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Transition Education and Quality of Life

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Abstract

Ortega Y. Gasset in his book The Mission of the University says that knowledge is the biggest achievement of the human being. Today’s society is that of the third wave, when school and university are the main institutions of social fabric. Looking from a sociological perspective, education is the determinator of social mobility and achievement in a micro and macro context in a globalised world. The Republic of Macedonia is a small Balkan country that is passing through a long period of transition, where unemployment, vulnerability and social exclusion are typical elements of social reality. The number people living below the national poverty line increased from 4% of the population in 1991 to 20% in 1996. According to State Statistical Office data, in 2008 the percentage of poor people in the Republic of Macedonia was 28.7%, which is more than a fourth of the whole population. The survey findings of research done in 2010 (UNDP) show that 40 % of respondents said that their financial situation was worse than average. The empirical part of this study is based on a survey (546 respondents) done in June-July 2012 in three regions inhabited mostly by the Albanian population, aiming to give a real picture about correlation between two indicators, education and life conditions.

Keywords: social transition, education, life conditions, Albanians of Republic of Macedonia

1. Macedonia: From Social Transition towards Europeanization

The term transition means passage from a condition to another, it defines the process of democratization or the practice of non-democratic regimes turning into democratic ones. This process was first witnessed in Latin America and then in southern Europe, followed by central, eastern and southeastern Europe and the so-called Western Balkans. A characteristic of the transition of ex-socialist countries of Europe is the passage from the state-directed economy into the market economy and modern civilization values like free enterprise, competition, private property, pluralism, open society. The Republic of Macedonia has been coping with these transitional problems for a period lasting two decades, during which the majority of the population got poorer (middle class transformed into poor or lower class), when unemployment, vulnerability and social exclusion are social graves while life satisfaction is a...
dream. The instability of the region as a result of the “balkanization process” and a situation that created a challenging climate for investment contributed to the rise of social instability.

Corruption is another serious problem that obstructs natural development and the integration of the country into Euro-Atlantic structures. Some have called the transition of Macedonia as a transition with “factory defect”. (Vajdenfeld, 1999, pp. 257-278).

Macedonia faces high unemployment (35%) (Pajaziti, 2010, p. 45), disagreements with neighbors (Cowan, 2000, p. 122-139), absurd anti question of Macedonian identity, the church issue with Serbia, that of language with Bulgaria, broken inter-ethnic relations (between Macedonians and Albanians), a chapter that was thought to be over with the interethnic conflict of 2001 and the Framework Agreement which implied constitutional changes in favor of non-Macedonian ethnic groups and communities that however failed to bring conclusive peace. From 2006 onwards, the country has been living under the turbulence of permanent provocations by Macedonian state nationalism which showed itself in the most refulgent way in the case of the Macedonian Encyclopedia, that of the fertility law, in the case of the castle church in Skopje, the anti-urban project “Skopje 2014” and other irrational projects costing Macedonian citizens more than one billion Euros in new debts in an era of global crisis. The transition process was accompanied by low economic growth compared to neighboring countries. A recession was seen during the early 1990s, while after the conflict, 2001-2004 there was a growth which in the period up to 2007 was at 4%. In 2008, 28.7% of the population was estimated poor (SSO, 2009). The unemployment rate in the fourth quarter of 2009 was 32.4% and in the first quarter of 2010, 33.5%. CNN states that Macedonia's economy is among the worst in the world (on the same rate with that of Congo, Sudan and Belarus), with a high rate of unemployment (31.2%) (CNNMoney).

2. Education and Quality of Life

Education is the basis and the main criteria of the progress of every single community. It means a thorough mastery of the system of knowledge, the creation of abilities and practical habits, the development of our forces and cognitive capacities, the development of the scientific attitudes about the world, connecting knowledge with practical and professional activities. Education encompasses all the means, instruments and the methods which are oriented toward “the change of the behavior of the people, either through the enlargement of the knowledge, or through the changes of the attitudes”. Different research done in economy and sociology have shown that the highest level of knowledge influences positively productivity, innovation, democratization and social cohesion (Arsenijević & Andevski, 2010, p. 32, 36).

