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## **PEACE AND DISARMAMENT EDUCATION IN ALBANIA**

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According to the Albanian Response to the Millennium Development Goals, “Increasing the quality of education and improving education infrastructure continue to be two priority development objectives of the Albanian government” (HDPC, p. 17). Through the training of teachers and student organizations and by providing new technology and infrastructure for the secondary schools in the districts of Gramsh and Shkodra, the innovative partnership project “Developing Peace and Disarmament Education Initiatives to Disarm Children and Youth” is working towards such goals.

### **Albanian Context**

Albania is one of the poorest European countries. It was awash with illegal weapons after the civil unrest of 1997 leaving nearly one illegal weapon per 15 people. It is a post-communist society that is going through a problematic transition into market economy. Its traits are: a) weak civil society, b) weak governance: the state does not fulfill its responsibilities towards citizens particularly pertaining to infrastructure; c) high

economic insecurity because of unemployment - around 15 % - few safety nets, and marginalization of a large percentage of the population; d) high human insecurity resulting from deprivation in both economic and social spheres that is exacerbated by neo-liberal economic development programs and e) high emigration rate - with one out of four Albanians leaving the country during the past decade.

This is the context in which we are working.

### **Peace Education Program**

Following a successful physical disarmament project conducted by the UN in cooperation with the Albanian government, the need for sustainable disarmament strategies arose as the social fabric had been punctured by weapon-related instability. A unique partnership was formed between the UN Department for Disarmament Affairs (UNDDA) and the Hague Appeal for Peace (HAP)—an international NGO that works in promoting peace education globally—to engender peace and disarmament education programs in four countries where recent disarmament efforts have occurred: Albania, Peru, Niger, and Cambodia. Local partners in peace education were chosen in each country in order to develop programs fostering disarmament of the *minds* of youth and children.

The UNDDA/HAP project is guided by the idea that physical disarmament must be complemented and sustained by a mental disarmament process within communities. According to the recent UN study on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Education (A/57/124, pg. 1), “The overall purpose of disarmament and non-proliferation education is to impart knowledge and skills to empower individuals to make their contribution, as

national and world citizens, to the achievement of general and complete disarmament under effective international control.” Also, according to the Final Document of the World Congress on Disarmament Education (UNESCO 1980) relating to pedagogical objectives: “Disarmament education should apply the most imaginative educational methods, particularly those of participatory learning, geared to each cultural and social situation and level of education. It aims at teaching *how* to think about disarmament, rather than *what* to think about it.”

The project utilizes a participatory approach, since the community must own it in order to be more successful. In this participatory approach, the project differs from top-down development projects that treat local communities as passive beneficiaries. Instead, we promote the view that people become *active agents of change* in their communities. The community helps in the design and implementation of the project. The UNDDA/HAP team provides guidance for the working groups, along with professional expertise and financial resources to the project. Developing a peace education initiative with community involvement from the outset keeps the focus on the collaborative and cooperative values of peace making. (At the same time we must guard against reproducing traditional community-based models that oppress other members of the society, like women, children and ethnic minorities.) Complementing the community’s efforts, meaningful partnerships are explored with other actors, such as UNESCO, UNDP, and local NGOs that have similar goals and objectives.

The steps of project development, as articulated by Betty Burkes, HAP pedagogical coordinator are the following:

- 1) Identify pockets of peacemaking and peace-building in each community;

- 2) Approach the community with respect and listen to their needs;
- 3) Create a workable and representative team capable of implementing the local project, evaluating its progress and advising the UNDDA/HAP team at each step of the process;
- 4) Compile resources which will be available to each team for the implementation phase;
- 5) Build on community resources and traditions that contribute to peace-building;
- 6) Bring in outside resources based on other useful peace education curricula;
- 7) Involve the community in the design and the implementation stage of the project;
- 8) Insert the successful peace education practices into curricula.

These steps are derived from and interpreted at the local level. For example, after assessing the needs of the community, working groups in each of the four partner countries worked to design the educational initiatives. Local communities participate in the decision making process for these initiatives and are involved in the actual implementation. The implicit assumptions of this community-based approach are that local realities require local solutions, and also that local projects can benefit from and contribute to insights on peace and disarmament education worldwide.

In Albania, in the first year of the project, activities resulting from this unique cooperation between international organizations and local communities include:

- a) Supporting students for a participatory student governance system;
- b) Training for training of the teachers in peace education & how to integrate it into specific academic subjects;
- c) Creating a school newspaper for communication, sharing stories of arms collection, creative student initiatives and relationship building through creative writing;
- d) Supporting a collaboration of urban and rural students in the school;

- e) Facilitation and support for educational and recreational activities such as contests in the fields of philosophy, literature, art, and social studies at the main school and outside of it that will promote tolerance, peace, disarmament, conflict resolution, human rights;
- f) Gender sensitivity workshops and activities; and
- g) Organizing joint activities among different schools on themes of tolerance, peace, disarmament, conflict resolution, and human rights.

Taken as a whole, these activities are contributing to what we believe is a long term mental disarmament process.

