The Global Alliance for LGBT Education (GALE) is a learning community of educators which aims to promote the full inclusion of people who are disadvantaged because of their sexual orientation or sexual identity by identifying, enhancing and sharing educational expertise. GALE is an NGO in official relations with UNESCO.

Date: Amsterdam, 10 November 2012  Reference: PD2012-11 Subject: feedback on Medium-Term Strategy

Madam Director-General,

With this letter we are happy to provide UNESCO with feedback to its draft proposals for the Mid-Term Strategy (document 190 EX/19).

Coping with rapid change: recession, globalization and fear of traditional values breakdown

GALE agrees with the analysis the world is in rapid change. We feel deeply concerned about the economic crisis but also about the longer term trends to set priorities and make policy decisions based on purely economic and monetary concerns and often based on rather narrow statistical assessments of needs. In our field of education, the right to universal education and access to information seem to get increasingly more narrowed towards shallow defined objectives, tending to hollow out the original purpose of human rights. For example, the Millennium Goals Education For All asks for access to schools, which is measured by access itself and by number of years of school attendance. But in practice it often turn out that kids, and especially girls still cannot read or write quite a number
of years in school. This points towards a shallowness in the way the Millennium Goal is formulated.

At the same time we notice a strong trend in some countries to harken back to ‘traditional values’. This is not worrisome because traditional values are bad in themselves but because some states and social partners seem to promote a return to traditional values to reinstate or support harmful practices which deny the access to education, culture and freedom of speech and information exchange to girls and citizens who do not conform to state or social normative pressure like indigenous groups, political and religious sections of society, Roma and lesbian gay, bisexual and transgender people. To us, the trend to harken back to traditional values seems to be a panic reaction to economic recession and to globalization, which, to some conservative actors, may seem to create a breakdown in the social cohesion of society and the family as the perceived cornerstone of ‘traditional’ societies. It is an attempt to take back control, while in the meantime taking away democratic participation of citizens, especially of citizens who do not agree or conform to state strategies and norms. The return to ‘traditional values’ without qualification which values will assist to solve the current crises is not a constructive solution. For example, when economic situations and other reasons break families apart, it is not helpful to create a discourse which raises the status of biological mother-father-child arrangements as superior to other arrangements, but to create support for all the social arrangements that strengthen new social supportive bonds. Some traditional arrangements (like community support) may fit into such renovated societies and others (like patriarchal families) may not. We advise UNESCO to keep an open eye to new and real supportive arrangements, which are both respectful for human rights and most effective to cope with globalization and economic fluctuations.

In the discussion about “Education For All” we have noticed a shift towards a more focused approach initiated by large international actors like the World Bank, for example on literacy and more concrete objectives to prevent drop-out. This seems a good direction and we would suggest UNESCO to explore ways to link into this “Learning for All” movement. However, during the NGO Conference on EFA in October, we also noted an ambiguity of the partners in the formalized UN structure, because strategies like “Learning for All” seem to pass by the obligation of states to implement the Right to Education. Obviously, in an UNESCO Mid-Term Strategy, the obligations and commitments of states to uphold human rights for everyone and to improved implementation of renewed Millennium Goals in the face of economic and attitudinal recession need to be central.

Our conclusion is that UNESCO needs to prioritize her role as state partnership organization, with a focus on concrete goals which on one hand initiate from human rights and on the other hand translate this in tangible and feasible development goals.
Lasting peace, quality education and poverty reduction

In extension of this, we support the proposal for the two overarching objectives to contribute to lasting peace by promoting quality education and lifelong learning, international scientific cooperation, preserving cultural heritage and cultural expressions and promoting intercultural dialogue, and to contribute to sustainable development and the eradication of poverty by developing policies and institutional capacities in the fields of education, science and culture. We would like to stress ‘lasting peace’, ‘quality education’ and ‘eradication of poverty’.

We understand “lasting peace” in the context of the broader phrase “education for peace, tolerance and mutual understanding”, which is used in several human rights conventions and resolutions. Such Peace Education should include comprehensive sexual education and help to create tolerance towards diversity and sexual diversity specifically.

“Quality education” should include the basic need of students that the school provides a safe and inspirational environment, also specifically for LGBT students and students who do not conform to traditional gender expectations. We also note that a majority of schools worldwide still uses outdated top-down teaching models, which demotivate students because of the teaching style and the lack of attention to curriculum content that is interesting and relevant for the daily lives of students. We encourage UNESCO to stimulate experiments with students participation in schools and in curriculum development. We are also willing to partner in such participation experiments related to LGBT students. Curricula that are more tailored to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students, whether formal or informal, have shown to have a high impact on the attendance rate, social empowerment and economic survival of LGBT students.

