



## Education, Human Rights and Dignity

By Fred van Leeuwen, General Secretary, Education International

10 December is International Human Rights Day. It is an occasion to celebrate human rights as recognised by the instruments of the UN and its agencies that enshrine those rights in international law and culture.

The UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognises the right to education. However, it sees education as being a lot more than training in skills as important as that may be. Its purpose is also to inform our societies and re-enforce the capacities of people to reflect, engage in critical thinking and adjust. The mission of education, according to the Covenant is the:

*"Development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity." Education "shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms". It goes on to say that "education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups ..."*

This Covenant was adopted 50 years ago, but it sounds as if it could have been written yesterday. However, we are seeing eruptions of fear, hostility and of all kinds of bigotry, much of it directed at migrants, disadvantaged and refugee communities. It is made worse by those politicians who calculate that there is more electoral benefit to be generated through fear than through fairness and responsibility. I ask a simple, if undiplomatic question. Is the refugee "crisis" being instrumentalised to erode and undermine democratic values and democracy itself in the world? It is in that context that we need to re-read the Covenant today and reflect on the mission of education.

Education International recently held a conference to discuss education for refugees. It was a fascinating meeting that brought together teachers, education stakeholders, political leaders, and academic experts. The main focus was on how education systems can better serve refugees and support their "integration".

Let us be modest: education on its own cannot confront all challenges, but they will not be met without it. Countering dark forces requires a political response and teachers and their trade unions must be part of that necessary mobilization, but we also have a role to play as educators.

But, that requires a philosophy of education that considers the whole child, one that includes critical thinking and discussion on global citizenship, social justice and human rights. It will be ignored, at best, by those who think that nothing has value that cannot be measured. And, it will not even be in the same universe with those who see education as a profit centre rather than as a vital mission for society. Good education is, in fact, part of the glue that holds society together. And, without it, particularly in the fast-moving world of today, we will be scattered in all directions by powerful and destructive centrifugal forces.

But, sound education, including civic education, is not only the right thing to do because of our concerns about larger society or even because of the values we serve. It is also good education and provides value to home and host populations. As John Dewey, the American educator and philosopher said early in the last century.

*"The intermingling in the school of youth of different races, differing religions, and unlike customs creates for all a new and broader environment."*