Inclusive Education: from Policy Dialogue
to Collaborative Action

Riga, Latvia
24 – 26 February 2008

Background document

I. Framework of the conference

The regional preparatory conference for the 48th session of the International Conference of Education (Europe and the North American Region) is organized in conformity with the decision of the IBE[1] Council which invites the member states to organize regional preparatory meetings in order to involve different regional stakeholders in the preparation process for the 48th Session of the UNESCO International Conference on Education (ICE).

The International Conference on Education is a major international forum for education policy dialogue among Ministers of Education and other stakeholders (researchers, practitioners, representatives of intergovernmental organizations and civil society). It is organized by the International Bureau of Education (IBE), the UNESCO institute specializing in assisting Member States to achieve quality Education for All through innovative curriculum development and implementation. The ICE48 will be held in November 2008 in Geneva with discussions focusing on the overall conference theme of "*Inclusive Education: the Way of the Future*".

UNESCO formulates[2] inclusion as "*a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education*". Inclusion implies changes in the education content, approaches, structures and strategies that take into account specific learner needs at different education stages and ages. Such changes ought to be also rooted in the conviction of education stakeholders that it is the responsibility of national education systems to provide fair access to quality education for all learners.

Based on the definition of inclusion mentioned above as a reference framework, four sub-themes have been proposed to structure the discussions of the ICE48:

(i)   Inclusive Education: Approaches, Scope and Content: "*to broaden the understanding of the theory and the practice of Inclusive Education*";
(ii)   Inclusive Education: Public Policies: "*to demonstrate the role of governments in the development and the implementation of policies on Inclusive Education*";
(iii)   Inclusive Education: Systems, Links and Transitions: "*to create education systems which offer opportunities for life-long learning*"; and
(iv)   Inclusive Education: Learners and Teachers: "*to foster a learning environment where teachers are equipped to meet the learners' diverse expectations and needs*".

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[1] UNESCO's International Bureau of Education
[2] UNESCO. 2005. *Guidelines for inclusion. Ensuring Access to Education for All.* Paris: UNESCO.

The 48th session of ICE should play a pivotal role in orienting the debate on, and clarifying the concept of Inclusive Education, and its implications for national education systems, as well as for international dialogue on evidence-based improvement of educational policies and practices.

II.   Objectives and expected outcomes

The Regional Preparatory Conference in Riga will address the topic of "*Inclusive Education: from Policy Dialogue to Collaborative Action*". While covering both policy- and practice-related aspects it aims to tackle primarily **policy issues related to inclusive education** in line with the second sub-theme of the 48th Session of the ICE "Inclusive Education: Public Policies: "*to demonstrate the role of governments in the development and the implementation of policies on Inclusive Education*".

Objectives of the Conference

The Riga preparatory conference of the ICE48 aims to constitute a forum of exchanges on inclusive education amongst high-level decision makers and education specialists with a view to inform discussions of the ICE48 in late November 2008. It envisages, more specifically:

- To provide a platform for discussion on Inclusive Education (IE) focusing on policy trends and implementation results.
- To analyze experiences of Inclusive Education in Europe and the North American Region and to highlight achievements and challenges.
- To provide suggestions on policy lines of action/guidelines to feed into ICE.

Expected outcomes of the Conference

As a result of the two-day discussion, it is expected that the Riga preparatory conference will bring about:

- Shared understandings of a broad concept of inclusive education and specific priorities/foci in Europe and North America.
- Relevant policies, practices and challenges of IE mapped out in formal and non formal education.
- Proposals to promote and improve IE policy making and implementation through collaborative action and successful partnerships.
- Foundations for effective networking.
- Proceedings published and widely disseminated.

III.   Concept of Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education is an evolving concept that became integral to the processes of educational reform in both developing and developed countries and regions. Traditionally, the concept of Inclusive Education has been limited to the gradual integration process into mainstream schools of students with special needs such as, and predominantly, physically and/or mentally challenged/impaired learners. Initially, the approaches and the responses to the need of diversifying learning and the curriculum have been essentially remedial, mainly by setting up differentiated structures and special schools, which ultimately contributed to further segregation and isolation.

