representatives of international organizations, such as the World Bank (WB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and of research institutes, such as the Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) in Hamburg and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek. The aim of the conference was to provide politicians, donor organizations, and education experts with a platform to discuss problems and opportunities for education in Central Asia and to develop joint projects.

The aim of this contribution is to describe and analyse the most important recent developments in the education systems of the Central Asian states and to present the options available to the OSCE in this specific field. The focus will be on the immensely important interface of education and the job market.

Education and the Concept of Comprehensive Security

One of the OSCE's key aims is to establish equal and undivided security throughout the entire area covered by the Organization. The OSCE adheres to the concept of comprehensive and co-operative security, based on the equal rights of all participating States. This concept touches upon a broad range of security-related matters: from conventional arms control and confidence-building measures, via preventive diplomacy, human rights and election monitoring, to the promotion of security in economic and environmental matters. But the promotion of comprehensive security also aims at integrating national and international security through co-operation and shared normative values. The Charter of Paris calls upon the participating States to co-operate more intensively to find solutions to economic, social, environmental, and humanitarian problems in order to create and sustain social stability and security.

1 Central Asia includes five states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan were not represented at the conference. Afghanistan was included as an OSCE partner for co-operation.

Case studies from around the world demonstrate a close relationship between education and the creation of lasting security. On 12 December 1997, a resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations confirmed “that basic education for all is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality, and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy”.² In the Action Programme of the “Bishkek International Conference on Enhancing Security and Stability in Central Asia”, organized in December 2001 by the OSCE and the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), educational initiatives are mentioned as an important instrument for combating and preventing terrorism.³

Education is extremely important for ensuring a secure future. The ability of a government to meet challenges in the security sector depends to a great extent on the quality of available human capital. To promote a comprehensive understanding of security and to encourage the use of non-violent means of conflict resolution, it is necessary to rethink both the content and the methods used in teaching and learning about communication, co-existence, and co-operation.

So far, the Central Asian states have not succeeded in connecting security matters with long-term educational goals. Existing education systems do not prepare school leavers to make a lasting, positive contribution to economic development that would combat poverty and enhance stability. The gap between the demands of the market and the skills taught in schools is growing wider every year. The number of unemployed teenagers and young adults is also increasing steadily. This “lost generation” represents a potential source of conflict and thus a threat to national and regional security that needs to be taken seriously. As the political scientist Henrik Urdal demonstrated in an analysis of armed conflicts between 1950 and 2000, young adults are far more likely to take part in rebellions when they have no alternative to unemployment and poverty and see in such activities an opportunity to secure an income.⁴

Investments in education frequently do not bring immediate results, but their impact is profound in the long-run. Education affects ideas and norms, and thus reshapes thinking, values, and behaviour. The improvement of education systems and their alignment to the demands of democratic societies is thus a long-term process that requires an intensive commitment over many years.

2 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 52/84 *Education for All*, 12 December 1997, at: <http://www.un.org/ga/documents/gares52/res5284.htm>.

3 Cf. *Bishkek International Conference on Enhancing Security and Stability in Central Asia: Strengthening Comprehensive Efforts to Counter Terrorism. Programme of Action*, 14 December 2001.

4 Cf. Henrik Urdal, *The Devil in Demographics. The Effect of Youth Bulges on Domestic Armed Conflict, 1950-2000*, New Orleans 2002, at: <http://www.prio.no/files/file40641/youthbulgesurdal.pdf>.

In the early 1990s, a number of publications concerned with social factors in the five Central Asian states highlighted the positive fact that these countries had virtually no illiteracy. These relatively high educational standards were seen as a source of hope for a future of dynamic development. As early as 1993, however, Uwe Halbach pointed out that “[...] Potemkin Villages consisting of figures and teacher-pupil ratios were also constructed with regard to the education system and veiled real problems”.⁵

To varying degrees, the problems already inherent in the Soviet-era education systems have intensified and become entrenched during the last decade. Within ten years, the Central Asian states, which all had broadly similar education environments at the time of independence, have developed in sometimes extremely different directions. The political and economic systems of all five states are undergoing drastic changes. The simultaneous transformation of these two areas is a major challenge for the region’s governments and administrative apparatus – not to mention its people. As each country has chosen its own path to developing and implementing reforms, the region can by no means be considered a homogenous bloc. Nevertheless, there are a number of developments that can be considered typical for all five states, and which have led to similar problems in each country’s education system:

