

TESTO 4

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« The challenges of shaping Education and Cultural policies for the Enlarged Europe »

Forum "Culture, Cultural rights and Education in an Enlarged Europe"

Ladies and Gentlemen,

when I started my work as Commissioner for Education and Culture, I have to say that I was very impressed with what had already been done. (Everywhere I went I could feel people's enthusiasm, I could feel that they wanted to contribute to building Europe and that they expected Europe to do more for education and training.) So I said to myself: "We have to reinforce what we have, we have to make it better!" And I have launched a series of new and ambitious projects designed to make the most of the opportunities we now have. For instance in the technology and information society fields, through the e-learning initiative, which I am sure, you all know. But also by injecting as much ambition as possible in an EU approach to Lifelong learning or to the definition of the objectives to be achieved in a co-ordinated way by our education systems.

(But you are certainly right, if you think that we may not have achieved enough. After all, there are still big problems in the field of education and training. The Commission itself has said so: There are 150 million people within the Union today who have not reached upper secondary education; less than one person in ten takes part in life long learning; and nearly one in five young people who drop out of school takes no further education or training.)

Also the comparison with some of our big competitors such as the US or Japan shows that we still have some way to go. (In Europe as a whole we may be better at maths than the US, as shown by a recent survey, but we still have a long way to catch up on Japan. It's the same with reading. It took the EU nearly 20 years to reduce the gap in the average years of schooling from 70 % of USA level in 1971 to 87 % in 1999. At the same time, the outflow of qualified people to the USA continues. All this even though we spend on education and training as much public money as the US (5.2 % of our GDP) and substantially more than Japan - which spends only 3.5 %. Private investments in education, training and research are however much higher in both Japan and the USA, and the same also applies to research and development expenditures. The Lisbon (Council) called for a substantial increase in the per capita investment in education and training, and the Commission is currently finalising a Communication emphasising the importance of achieving this goal, if we want to make the Union competitive in the knowledge based (economy) and society.)

Obviously, the first responsibility for education and training policies is, and will remain, with the Member states. It is well understood that Europe's role in education and training matters is to support, not to dictate. Subsidiarity is a sound principle, which should be maintained. But it should be applied wisely and not in a way depriving us of the European added value. This is especially true at a time when Europe is more and more confronted with the challenge of globalisation.

I am happy to note that I am not alone in this conviction. The European Council in Lisbon, two years ago, was a watershed. It recognised the important role of Education and Training as an integral part of economic and social policies - as an instrument for strengthening Europe's

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None of us, I suggest, can afford to ignore the condition of our fellow passengers on this little boat. If they are sick, all of us risk infection. And if they are angry, all of us can easily get hurt.

Our problem is one of reality multiplied by perception.

The reality is that power and wealth in this world are very, very unequally shared, and that far too many people are condemned to lives of extreme poverty and degradation.

The perception, among many, is that this is the fault of globalization, and that globalization is driven by a global elite, composed of—or at least, represented by—the people who attend this gathering.

That perception is not universal, but it is widely shared—especially in places like Argentina and East Asia, which have recent experience of severe financial crises, but also by an increasingly vocal section of public opinion in the developed world.

Do not underestimate the attraction of the rival gathering, timed to coincide with yours, that has just finished in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Its title, “World Social Forum”, is intended as a criticism of yours, implying that you are interested “only” in economics, or in profit, and that you do not care about the social effects of your economic activities. And that criticism resonates around the world.

I believe that perception is wrong—and that globalization, so far from being the cause of poverty and other social ills, offers the best hope of overcoming them. But it is up to you to prove it wrong, with actions that translate into concrete results for the downtrodden, exploited and excluded.

It is not enough to say—though it is true—that without business the poor would have no hope of escaping their poverty. Too many of them have no hope as it is.

You must show that economics, properly applied, and profits, wisely invested, can bring social benefits within reach not only for the few but for the many, and eventually for all.

Some of the business leaders among you may respond that that is not the business of business—that your job is only to look after the bottom line, and the interests of shareholders. They would argue that social policy is a matter for governments, and also that it is up to governments to ensure that more people enjoy the benefits of capitalism, by creating a business-friendly climate in each country.

Certainly there is much that governments can and must do. I will come to that in a moment. But more and more business leaders are realizing that they do not have to wait for governments to do the right thing, and indeed they cannot afford to. In many cases, governments only find the courage and resources to do the right thing when business takes the lead.

I am glad to say that many business leaders have responded to the call I first made in Davos three years ago, when I proposed the Global Compact. They have publicly espoused the nine principles that I set out then—principles drawn from international agreements on human rights, labour standards and the environment. And we are working, together with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, and leading non-profit groups that have relevant expertise, to help those business leaders ensure that the nine principles are really applied in their day-to-day corporate practice.