The objectives and implications of Inclusive Education have, however, shifted significantly since the 1990's, primarily due to the recognition that integration models ,which take into account special needs have to be supplemented by many

other inclusive strategies ,which address the diversity of learners' expectations, needs, learning styles and contexts. Diversifying and differentiating learning and the curriculum, while usually accepted as an important principle of modern education, represent however substantial challenges to national education systems promoting common curricula, requirements and approaches for all students of a certain age group. If mainstreaming requires implicitly or explicitly that learners comply with established norms and pedagogical routines, regardless of their specific needs and contexts, Inclusive Education implies that the systems adapt to the learner, and not vice-versa. Inclusive Education is based, both as a principle and practice, on the usage of a vast repertoire of different learning strategies to precisely respond to the diversities of learners' needs, interests and contexts.

Different current forms of education and social exclusion seem to question the capacity of educational systems to provide effective learning opportunities based only on a narrow concept of integration addressing primarily special needs. Exclusion can also come from within the mainstream educational system. Repetition, over-age and dropout intermingle, so as to perpetuate exclusion. Empirical evidence clearly indicates that a student who repeats the first school years faces a strong probability of dropping out in secondary education .Exclusion, as it was said in the 2004 International Conference on Education[3], hinders the development of professional and social competencies as well as the access to essential knowledge and basic skills that are needed to become an autonomous and responsible citizenship.

During the Regional Preparatory Conference, and in anticipation of the ICE48 debates, several questions will be raised such as:

- *How can the circuit of exclusion that occurs in the first years of primary school be broken?*
- *How can the contradiction between the need of expanding access to secondary education and the existing secondary elitist model that penalizes the deprived be addressed?*
- *How much do we respect, tolerate and empower diversity in school and children as a way of attaining more inclusion?*
- *What are the explicit and implicit contents that feed social and pedagogical exclusion?*
- *What is the relationship between a prescriptive curriculum and the processes of exclusion?*
- *Do low expectations of principals and teachers impact upon the learning outcomes of students?*
- *How can a good balance be found between the need to integrate learners into national education systems (with all that is common in terms of mainstreaming) and the need to address specific backgrounds, needs and aspirations of the individual.*

Forging conditions and opportunities for all learners to have access to quality learning is the underlying foundation of a democratic concept of quality in education. Education for All does not imply only access - it moreover requires access and quality, which is clearly embedded in the UNESCO statement that "Education for All can't be achieved without improving quality"[4]. Inclusive Education could be one core principle and strategy to address the challenges of **Education for All** (EFA)[5] goals. The EFA goals stress the need for education systems to:

(i)   Assume in a more decisive way a rights-based education approach, which implies that all learners have a right to quality education starting from early childhood through upper stages;

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[3] UNESCO. 2004. *Final report: International Conference on Education. 47th session. Workshops 2A y 2B Quality education and social inclusion. Ge*neva: IBE-UNESCO. Annex XVI, pages 8-14.
[4] UNESCO. 2004*. EFA Global Monitoring Report. The Quality Imperative*. Paris: UNESCO.
[5] The six EFA goals refer to the expansion of early childhood care and education, to the provision of free and compulsory primary education for all, to the promotion of learning and life skills for young people and adults, to the increase of adult literacy by 50 per cent, to the achievement of gender parity by 2005 and gender equality by 2015, and to the improvement of the quality of education. See portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php.

(ii)   Emphasise education as a public good based on an irreplaceable governmental mission and responsibility as well as governmental commitment to providing appropriate funds, conditions and opportunities; and

(iii)   Develop a comprehensive agenda of educational change and policy reform tied to promoting and facilitating the right to access to quality education, thus tackling equity and quality issues altogether. Education should be demand- and not supply-driven; it should be driven by the legitimate demands of learners and stakeholders and not exclusively by the demands and the corporate interests of education suppliers.

