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Education for Peace in a Multi-Religious Context

Learning to live together through ethics education for children: promoting ethics and values-based education in diverse educational settings

Good morning respected organizers, esteemed panelists and participants,

Let me first start by challenging the emphasis that has been given to peace education to respond to the challenges of our societies today. Peace education has been largely focused on promoting knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, and therefore, relies solely on the content of education but not necessarily on the systems, processes, learning structures, policies and management that surround education, which are critical to foster a culture of peace and transform violent structures. It is not enough to teach children to respect others when in their schools teachers use corporal punishment or even vertical approaches to teaching that does not respect the dignity of the child; it is not enough to talk about peace, when children are not allowed to speak their views in schools and when schools do not help developing critical thinking; it is not enough to promote values of peace, when schools divide, fragmentize and immerse children into compartmentalized learning spaces, according to socio-economic class, religion, learning abilities and even gender, thus reinforcing the very factors that lead to divisions and fear of the other in societies at large.

I believe we should be speaking about education for peacebuilding rather than peace education, as it is education as a whole that needs to be reinvented and reimagined to respond to the multiple ethical challenges in our societies, including the need to respond to the rise of xenophobia, hate and fear of the other. Today education needs to be grounded on an ethical perspective of society, where schools and non-formal education programs understand themselves as part of a community and as a key actor in fostering social cohesion and building peace; where the principles that guide education, not only content but also management and policies, are sensitive to cultural and religious differences; where educational spaces are safe for children to strengthen their sense of belonging, inclusive identities, and allow them to become who they want to become, connect with others and transform themselves and the world around them. It is unacceptable and even unethical if, because of political interests, religious or cultural righteousness, or economic advantage, education systems shut themselves to welcome the other, recognize, and foster respect for diversity, or even to equip learners to relate and live in

solidarity with others.

How could education for peacebuilding that contributes to the challenges of our societies today in a multi-religious world look like?

Arigatou International, the organization I represent, developed in collaboration with UNESCO and UNICEF, a manual titled Learning to Live Together - An inter-cultural and Inter-faith Programme for Ethics Education. The programme has been implemented successfully for ten years in more than 40 countries around the world. It is a programme for educators (teachers, youth leaders, social workers) in religious and secular education settings to nurture ethical values and spirituality in children and youth for them to learn to live together, by equipping them to learn to live in solidarity with people of different religions, cultures, and ethnicity; empowering them to make ethical decisions; nurturing their spirituality; and enhancing their innate ability to make positive contributions to transform their communities based on values that promote respect for their own culture and beliefs and for those of others

The programme helps strengthening their identity and critical thinking, ability to empathize with others, respect and work with people of other cultures and religions, and foster their individual and collective responsibilities in a global community.

It is a program that aims to transform how education embraces diversity and fosters pluralism, not just in terms of content but also in terms of learning approaches and education structures.

The Ethics Education framework of the Learning to Live Together Programme promotes a new and dynamic way of thinking about ethics in a global and plural society. Education about ethics is something all religions and societies can do independently; what is unique about this initiative is that it is done inter-religiously and inter-culturally. It is not a new 'teaching' but a new way of emphasizing the building of positive relationships. Its approach:

- Is inter-cultural.
- Is inter-religious.
- Affirms diversity.
- Affirms dialogue and communication within oneself and with others in an on-going process of individual and collective learning.

Through our programs we have seen Indian children and youth from all socio-economic classes and religious backgrounds working together to promote interfaith

learning, challenge violence against children and poverty that affect them; Christian, Muslim and Jewish participants in Israel coming together for the first time to talk about their shared land; Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim children in Sri Lanka learning about their differences and commonalities and challenging the hate rhetoric; new training programs for teachers accredited by the Ministry of Education in Romania to tackle issues of bullying and exclusion of the other, including Roman children; schools in Greece creating a culture of learning to live together with children from war-torn countries; programs in El Salvador bringing together schools, religious communities and social and religious leaders to protect children from gang violence and empower them to prevent recruitment; as well as programs with the Ministry of Education in Kenya to respond to the prevention of extremism and violence among tribal groups.

