

## ➔ **SOUTH-EAST EUROPE: A VIRTUAL MEETING PLACE FOR EDUCATION REFORMERS**

### **In a Nutshell**

The South-East Europe Education Cooperation Network (SEE-ECN) is a broad-based, low-cost regional project. It supports the exchange of information, ideas, and know-how for the reform and improvement of education in 11 countries.

The network began with a sense of urgency over the need to enhance education standards, and took off through strategic kick-starting from external finance. As a virtual meeting place, it has brought people together and mobilized capacities across the region, stimulating a kind of East-East cooperation, while providing a framework for donor support.

### **The Story**

SEE-ECN emerged with the end of the Kosovo conflict in 1999, which brought fresh opportunities and interest in cooperation among ex-Yugoslav republics. The Stability Pact political framework, brokered that year, highlighted the region and the commitments of donor countries to assist post-conflict reconstruction, development and integration of the region within Europe and globally.

During the late 1990s, cross-border and regional cooperation in education in the Balkans was driven largely by donor-led initiatives, experts and agendas. Otherwise, contact between countries was fragmented and in some cases frosty, with almost no formal relation among some neighbouring states and entities – for example, between Albania and Serbia, or Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The quality of education varied widely from place to place.

In the post-conflict period, ministries of education, schools and universities shared the challenge of having to respond quickly and flexibly to profound democratic, economic and social transition. Many countries grappled with deteriorating infrastructure and low teacher salaries, rural-urban migration, refugee return or non-return and brain drain, political instability, and weak and outmoded institutions. Citizens everywhere held high expectations for “European standards” in education. These common issues and needs over a relatively small geographic region, with shared languages across some borders, provided the impetus for greater cooperation among policy makers and the donors seeking to support them.

In 2000, the Open Society Institute and the network of Soros foundations teamed up with the leading education reformers in Slovenia to conceive an indigenous network for education cooperation that would increase the regional information flow about education, incorporate local languages, engage education experts across borders, and provide a focal point for dialogue and capacity development on education reform. Slovenia was well positioned to lead the formation of the

network, with its steady experience of restructuring education and relative political stability since gaining independence in 1991. The Center for Education Policy Studies at the university in Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana, became the network's base.

The Open Society Institute and the government of Austria provided seed funding of approximately \$200,000. A virtual governing board was formed to oversee the network and decide priorities. Over the next year, the SEE-ECN identified a local coordinating organization for each country or entity in the region, thus extending the network through Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia. Local coordination was set up in existing organizations – mostly local education institutes, think-tanks, and non-governmental organizations. The start-up funds financed a staff coordinator in Ljubljana and reimbursed local coordinators for direct costs.

As a first priority, the network collected and translated education policy documents from and about the region. Jointly over the first year, they built a virtual library, which now houses more than 1,500 items and is already accessed by around 10,000 users monthly. An online expert database supports the exchange of specialists across the region. The network has worked with the OECD in preparing and making available reviews of each national education system; this work was linked to the efforts of the Stability Pact to raise education as a priority and attract donor assistance.

In 2001, the SEE-ECN, with the Open Society Institute, sponsored its first regional event for capacity development, on drafting education legislation. A vast e-library of education laws from within and beyond the region was collected, and country teams of ministry officials, parliamentarians, lawyers, and policy analysts came together to exchange experience and practical know-how. Six months later, the UNESCO International Bureau of Education partnered with the SEE-ECN on a similar process to increase capacity for managing large-scale curriculum reform.

In the past, international agencies had mostly invited local stakeholders to seminars they thought were needed, but with the new network, it became possible to turn the process around, with local stakeholders setting the agenda.

An e-survey conducted in 2002 has helped assess the value of the network to users. Around 200 institutional and 100 individual members are registered in it; all ministries of education have been enthusiastic. Major donors, agencies and researchers active in South-East Europe routinely consult it and seek referrals, while the number of sponsoring donors and partners has tripled since the start-up.

## Results and Critical Factors

- A common interest and a sense of urgency to enhance education standards motivated participants to work together across borders.
- External finance played a strategic role in kick-starting the SEE-ECN initiative, but did so by responding to rather than leading the agenda.

- The network has since provided a framework within which donors can more easily identify needs and engage with local partners.
- Using ICT to mobilize expertise and create a virtual meeting place for the exchange of ideas has significantly increased access to information resources at a comparatively small cost, and works on a demand-driven basis.
- Physical hubs located in different institutions in participating countries have reinforced the virtual network, ensuring that activities and initiatives can be followed up.

### **Further information**

The South-East Europe Education Cooperation Network ([www.see-educoop.net](http://www.see-educoop.net)).

Open Society Education Programmes: South-East Europe ([www.osepsee.net/1.htm](http://www.osepsee.net/1.htm)).

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) International Bureau of Education ([www.ibe.unesco.org/](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/)).

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