From a societal perspective, Inclusive Education is clearly linked to the discussion on the type of society and well-being to be pursued. It is based on the consideration of education as a central social policy area, which lays the foundations for sustainable and harmonic societal developments in the long run.

From this broadened perspective of inclusion, some central issues in, and specific aspects of Inclusive Education are related to:

• The education of students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties;
• The struggles against poverty, marginalization, gender based segregation and HIV and AIDS related exclusion;
• The consideration of cultural diversity and multiculturalism as both a right and a learning context;
• The protection of the rights of minorities, migrants and indigenous populations;
• The effects of natural disasters and conflicts on populations; and
• Bridging the existing digital divide among groups.

From a purely educational/pedagogical point of view, an inclusive strategy implies the careful consideration of the specificity and uniqueness of each learner so as to provide him/her with real educational opportunities throughout their lives. It is about the ways in which teachers and students interact and generate mutual empathy and closeness, understand and respect their diversities and jointly create suitable conditions for achieving relevant learning opportunities for all.

The transformation of education into Inclusive Education[6] demands collective thinking and action regarding the concept of social justice, on the beliefs around the learning potential of each student, on the conceptual frameworks that sustain good practices of teaching and learning and on a comprehensive vision of the curriculum that encompasses both processes and outcomes, as well as common and differentiated aspects.

In overall terms, Inclusive Education implies four key elements:

(i)   It is essentially a process of seeking the most appropriate ways of responding to diversity as well as learning how to learn from differences;

(ii)   It is linked to stimulating, through multiple strategies, the creativity and the problem solving capacity of learners;

(iii)   It comprises the right of the child to attend school, to express his/her opinion, to have quality learning experiences and to attain valuable learning outcomes regardless of their natural, social, cultural and ethnic characteristics;

(iv)   It implies the moral responsibility of prioritizing those students who are at risk of being marginalized and excluded from school, and of obtaining only poor learning results.

IV.   Guidelines and working methods of each session

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[6] British Educational Research Journal. 2005. *Thematic Review. Inclusive education: discourse and action.* Vol. 31, No. 2, April 2005, pp. 269-275

The conference will consist of the following thematic plenary sessions and working groups:

1) Introductory plenary session – **Theory and practice of inclusive education: continuous challenges and new approaches**

Three key-note speakers will explore the concept of inclusive education by tackling different aspects of inclusiveness from a broad perspective. Presentations will be followed by a short question and answer session.

2) Panel Discussion (plenary) – **Inclusive education and social cohesion: some international perspectives**.

The International Bureau for Education has already held a series of workshops around the world in preparation for the 48th session of the ICE. This part of the conference will present the results of the meetings held in other regions and will also inform the conference with regard to the situation of inclusive education policies in four regions of the world: Latin America, Africa, the Arab states and Europe.

The panellists ought to address some important questions such as:

- *What role inclusive education plays in the educational agendas of different regions in the world?*
- *What are evidence-based aspects that inclusive education is an integral part of national education policies?*
- *What strategies are being considered to foster inclusive education and how are resources being allocated for the short-, medium- and long-term?*

The presentations will be followed by a question and answer session. The participants will be also invited to express their comments and share some additional information on inclusive education policies and practices in different countries and regions of the world.

3) Roundtable discussion with the Ministries of Education: **Inclusive Education Policies and Practices in Europe and the North American Region**

The round table discussion will be held in two sessions allowing all representatives of the Ministries of Education to present their visions and experiences in compliance with some guiding questions as suggested below:

- *What are the main inclusive education components, priorities and ongoing initiatives within national education policies?*
- *What are the main achievements in the field of inclusive education?*
- *What are evidence-based, relevant examples of partnerships between governments, civil society and international organizations, and between formal and non-formal education?*
- *What are the major challenges and concerns countries are still faced with?*
- *How are these priorities and challenges being addressed?*
- *What particular issues should the 48th session of the ICE address in November 2008?*

Each participant will have the opportunity to address the auditorium with two-three minutes long comments. The participants have the opportunity to react to and to enrich the discussion with additional contributions.

