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Redefining Relevance in Higher Education

In what may seem to be a paradox for the undiscerning ear, Maria Montessori, the world-renowned Italian educator, and alumna of the University of Rome, declared decades ago that “*education is the best weapon for peace.*” Disarming the word weapon from its militant meaning, she affirmed that “establishing peace” in conflict-ridden world “is the work of education,” while “all politics can do is keep us out of war.” Numerous skeptics, then and now, perhaps outside the very welcoming space of this auspicious gathering—perhaps including certain politicians, would likely attempt to belittle Montessori’s statements by ascribing to them such disparaging descriptions as “hopeless romanticism,” and “inadequate idealism.”

Educators, policy makers in the HE sector, sociologist, and most definitely philosophers of history simply know better! At the dawn of this century, and throughout the preceding one, we have aggregated, amalgamated, studied, and analyzed ample experiences and lessons that point us to that the United Nations 4th Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) is “quality education,” set before such lofty and vital aspirations as *clean water and sanitation, clean energy, economic growth,* and “*peace, justice, and strong institutions.*”

A more technical meeting, detail-oriented, meeting than ours, would perhaps enumerate ample, well-analyzed examples of the long-lasting effects of goal oriented equitable education not only on establishing peace, but on creating the enabling environment that would prevent conflict, or at least alleviate some of its more catastrophic consequences.

In this gathering, however, it seems imperative to rethink the meaning of education, and its strategic goals in connection to peace, communal harmony in countries affected with internal conflicts, and the efficacy of simply celebrating self promoting quips about peace and education without setting them against reality. If the pervious century has provided us with any critical lesson about the dialectic of peace and education, then it must be that self-congratulatory statements and quotes are not actually effective in facing the real challenges of this century. The question of rethinking the relationship between peace and education will take us back to the drawing-board to consider what we mean by education, and what we mean by peace.

Today, the conflicts in Syria and elsewhere have demonstrated that simply preparing the graduates of today for the job market of tomorrow is not enough. Highly-educated graduates from top universities, East and West, have proven to be susceptible, for example, to extremist ideologies and terrorist organizations that recruited them on a scale similar to that of the less educated or less fortunate. Highly educated men and women have deserted their comfortable lives in the “first world,” to travel to the “third” in order to join the ranks of organizations that embrace medieval thought and practices, such as “ISIS” and “Nusra” in Syria, and their predecessors, and clones in Libya and elsewhere. Is this not a wake-up call to all of us? Is it not an alarming invitation to rethink the gap...the dangerous chasms, in taking a purely technocratic approach to higher education?

The protracted and devastating war in Syria calls upon us to pause and ponder. This is a new generation of warfare that will produced multiple new generations of problems. Among its facets are complex decentralized conflicts, sophisticated psychological warfare, manipulation of social media, sectarian and ethnic tensions, and reshaping of collective consciousness. There is a pattern that is easy to reproduced elsewhere, and migrate across national and continental borders. This is why it would be disappointing to say the least, counterproductive and tragic to be more forward, if we dwell in gathering like ours on intractable international conflicts that are decades old, that are at the core of international power games and the manipulations of superpowers while this new pattern is knocking at the gate.

In Syria, we had the case of plurality facing essentialist fundamentalism, a diverse national body politic under the attack of well-funded, highly organized, multinational terrorism. As we convene here today, there are colonies, literally, of Igor fighters and their families, established in hills and mountains of north western Syria. There are Belgian, German, French, and

Chechen nationals who responded to the call of such nightmarish ghouls as ISIS and Nusra.

The question of Palestine, and the subsequent Arab-Israeli conflict will always be at the foreground of international power politics until an enabling environment is created to effect a just and durable peace. Such peace is not possible, however, without a tangible measure of justice, all talk about peace is just half-hearted lip service.

When academics and education leaders from Europe and MENA meet and narrowly focus on that intractable conflict, they will be missing a valuable opportunity to address the broader issues of common interest to all stakeholders. A wider focus is the more feasible and more productive path. It will liberate our energies to focus them on such issues as sustainable development, human rights, preparing the graduates for the social and cultural challenges on this century, and thus endowing them with a stronger perspective and global outreach. We will be better serving ourselves and our constituents if we capitalize on our opportunity to meet by avoiding "feel-good" symbolic gestures, and by not engaging in the replication of the infamous debate about the sex of the angels that consumed the intellectuals of Constantinople while their city was about to fall.

This is one lesson over which we should all ponder. Educational institutions should not focus entirely on the employability of their graduates and the caliber of their technical abilities. Connecting universities with their societies should not simply mean enhancing the presumed *raison d'être* of the university as a service provider for the world of industry, business, and professional practice, and therefore as an institution worthy of funding from public and private sources. The social role of HEI should be investigated in such a manner as to find modalities for addressing the "type" of graduate that we want to send to the society of today. This could mean reconsidering the very environment of the university as a locus in which we can effect policies of social integration across various spectra of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and class. It could also point us to ways through which we connect the need for upward mobility in the life of a future graduate with the imperative of making that very graduate a force of stability and harmony and a contributor to the sustainable development of her/his community and society.

In the post-conflict and recovery stages, we, in Syria, should be considering these necessities as priorities that coincide with, if not precede, the need for

repairing damaged infrastructure for example. It is true that it is more seductive, definitely easier, and easily measurable, to consider allocating billions here and there for rebuilding destroyed physical facilities, than to think about the *type* of the educated citizen we need in the future. It is also true, and I reiterate, that the easy technocratic approach of the 20th century has proved to be totally inadequate to address the social and ideological challenges inherent in what is called today 4th generation warfare. In this new mode of conflict, the most effective weapons include manipulating collective consciousness and psychological warfare.

Whatever the tools, and the approach, the HE sector in Syria will face daunting challenges in the decades to come. In an increasingly smaller world, it would be detrimental to us all, if our potential international partners take a leisurely backseat, a watch and wait, a sit in the stands, attitude towards of the new dynamic at work in my country and my region. The willingness to cooperate with Syrian higher education institutions today, cannot, and should not, be seen as the technical issue of “extending a helping hand,” but as a strategic decision on the part of higher education institutions, particularly in Europe, to be a full-partner in determining the shape of tomorrow, not only in Syria and the Arab region, but in Europe as well. We have all seen the demographic and economic results of the catastrophic spillover from our region to Europe. Extremist ideologies and transnational, and recognize no national or cultural boundaries. We should act. We should act NOW!

Montessori was perhaps too optimistic when she declared that politics can “keep us out of war.” Yet modern-day conflicts have tragically and repeatedly demonstrated, with a great loss of human lives, that a pure power-based political approach, one that calculates balances of loss and gain on the international arena, actually perpetuates conflict, increases suffering, and leads to long-lasting devastation, and at times irreparable damage to us all. We should lobby and pressure decision makers at all levels to take a novel approach to the moods of cooperation in higher education, one that has the future of us all in mind.

I extend, again as I did last year, an encouraging and welcoming hand to everyone who is willing to cooperate with us to achieve our common goal of ensuring that the university plays a role in serving communal and global peace, of effecting a culture of openness and cooperation, of nurturing the graduate of tomorrow, an enlightened individual, professionally trained,

socially responsible, forward looking, and globally enlightened.
Again. I extend a hand!

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