### **Mental Disarmament Process**

Using local peace resources, we are creating and fostering alternatives to weapons and violence in our communities. We are responding to actual needs of schools and communities through ongoing training and assessment. Support for infrastructure in schools - such as computers and software to bridge the technology and knowledge gap- also helps promote an open and democratic education. Project activities include sustained work with different constituencies in the schools: teacher training to increase quality of teaching; the development of student leaders and government to increase pupils' voice in the school; debate clubs to foster critical thinking over issues of disarmament, peace, and other pressing local and global issues. We believe these diverse initiatives are contributing to the mental disarmament of the school community and towards reaching the goals in the focus of disarmament education.

For example, the debate club becomes a means of disarmament education in the following way: After some training to the debate clubs in Gramsh and Shkodra we

introduced a debate topic “Do Weapons Increase Security?” to both Gramsh and Shkodra schools. The pupils discussed in front of their teachers about personal and global issues relating to weapons and security. They read UNDP materials on Albanian disarmament, and some other UN charts on weapons spending found in the UN DDA education website. Also, the school newspaper opened up conversations among pupils and teachers relating to the educational and community priorities and the effects of weapons. Through this collective dialogue, knowledge of issues in peace and disarmament were covered while methods of critical thinking, public speaking, and problem solving were strengthened.

The youth activist summer school “Toward a Culture of Peace” was also instrumental in fostering a process that would create opportunities for the students to find solutions to major human security problems in Albanian society, such as trafficking, blood feud, gender discrimination, etc. Most of our workshops were future-oriented. The workshop would be divided in three parts. In the first part, the participants are asked to *envision* an ideal world where tolerance or human rights would be manifested. The second part is focused on the *main obstacles* to this vision. The third part would focus on the *personal and community ways* to overcome such obstacles and to work toward such vision.

The process was very open and participatory, grounded the participants in *group work*, and allowed for their imagination to work. They explored through *drawing, theatre of the oppressed*, and many participatory games the importance of making steps toward achieving their vision. During the second day, we explored through an *open space workshop* the issues that the participants themselves wanted to work on. The issues that

they chose, such as trafficking, gender discrimination and blood feud are very timely in the Albanian society nowadays, and they had creative ideas on how to overcome such puzzles. Quoting the chair of the Gramsh student government: “I suddenly realized that whatever action we do, we have the choice, to stay passive and do nothing like most of the people around us, or to be active in achieving our goals. There is so much that depends on us.”

Two of the leading students from our project summer school went on to participate in a Balkan-wide summer school - the “Youth Leadership Institute” through a US-based Balkan Youth Link organization. The inter-cultural and inter-ethnic experiences enriched the student leaders with ideas and activities that they bring back to the school community. They also built lasting friendships with other students from the region.

### **Challenges**

Such experiences are encouraging, but all solutions bring their own challenges and problems as well. This project is no exception. Below are listed a few of the challenges that we are facing:

*a) The problem with authoritarianism. An issue of paradigm change.*

While knowing that the current education system has many gaps that need to be filled, it is well-understood that it is based on domination and strict hierarchies. The Communist legacy of state-dependent individuals have resulted in school communities that are unused to making their own choices, in open democratic ways. The peace education will

purport to change this into a more equal pupil-teacher relationship, but much of this change has to happen through the vessels of authoritarianism, strong teachers and principals.

Despite the fact that the pupils are systematically treated as passive learners in the Albanian education system, we have found that when pupils participate in activities of their own, they take charge and do an incredible job. The power and energy of such youth is very motivating to the whole project crew, albeit sometimes perceived as dangerous by some of the traditional teachers. An inherent conflict with teachers about who takes responsibility in the future activities should be addressed by slowly giving more responsibilities to the activist pupils who have earned the trust.

*b) The impact of poverty.*

Widespread economic deprivation means that many teachers are focused on how to sustain their lives and families, more than improving their poorly paid teaching.

*c) The student senate and youth parliament capacity.*

Since both the student senate and the youth parliament have been created only 2 years ago, they lack experience and often coordination – problems often cited by both pupils and teachers.

*d) The dependency issue is also a factor in the project.*

Such international/development projects in poor countries like Albania cannot happen without substantial donor participation. The activities and the project rely on the

financing and central resources of the project which are primarily determined outside of Albania. Through continuous training and involvement with the constituencies, we are working to build local capacity to sustain the project after the current funding period ends in 2005.

## **Findings**

We have learned that the quality of the relationship we have with the teachers and pupils is the best indicator of whether the activities are going to be successful. By now, we have gained the trust of the schools, and the local participation is guaranteed.

The project continues to grow and change. Peace and disarmament programs, like other weapons collection efforts, should be evaluated critically, independently, and publicly. To achieve this, we have incorporated learning assessments in each of our activities. A formal independent evaluation also occurs in three stages of the project: the beginning, the middle and the end. It is NOT therefore a pedagogically fixed program; we are open and willing to learn from our mistakes and to build on our achievements.

In closing, peace education, and other educational initiatives in our societies should not be approached in isolation, but rather must coincide with efforts to improve the rule of law, law enforcement, community development, and democratic governance. Alone, peace education cannot be that effective. It is like a seed that relies upon the quality of the soil, the climate, and other surrounding factors. We hope that this project is cultivating the circumstances for such positive change.