- Government expenditure on education programmes has been significantly cut over the last decade.
- The number of children of school age has remained consistently high. In four of the five countries, a third of the population is under 14; in Kazakhstan, the proportion is one quarter.
- Adults are confronted with the need to prepare their children for a constantly changing world, which they themselves find hard to understand.
- The gap between what is taught in schools and what is demanded by the market is growing ever wider.
- Syllabi and schoolbooks are not oriented towards the acquisition of flexible knowledge that can be applied to different situations. Children are taught what they need to pass exams – not the skills they actually need for life.
- Although citizens of all five countries have the right to a free secondary education, access to education is increasingly determined by family income and place of residence.

5 Uwe Halbach, Die zentralasiatischen Republiken [The Central Asian Republics], in: Dieter Nohlen/Franz Nuscheler (eds), *Handbuch der Dritten Welt* [Handbook of the Third World], Bonn 1993, p. 143 (author’s translation).

Before treating these and other problems in more detail, it would be helpful to take a brief look at the education systems in the five countries of Central Asia.

Primary and Secondary Education

As part of the educational reforms carried out in the Soviet Union in 1989, compulsory schooling was extended from eight to nine years. University entry was possible following eleven years of schooling or nine years of school and a course at a vocational or technical college (Russian: *tekhnikum* or *uchilishche*). A standardized syllabus was used in all republics, with only the language of instruction differing from case to case. Besides Russian, classes were taught in the language of the main ethnic group of each republic and those of other large population groups. Nevertheless, "Russian schools" were considered superior, and those who attended them found it easier to gain access to higher education.

The education systems of the Central Asian states were nationalized following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Restructuring meant that many textbooks became unusable as neither the language they were printed in nor their content corresponded to the new reality. The emigration of the Russian-speaking population led to the loss of many qualified school and university teachers. At the same time, all five states were confronted with the challenge of developing their own syllabi and establishing the requisite institutions and personnel capacities. During the Soviet era, syllabi had been developed centrally in Moscow.

The current state of the education systems of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan is as follows: Children start school at the age of six or seven. Four years of primary and five years of secondary school make nine years of compulsory schooling in total. University entry is possible after eleven years of schooling. Senior high schools (*litsei*) and colleges, many of which have been established in the last few years, offer a two- or three-year programme of study that can also lead to university entrance. There is also a growing number of private education providers, and places at such "elite institutions" are highly sought after and expensive.

The education sector in Turkmenistan has been subject to particularly severe cuts in recent years. The attempts of President Saparmurat Niyazov to nationalize the education system took their most radical turn so far on 1 June 2004. On that day, a law came into effect denying recognition of university qualifications acquired outside Turkmenistan. Anyone possessing such a qualification is now faced with the threat of being made redundant.⁶

Although the duration of compulsory schooling has not officially changed in Central Asia since the Soviet era, there are a number of *de facto*

6 Cf. http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/rights/articles/eav050504_pr.shtml.

differences. For one, a growing number of pupils are leaving school after ninth grade to take up unskilled work in bazaars or the agricultural sector. In Tajikistan, in particular, there is a growing discrepancy between boys and girls after the ninth year of school. Many families are not prepared to invest in the education of their daughters beyond the minimum level necessary, as girls generally leave the parental home following marriage. From the point of view of the family economy, therefore, investment in education beyond the bare minimum is only justified in the case of boys.

In general, none of the Central Asian states is any longer in a position to enforce and monitor compulsory schooling, which has led to falling levels of enrolment and declining attendance figures. Although enrolment rates vary according to the source consulted, it is clear that Tajikistan has seen the greatest decline since the Soviet era.⁷ Moreover, especially in urban areas, children often fail to attend school to take up casual work increasingly offered by the larger bazaars. Finally, there is also the state's own encouragement of child labour: In both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, children and young people are employed in the cotton harvest from the start of September until at least the end of November. While smaller children are allowed to return home in the evening, older boys and girls are expected to remain at campsites located in the fields and must pay for their own food.