“Eradication of poverty” should be taken to include LGBT people, because large numbers of these groups are structurally excluded from social, professional and economic opportunities. This group is most often overlooked in poverty eradication and disaster relieve strategies. UNESCO and States need to overcome the common prejudice that LGBT people are ‘rich gay men in the West’ and that sexual identification is a luxury problem. The same-sex attracted girls in poor townships subjected to so-called ‘corrective rape’, such girls committing suicide when being forced to marry in Asia, the boys who been forced out of schools and kicked out the family home, having to resort to prostitution to survive and the transgender people who are refused to shower in refugee camps and forced to clean the latrines, tell us other stories.
Human rights

In the domain of human rights, it needs to be stressed that human rights are indivisible and universal. All people have human rights and should be treated equal, ideally in the social setting in general but certainly by the state. Currently there are still too many states who discriminate, marginalize or persecute whole population groups on poor grounds: migrating populations, people without citizen status, religious groups, political groups, indigenous groups, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. With the globalization, such internal state policies increasingly has international repercussions for migration, safety and economic situation. Therefore such discrimination, which may have been part of locally ‘acceptable cultural’ standards, now creates extra tensions in between states and threatens economic and social stability. For example, when homosexual acts are illegal in 78 countries, this creates not only large numbers of disenfranchised people within those countries who cannot fully participate in economic and social progress, but also creates refugee flows that burden other states. It will be increasingly difficult to accept state arguments that other states should not interfere with their ‘internal’ affairs. Soon there will be no true internal affairs anymore and even today, there are much pressures on states to correct at last the most obvious human rights denials, like the death penalty for voluntary same-sex acts.

Development

Development always has been a partnership between rich and poorer partners, and between state and NGO partners. Now more than ever, these alliances need to be strengthened. In an era where the State is not an all-knowing actor with unlimited monopoly powers, but only one of the actors in an exponentially growing field of non-governmental actors, States need to redefine their positions as a conductor of a series of alliances that in turn are the real implementers of development. States need to facilitate this process and while doing this, attempt to regulate and promote that other actors in turn respect and promote human rights and equal treatment.

This general starting perspective supports the UNESCO proposal to strengthen partnerships and to be closer to the field.

We agree on the prioritizing to be more a laboratory of ideas and to focus on analysis and benchmarking. But also here partnerships and alliances are necessary. GALE developed a guide to advocate for sexual diversity education (http://www.lgbt-education.info/en/news/global_association/news?id=617) which contains a proposal for a monitor of the implementation of sexual diversity in education policies. We will engage with both GO and NGO partners to encourage using this instrument. However, our instrument will be much better to use when there would be hard statistics to support analysis. We would like to encourage UNESCO to refine the Right to Education and
Educational for All measuring systems and integrate sexual diversity in them.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues

Until now, GALE is the only NGO partner of UNESCO representing people who are disadvantaged because of their sexual orientation or sexual identity, often labelled as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. In our four years of cooperation, some progress has been made, notably in the UNESCO consultation on homophobic bullying in educational institutions by the education division and through the establishment of the employee group UNESCO Globe and the following abolishment of discriminatory employee rights. These are improvements on the staff level.

In the participation of GALE in the formal consultations with other NGOs or as part of the Dutch government delegation, we have attempted to bolster the UNESCO strategy to be more inclusive. We have supported the explicit inclusion of several groups that currently suffer exclusion and therefore cannot benefit fully from human rights or development strategies. However, until now, we constantly have encountered resistance against explicitly mentioning LGBT people as one of the marginalized groups. We understand that this may be controversial in a number of States, but it would show courage and leadership of UNESCO to follow the lead of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to be more explicit on this issue in the coming years.

In addition, the mainstreaming of sexual diversity issues in other divisions and strategies of UNESCO like science, culture and gender needs to be more pronounced.

Summary of the recommendations

1. UNESCO needs to prioritize her role as state partnership organization, with a focus on concrete goals which on one hand initiate from human rights and on the other hand translate this in tangible and feasible development goals

2. Keep an open eye to new and real supportive social arrangements, which are both respectful for human rights and most effective to cope with globalization and economic fluctuations; LGBT families and support structures are examples of these

3. Peace Education should include comprehensive sexual education and help to create tolerance towards diversity and sexual diversity specifically
4. We encourage UNESCO to stimulate experiments with students and youth participation in schools and in curriculum development

5. We offer to partner in youth participation experiments related to LGBT students

6. “Eradication of poverty” should be taken to include LGBT people, because large numbers of these groups are structurally excluded from social, professional and economic opportunities

7. Refine the Right to Education and Educational for All measuring systems and integrate sexual diversity in them

8. Be more explicit on inclusion of LGBT issues in human rights and UNESCO strategies

9. Mainstream sexual diversity issues in the UNESCO science, culture and gender divisions

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

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