Kenya: We worked together with the Ministry of Education and UNESCO Regional Office for Eastern Africa to train officers from the different directorates of the Ministry of Education, followed by a training of teachers from the Tana River county, which was selected by the Ministry due to its cultural and religious diversity but also because of the dramatic increase in ethnic violence in the region, particularly between the Pokomo who are farmers and majority Christian in the lower parts of the Tana up to the delta, and the Orma who are traditionally nomads and Muslims, whom have been in conflict for many years, leading to violence, hatred and distrust between the communities, and largely affecting children and schools; the county was also selected as an opportunity to build the capacities of educators who do not often have the opportunity to be trained in these peacebuilding topics and skills, as most peace education programs are prioritized in other areas of the country.

The implementation process started off in September 2014 with the sensitization of policy level officials from MoE, Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) and the Teachers Service Commission (TSC). This paved way for a pilot project in Tana Delta Tana River County, which targeted 13 primary schools.

Teachers from the 13 schools implemented the program during a full school year with a total of 657 children; we conducted introductory seminars with the heads of the schools to get their buy in, and monitored the process; we also provided in-service support and evaluated the program at the end. Children also developed at the end of the program, community engagement programs to work with the community where they reached out to religious communities, parents, other students and the government.

Some of the spinoffs of the project were;

- 1) Sensitization of KICD leadership and curriculum developers to facilitate mainstreaming of LTLT into the new curriculum
- 2) One day policy dialogue meeting was held with senior MoE officials from technical departments to facilitate mainstreaming of LTLT in policies and technical programmes
- 3) Development of Positive Discipline Handbook and Facilitators Manual for teachers which contribute of eradication of violence against children at the school level.
- 4) Integration of LTLT in the programme on Prevention and Management of Emerging forms of Violence.
- 5) Expansion of the pilot programme to Baringo where 60 teachers from 30 primary schools and six education officers were trained on LTLT. This was coupled with a community /county leadership dialogue meeting and psycho-social intervention in four schools that hosted displaced learners.
- 6) In collaboration with UNESCO IICBA the team initiated a peace building programme that adopts the LTLT themes and approaches
- 7) LTLT was also integrated into the Life skills training of KNATCOM Youth Forum members

Testimonies of children:

"Before I used to gear things I don't even know, things I have heard from the village but now I don't believe all those things they said. I make my own opinion and think other children are also good."

I used to be troublesome, especially to people from other religions – the Christians. However, now I cooperate with them – and relate to them well – because I learnt to treat well people that I used to think were different from me.

The evaluation revealed that the systematic implementation in the Tana River County delivered positive outcomes, particularly in relation to its impact on children and teacher; and to a lesser extent directly on communities. Particularly, positive outcomes were identified in the improvement of teachers' interaction with children by providing spaces for them to reflect on their realities, relations with others and needs; as well as through the development of listening, mediation, and observation skills that enhanced their pedagogical approach. Evidence indicated relevant changes at this level illustrated in the inclusion of reflection time in the lessons, an increase in children's openness to express their ideas and opinions, an increase in

teachers' flexibility to deliver contents, and an increase in children's interest to actively participate in the lessons and work with others.

Findings concluded that the programs increased children's willingness and capacity to relate to people of different cultural and religious backgrounds, as well as increase in their knowledge on violence and injustices around them and its causes. The program saw the development of children's critical thinking measured in the way children chose to relate to others and presented arguments about issues that affected them; the programs increased children's ability to empathize and work together with others by challenging their stereotypes through participatory methodologies that increased their interaction with one another and their capacity to listen to new narratives. Furthermore, findings suggested that by developing children's ability to nurture their spirituality; especially, by learning how to deal with challenges, conflicts, dilemmas, handling emotions and responding in non-violent ways when problems arise, the programs allowed significant improvements in children's relations with others, a decrease in the number of conflicts that existed before the implementation took place, as well as an increase of cooperation and social coexistence in the classroom.