Vocational Education

Representatives of numerous international organizations agree that improving the system of vocational training is one of the most urgent issues for education reform in Central Asia. A report recently published by the World Bank argues that: "The implications of a market economy for education are radically different from those of a planned economy, but they are fairly easy to see."⁸ What are these implications?

A market economy requires both university graduates and skilled workers. A look at the states of Central Asia reveals that the number of people attending vocational colleges is far lower than those attending university. There is also a shortage of jobs for the latter. This imbalance results from the fact that certain occupations enjoy a much higher social standing than others. While a growing number of graduates in law, economics, and business subjects compete in a saturated job market, there is an increasing shortage of qualified and experienced farmers, medical personnel, office workers, trades-

7 In an interview, Iveta Silova, USAID advisor on educational issues, estimated attendance rates in Tajikistan at 84 per cent, compared to 88 per cent in Uzbekistan and 89 per cent in Kyrgyzstan. See: www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav090703a_pr.shtml.

8 The World Bank, Europe and Central Asia Region, Human Development Sector, *Hidden Challenges to Education Systems in Transition Economies. Education Sector, Strategy Paper 14*, at: [http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/eca/eca.nsf/Attachments/Hidden+Challenges+to+Education/\\$File/ECA.layout.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/eca/eca.nsf/Attachments/Hidden+Challenges+to+Education/$File/ECA.layout.pdf).

people, service workers, and so on. One consequence of this is that foreign-made products far outnumber items produced domestically in the bazaars and markets of the entire region.

In order to enhance the ability of small and mid-sized enterprises to compete in local markets, it is urgently necessary to improve vocational training in general, and to gear it more closely to the needs of the market. As in Soviet times, vocational training in Central Asia remains dominated by classroom-based teaching methods, and there is little on-the-job training. The establishment of new types of educational institutes – e.g. “vocational colleges” – in countries such as Uzbekistan cannot disguise the underlying problem. For instance, the lack of communication between employers and vocational colleges is reflected in syllabi that focus more on theoretical than practical knowledge. There is also too little value placed on the teaching of skills that enable lifelong learning – crucial if the workforce is to adapt to the needs of the market. Lifelong learning is one of many preconditions for active participation in the life of society. One way of reshaping syllabi would be to set up an intensive dialogue between employers, consumers, and the colleges themselves.

Troubling Developments

The problematic trends in the education systems of Central Asian countries are being exacerbated by ongoing economic restructuring. Three main developments characterize the situation of the adult population.

- (1) *Unemployment and labour migration*: Economic reforms and structural changes in all five Central Asian states have increased the number of people who are unemployed or without regular employment. A large proportion of the population work as seasonal labourers in the agricultural sector or migrate to other countries in search of work. Hundreds of thousands of people migrate seasonally each year from Tajikistan to Russia, from Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan and from Kyrgyzstan to China to earn money. In the early morning, both men and women can be found near the large bazaars looking for work as day labourers. Public-sector employees are frequently unable to live from their salaries and rely on secondary sources of income. Many of them have a second job in the informal economy, which they need to make ends meet.
- (2) *Growing gender inequality*: While the percentage of girls attending school decreases with age, a contrary trend can be observed in adult education: Women show far greater interest in enhancing their vocational qualifications than do men. According to representatives of international organizations, men do not appear to see the connection between vocational training and lifelong learning, on the one hand, and improved

job prospects, social mobility, and higher income, on the other. In interviews, representatives of local NGOs have stated that women adapt more easily to changing social and economic conditions, while men remain attached to traditional role models. It is therefore especially important to raise the population's awareness of the connection in market economies between "the quality of human capital" (i.e. educational achievement) and individual and family income. People need to learn that lifelong learning is an important means of reducing and avoiding poverty.

Of course, one cannot ignore the fact that in Central Asia the concept of lifelong learning conflicts with gender norms. Men primarily see themselves as the providers for their families. Even in their youth, they are expected to contribute to the household budget, and child labour is effectively a means of survival for many families. The school drop-out statistics for boys show that education is losing more and more ground to economic activities that do not require formal qualifications. This trend continues when boys grow up and start families of their own. It is thus important that international organizations not only concentrate on improving girls' access to educational institutions, but also pay attention to the situation of boys.