4) Simultaneous workshops – **Inclusive education: Conceptual and Practical Issues (based on the experiences of European and North-American countries)**
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The four simultaneous thematic workshops will offer an opportunity for policy makers and researchers to exchange information on four main aspects and fields of inclusive education (i.e. special needs education; the different learner needs and learning styles, and how to address them meaningfully; pedagogical management of cultural diversity; addressing poverty, marginalization and conflicts):

- Workshop 1 - **Special needs education**;

The workshop participants are invited to address the following issues:

- *Special needs education – from exclusion to inclusive education: Relevant changes in mentality with regard to special needs education and innovative solutions fostering inclusiveness.*
- *Quality in special needs education: adequate diagnosis and appropriate responses..*
- *Teachers' role in working with learners with special needs. Challenges for pre- and in-service teacher education and training.*
- *The role of stakeholders (i.e. involving parents, the learners themselves, the community) in supporting quality approaches in special needs education.*

- Workshop 2 –**Different learner needs and learning styles, and how to address them meaningfully**

The workshop participants are invited to address the following issues:

- *Different learning needs and styles: how to identify and acknowledge needs for differentiated curricula and learning?*
- *Balancing common approaches and differentiated learning: current achievements and challenges.*
- *The role and importance of early childhood education.*
- *Basic skills acquisition and life-long learning.*
- *Learner-friendly school- and classroom environments.*
- *Challenges for pre-and in-service teacher education and training.*

- Workshop 3 – **Pedagogical management of diversity**

The workshop participants are invited to address the following issues:

- *Linguistic diversity (i.e. language of instruction; fostering communication competencies for the twenty-first century: mother tongue instruction and the teaching and learning of other languages).*
- *Multi- and intercultural aspects of schooling: achievements and ongoing problems.*
- *Challenges to pre-and in-service teacher education and training.*
- *Fostering intercultural understanding and constructive management of diversity competencies through cooperation between formal and non-formal education.*

- Workshop 4 - **Addressing poverty, marginalization and violence**

The workshop participants are invited to address the following issues:

- *Forms of social and educational exclusion in contemporary societies: how can education forge inclusion?*
- *Education quality and social cohesion: providing fair access to quality education for all and granting participatory and transparent processes.*
- *Combating poverty, marginalization and violence through education: what works and why?*
- *Challenges to pre- and in-service teacher education and training.*

- *Linkages between formal and non-formal education.*

The four workshops will benefit from short input presentations by Latvian and international colleagues (not exceeding five to seven minutes). While interacting in the context of the four workshops mentioned above the participants are requested to focus on links between policies and practices of fostering inclusive education, such as:

- Balancing top-down and bottom-up policy development in the context of participatory and transparent processes involving all relevant stakeholders;
- Identifying good practices/achievements and capitalizing on them;
- Addressing challenges and concerns promptly, transparently and effectively.
- Learning from both achievements and failures.
- The importance of sharing, and of partnerships and networking for change.

5) Closing session - **Inclusive education from policy dialogue to collaborative action**.

The closing session will be devoted to the presentation by different Rapporteurs of the results of the ministerial roundtables and thematic workshops. The General Rapporteur will also provide an overview of the main policy issues to feed into the ICE48 based on the results of the Riga preparatory conference.

Conference Proceedings
The conference proceedings to be published after the conference will consist of:

- Official documents of the conference (in the three official languages of the conference);
- Presentations/Inputs and other reference documents used by key-note speakers, speakers, presenters and facilitators (in the language used by them during the conference);
- The overall report of the preparatory conference (also including reports from the ministerial roundtables and workshops).

V. Correspondence and Contacts

All preparatory conference-related correspondence should be addressed to:

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