African Union Side Event: 13 Feb 2024

“Ensuring the right to equitable and inclusive quality education to break and prevent cycles of Violence in Africa, by harnessing the development and peace potential of the people to achieve the Africa we want”

Venue – Ramada Hotel Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Ladies and gentlemen,

Distinguished guests,

I am pleased to be joining this important event today, at the sidelines of the African Union summit on a crucial theme – ‘the right to equitable and inclusive quality education to prevent violent conflict’.

I must extend my appreciation to our partners - the African Union Department of Political Affairs, peace, and Security, IPSS, WBG, and UNITAR. I am pleased to share that these partners are cooperating with my Office to support early warning and conflict prevention through utilizing the power of human rights.

The right to education, a fundamental human right, is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The significance of education as a right, and as a public good, has been reaffirmed in various international instruments such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education. To date, over 107 countries have enshrined the right to education in their national constitutions. In their efforts to fulfil this right, states have made remarkable strides.
The right to inclusive and equitable quality education must be prioritized if States and other stakeholders are to prevent violent conflicts, or grave human rights violations. Particular attention needs to be given in relation to rural areas, areas of deprivation or in relation to the specific situation of minority groups.

The connection between the right to education and conflict prevention is evident. Deprivation and exclusion are among the major precursors to conflict. Ensuring that the conditions are in place that allow all people without discrimination to access education and its accompanying opportunity for livelihood contributes to address this challenge.

Access to quality education helps to directing the potential of young people to development, it empowers them, and builds their resilience. It is essential for peace, tolerance, human fulfilment, and sustainable development. The right to education is also indispensable to exercising other rights.

However, the truth is that we face a dual crisis of equity and relevance in education. Many children in Africa are still not receiving basic education, and the relevance of current educational systems is being questioned. According to data from UNESCO, 98 million children and young people in Sub-Saharan Africa, are deprived of their right to access education. It is the region with the highest out-of-school population.

In contexts where there is access to education, it is crucial to understand what value it plays to advancing mutual existence. One of the challenges before us in this regard, is ensuring that education becomes an instrument of peace. Schools can become tools for division and lay the groundwork for future violent conflicts.
It is crucial to ensure that education is inclusive, acknowledges diverse voices, and perspectives so that it serves as a bridge for the future rather than as a source of division.

To harness the forceful preventive potential of the right to education, it is also important to take note of the recommendation of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education. Namely that, education should promote acceptance of self and others; it should promote a sense of belonging to society; critical thinking; diversity; and it should strengthen the capacity of learners to feel empathy for others.

As the UN Secretary-General argued, “education can promote tolerance and an understanding of the value of diversity. Changing the behaviour, attitudes and perceptions of young people can contribute to creating a society that is resilient”. To achieve this, educational systems should reflect the ethnic, national, and cultural diversity of societies, and multiplicity of historical narratives among and within societies. Education systems must set an example of inclusiveness in their policies and prescribe textbooks that promote inclusiveness and acceptance.

Education should strengthen respect for ideological pluralism and enable everyone to participate effectively in a democratic and pluralistic society. A gender focus must also be adopted to reveal how education may be used to combat gender inequality to prevent violations that specifically target women.

We should also underline the importance of lifelong learning. In connection with conflict prevention, lifelong learning (which enables critical thinking) is an important factor adding to conflict prevention. Pure factual learning is not good
enough. In addition, our hearts and minds need to be constantly educated. This provides an important link to Human Rights Education, which provides the values that should underpin any education.

Human rights education contributes to the long-term prevention of human rights abuses and violent conflicts. It promotes equality and sustainable development. Human rights education enhances participation in decision-making processes within a democratic system. A Human Rights Education that promotes values and encourages all individuals to claim their own rights and uphold those of others, should therefore be part of all curricula.

If crafted in an inclusive and relevant manner, education can help to reduce risk factors and promote resilience, development, citizenship, and solidarity behaviours. Education can play a great preventive potential by helping people to internalize a conception of themselves and others as rights holders and deserving of moral consideration, and by instilling intellectual habits of independent and critical thinking.

Finally, education can help to prevent violations and violent conflict by contributing to the development of empathetic responses and of emotional dispositions of consideration and respect.

The fulfilment of the right to education in all its dimensions is essential for prevention upstream, at a stage where the effect is most efficient.

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