- (3) *Increasing illiteracy*: A third alarming trend is increasing illiteracy among the adult population. Both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have adopted new alphabets without providing sufficient opportunities for adults to learn them. Young people, for their part, often have an inadequate mastery of the Cyrillic script, which gives them problems reading newspapers, filling in official documents and accessing (older) literature. The need for bilingual education is one of the greatest challenges facing the education systems of all Central Asian states; it is also a crucial prerequisite for the establishment of regional markets.

If it does not prove possible to harmonize the education sector and the labour market in Central Asia, current trends are likely to intensify and to become serious causes of instability. Examples from around the globe show that the unemployed are far more likely to take part in violent conflict as a means of improving their economic situation. On the other hand, well-educated people – to the extent that they are well integrated in society – are more liable to seek peaceful means to solve conflicts and are more capable of developing alternative strategies in difficult situations. When people see that learning can improve their future prospects, they are more willing to invest time and money in their own education and that of their children.

Recommendations

International agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, the European Commission, and the Asian Development Bank are supporting the reform of education systems in the Central Asian states. Organizations including the German Agency for Technical Co-operation (GTZ), the Aga Khan Foundation, Save the Children, CARE International, and many more are also active in the field of education. Working together with education ministries, local communities and parents, these organizations have already helped to bring about improvements in the education sector in Central Asia.

To further improve the quality of education in the Central Asian states and to ensure that these improvements are sustained in the future, reforms are urgently needed in the following five areas:

1. Education Planning and Management

There is an extremely urgent need to train staff in education ministries and regional and education departments so that they can adapt the way they administer education to the needs of modern societies. Strengthening regional education departments would lead to decentralization of management structures in the education sector. This would make it considerably more attractive for local government and local communities to participate in education planning, thus making their own contribution to improving the education system.

2. Funding Education

Both national governments and international organizations need to use the resources they have available in the education sector more effectively and to establish appropriate structures to support this. This requires, in the first place, the creation of a realistic overall financial plan for the medium term, based on expected income and expenditure. National governments should be supported in their efforts to implement education sector reform.

3. The Learning Environment

A congenial learning environment is a key aspect of ensuring learner motivation. It is thus important to continue efforts to renovate and repair school buildings in Central Asia. Furthermore, to improve the efficiency and sustainability of investments in educational infrastructure, new types of school building should be considered, especially those that promise improved energy-efficiency and lower maintenance costs.

4. The Quality and Content of Education

Central Asia's national institutions of teaching and research should be provided with more support in bringing both the quality and the content of education up to international standards. Workshops and the exchange of experts on an international level can make a lasting contribution to the successful im-

plementation of international standards. In this, a special role can be played by young academics returning from abroad, and efforts should be made to make full use of their knowledge resources.

5. Adult and Out-of-School Education

More support should be given to educational initiatives outside the official school system, such as those organized by NGOs or local self-help groups. These provide learners with more control over both the goals and the methods of their learning, which generally improves the relevance of learning activities undertaken. Educational programming and related activities undertaken by the mass media should also be supported.

With its unique experience in the areas of dialogue and negotiation, the OSCE provides participating States with a framework that allows all relevant actors to discuss issues of education and security and develop solutions on equal terms. The Organization can act as a catalyst for a range of international, national, and local entities in the education sector. With Centres in all five Central Asian states, the OSCE possesses a well-established network that allows it to observe developments and to work with national governments to develop joint proposals for future co-operation. In addition, OSCE institutions are already involved in the education sector and in various training activities. To contribute to the long-term improvement of Central Asia's education systems, the OSCE should pay more attention to the following:

- More teachers should be invited to attend workshops and seminars.
- The OSCE should continue and expand its work with young people in areas such as the environment, conflict management, civil courage, and confidence-building measures.
- The OSCE should continue to support young people and adults in their self-directed work of creating an active civil society.

Only when the populations of the five Central Asian states are given the opportunity to take advantage of lifelong learning will the OSCE be able to implement its concept of comprehensive security in the region. Lifelong learning is one of the most important resources enabling active participation in the social, economic, and political life of a country and a prerequisite for a politically mature citizenship. The promotion of education can help ensure that – alongside national priorities – Central Asia develops shared values and norms that will contribute to fully integrating the region into the OSCE area.