I would like to suggest four particular elements based on the experience of Arigatou International in the field of interreligious learning and dialogue and practical experiences working with partners that can be useful to envision how education can be transformed to respond to ethical challenges of today:

1. Content of education. Education has traditionally prepared learners for the job market; education needs to include socio-emotional learning and allow children to develop their spirituality, a spirituality that nurtures their capacity to relate to themselves, enhances their positive relations with others, with nature and with the Divine. We cannot afford anymore that our education systems avoid allowing spaces for an important part of the identity of our children to flourish, which is the spiritual. Our experience shows that by nurturing spirituality in children, they are more equipped to manage their emotions, respond non-violently when their rights are trampled upon, engage in dialogue and move from the quick response to try to transform relations with others. This lens can be included across the curriculum and not just as a stand-alone subject.

Often educators are not aware of how their own behaviours and attitudes quickly dismiss opportunity for children to express and develop their spirituality. Children's imagination and views that are expressed differently to what the community accepts are more often than not suppressed by

adults.

2. Pedagogy – All this content becomes empty words if they are not embedded in a pedagogy that is in line with that approach. We have developed an ethics education framework that incorporates a transformative pedagogy that uses participatory and collaborative learning, enhances children's imagination, critical thinking as well as critical consciousness or conscientization as coined by Paulo Freire, where children become aware of who they are, the dynamics and structures around them, injustices and the role they play in it, and how they can help transforming those structures. This new approach to education requires the development of safe learning environments, the use of participatory and collaborative learning methods, and sensitivity to the context where the programs take place. Ultimately the approach aims to provide the opportunity for children and youth to act collectively to achieve common goals, building on their individual strengths, appreciating the diversity around them, and nurturing their spirituality. This educational approach demands facilitators who are aware of the influence of their actions, behaviours and attitudes on children and strive to become role-models. This is very central to our approach, and something we have seen is critically missing in most education institutions. It is a pedagogy that affirms each person's or groups' identity and supports the sacredness of our interactions with one another by fostering interconnectedness. Critical thinking is seldom an approach that is accepted and valued in religious education or religious instruction. Far too often, children and young people are told to listen quietly to adults and obey without asking why.

Education, and particularly, religious education as well as civic, human rights or ethics education need to be embedded in a dialogical pedagogy that help challenging structures that discriminate the other, cultural views that exclude the other, and can help create safe spaces for the encounter with one another.

3. Community engagement. Central to the crisis of education to respond to the rise of xenophobia and hatred speech and to help transform it, is its lack of engagement with the community. We see this across the board; schools rarely have interaction with the reality out there. Children may speak about what happens outside the walls of classroom but they are not given space to develop their own projects to help transform situations. They are not even discussing through an ethical lens the situations of the community. We need the engagement of the schools in dialogue with religious leaders and actors, with politicians, with the private sector, with other schools, and with media; we need the engagement of parents. Very often we see in schools a superficial engagement with the community: for instance: visiting the poor, observing poverty – we need to move to genuine dialogues and

interactions. It is of critical importance to work together with Media to challenge hate speech and xenophobia; create spaces in the classroom for the use of media to create positive images of the other and examples of mutual understanding, respect and collaboration.

4. Work together with governments to influence curricula, policies and enhance pre-service and in-service training for teachers that include innovative pedagogical approaches to create interfaith dialogue, and provide tools and skills for teachers to learn to create spaces for acknowledging different identities, including religious identities. Education curricula need to include subjects that promote learning to live together. Basic and comparative learning about other religions is important, yet it is not enough to establish a deeper understanding and appreciation for the need for interreligious diversity in society, to learn to appreciate the other and go beyond prejudices.

Education today in a multi-religious world needs to challenge the vertical structures and divisions that create distance with the different – with the religious other, but also empower learners to see and relate to the other as if that other was part of who she is he is – the meaning of Ubuntu – and that requires a re-imagination of our education as it is today.