Human Rights Education in the V4 region

– Practices, Challenges and Ways Forward –

Report of the Budapest seminar

The Tom Lantos Institute (TLI) convened a seminar on human rights education (HRE) in the V4 countries on 14-15 April 2016 with the aim to gain a better understanding of the current landscape of HRE in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the region as a whole. The seminar was the first in a series of two in a joint project with Pro Humanum (Warsaw, Poland) and Tandem (Komárom, Slovakia), partially funded by the Visegrad Fund.

The goal of the project is to open a dialogue and ignite a process of reflection on HRE with a variety of actors from different countries which are geographically close and share similar experiences, but also have their own specificities. As agents, we produce, reproduce, and have an influence on structures as much as they shape us. This also applies in relation to human rights norms, discourses and mechanisms. That is why the TLI considers it important to engage in a more in-depth deconstruction of its own role as human rights actor, and of the myriad of interpretations and practices of human rights and human rights education. In the first place, the wording „human rights education" (HRE) is open to interpretation and should not be taken for granted. Similar concepts of education do exist that overlap with, but are also distinct from HRE, thus bringing an additional perspective on the issues at stake. These include – but are not limited to – citizenship, intercultural, anti-racist, global, or Holocaust education.

For this first meeting, 20 participants from civil society organisations, public institutions, and universities gathered in Budapest to discuss in small groups and plenary sessions three major sets of questions:

- <u>WHAT are human rights</u> and how do they relate to education? What is human rights education?
- <u>WHO are human rights actors</u>? What specific roles do they play, what are their responsibility towards education, and how do they cooperate with each other? How do these actors create, perpetuate, or contest discourses on human rights, and hence shape HRE? What are the structures, processes and power relations underpinning the HRE landscape?
- <u>HOW has HRE developed and evolved</u> in the past two-and-a-half decades in the region? To what extent has it contributed to the democratic transition of these four countries? How and under what conditions can cooperation between HRE actors and across countries be strengthened?

Summary of the discussions

Overall discussions revealed a certain discontent among participants criticising the lack of interest in or commitment to HR and HRE from policy-makers, schools, but also the indifference of society at large. Attempts by civil society organisations to promote and implement HRE in schools would be hindered by a difficult, unsupportive and undemocratic environment in the education system, according to participants. Numerous complexities come to play in each of these countries, making it more difficult to tackle the root of the problem. For instance, the reluctance of teachers to address HR in their classes may come from a lack of appropriate training during their university studies, whilst most curricula include HR-related issues however only marginally. In the course of the seminar, participants identified a wide range of challenges in the four countries, some systemic, others more related to practices and methodological issues.

Systemic challenges include the calling into question of human rights and its motives, perceived negatively by some stakeholders or decision makers as a "foreign", sometimes "Western", theoretical concept that is too removed from people's everyday lives. This is both a symptom of a weak socialisation of human rights, and a hurdle to the implementation of HRE in schools. How to make HRE relevant enough to teachers and educational decision-makers so that it is mainstreamed in the curriculum? At the same time, civil society organisations carry out *ad hoc* extra-curricular HRE activities in schools successfully and many teachers show interest in being trained on human rights related issues. In the view of some participants, governmental influence on curricula would limit or even prevent the inclusion and development of HRE in schools; yet governments in all EU member states formally committed to mainstreaming HRE. This reflects how precarious cooperation remains between all stakeholders, in particular civil society organisations and governmental institutions. Two reasons leading to this situation have emerged in the discussions: lack of mutual trust, but also diverging perceptions of what HRE should be in schools in terms of methods of teaching and topics to be addressed. Indeed, governmental attempts to include HRE activities in schools (such as compulsory voluntary service in Hungary) have been accused of being against the very essence of HRE – that is education *about*, *through* and *for* human rights. The role of neutral actors such as ombudspersons in bringing all stakeholders around the table has been highlighted as a possible solution to overcome poor cooperation and lack of dialogue. Overall in most countries there is a formal commitment to HRE, yet in practice these commitments are not adequately implemented. This has been explained by the fact that governments tend to underestimate the importance and role of HRE in democracies.

Participants touched upon more concrete, methodological challenges that will be discussed more in-depth in the upcoming seminar. For instance, most issues addressed in HRE are sensitive or even controversial, yet teachers are usually not equipped with appropriate and adequate methods. At the same time, handbooks and teaching materials do exist, yet their use, translation, and local adaptation arestill very limited. Arguably, a few issues appear to be even more challenging to address in the classroom, such as antigypsyism, anti-migrant sentiment, extremism, hate speech and freedom of speech. Moreover, vulnerable and marginalised groups would be more difficult to reach out to, a.o. due to intrinsic inequalities in the education system. Despite these difficulties, several practices have been highlighted as potential opportunities for the implementation of HRE within the formal education system, such as compulsory school parliaments or volunteering activities in schools. Yet these initiatives are criticised by many, seminar attendees and wider civil society alike, for being *ad hoc*, ill-functioning, or even counter-

productive. In particular, it is questionable whether the values of human rights taught and discussed only briefly in the classroom or during extra-curricular activities would not face challenges or even be dismissed both by the broader school environment, but also by family and social circles in which children and the youth are greatly socialised by. Furthermore, educators who feel they are working against a whole *system* find it difficult to engage *individual* actors (students, teachers) to support the cause of human rights. This dilemma reveals the fact that human rights are often more a matter of personal convictions rather than socially shared values. Therefore, the question of mainstreaming HRE and making it an integrated, cross-curricular subject in national education systems is timely.

Other points were raised by participants regarding the impact of HRE, but also its role in crisis contexts. How to measure the effects of HRE, and can conclusions be drawn based on short-term, outcome evaluations (e.g. after-class questionnaires)? Can HRE be a tool for global and local crisis prevention? How can HRE be utilised in the current context of refugees fleeing to Europe? Some of these questions will be addressed in the upcoming seminar, which will focus more on methodologies and practices, as well as on actors and their responsibilities and approaches. Indeed, if HRE is deemed irrelevant, impractical or unappealing by so many stakeholders and allegedly by society at large, then what is the responsibility and role of HRE actors – from practitioners to decision-makers to curriculum developers – in this gloomy picture? Oftentimes personal relationships play an important role in bringing HRE into schools and in developing HRE in general. Yet difficulties lie beyond this in translating these relationships into structured and functioning organisational networks that would enable a more comprehensive and systematic approach to HRE. With this project we aspire to contribute to dialogue, cooperation and platform-building in HRE.