Quality of life is an area of study that has attracted an ever increasing amount of interest over the past two decades, particularly in the areas of health, rehabilitation, disability studies and social services, but also in medicine, education, and other fields. QoL is in close connection with an individual’s satisfaction and happiness. People with a higher life standard are more disposed to be part of a healthy and stable society. According to Lipovcan et.al. (2004) QoL is moderated by the degree of control that an individual perceives to have, and by opportunities for improvement in specific areas of life (Lipovcan et.al., 2004). In quality of life research, one often distinguishes between the subjective and objective quality of life. Subjective quality of life is about feeling good and being satisfied with things in general. Objective quality of life is about fulfilling the societal and cultural demands for material wealth, social status and physical well-being.

Empirical Research: Education’s Impact on Life Conditions of Ethnic Albanians in Republic of Macedonia

Our research is based on 546 questionnaires applied in three important regions of RM, Skopje, Kumanovo (Northeast region) and Polog, putting under scrutiny the correlation between education and the quality of life, how education influences the improvement of life conditions, from individual, subjective (feeling good and being
satisfied with things in general), to societal-objective satisfaction items (fulfilling the societal and cultural demands for material wealth, social status and physical well-being). The general conclusions of our research are that the Albanian citizens of Macedonia live have lower incomes than the average in the country, facing existential difficulties, that citizens see their social situation as stagnant, with a worsening tendency. Almost half of the surveyed people expressed low levels of subjective satisfaction. Albanian citizens express dissatisfaction with public services provided by local governments. The opinion of respondents demonstrated a graver situation of the Albanian community compared to the majority community. The vast majority see the political factor as the main one for the general negative climate and living standards. There is a perception that Albanians have a quality of life much lower than Macedonians.

Our thesis in this research is that education has a positive impact on people’s individual and family well-being, i.e. schooling improves individual well-being and affects subjective quality and objective life conditions (Ross & van Willigen, 1997, p. 275), that education means better jobs, better earnings and better life conditions and vice versa, low levels of education mean low level of quality of life. This fact is proved by our finding that 70 % of respondents that had not finished elementary school, with elementary and secondary school earn less than average salary – less than 350 € (1/3 of the group with higher education earns more than 601 €, 17 % more than 801 €), that 60 % of them find themselves very unhappy (1, 2 from 1-10 scale) with their life (this percentage is much lower than those with university education, MA and Ph.D.-5.6 %). 16 % of the latter group are very happy (8, 9, 10 from 1-10 scale), noting that there is no respondent from the low-educated category that is satisfied with life conditions. On the question “How satisfied are you with your life standard?”, 30 % of poorly educated and only 9.4 % of highly educated respondents declared that live with bad life conditions (0%-9.4% very satisfied). From low-educated 260 participants, only 20 (7 %) declared that they make ends meet very easily or easily (21 % of respondents graduated in universities).

Illustration 1. Has your household at any time during the past 12 months run out of money to pay for essential food for daily meals?

| Education Level         | Yes (%) | Almost Yes (%) | No (%) | No answer (%) |
|-------------------------|---------|----------------|--------|---------------|
| Univ. (MA, PhD)         | 16.4%   | 36.4%          | 47.2%  | 2.0%          |
| Secondary education     | 21.2%   | 44.3%          | 34.5%  | 0.0%          |
| Primary education       | 20.0%   | 50.0%          | 29.9%  | 0.0%          |
| Uncompleted primary     | 20.0%   | 50.0%          | 30.0%  | 0.0%          |

45% of the people with university education and only 20 % of them with unfinished elementary school declared that they are very satisfied with their family life. The research findings showed a correlation between education and social life: more educated people were more satisfied (21.3% very satisfied) with this important component of life than them with low level of education (10%).

Low educated citizens felt more the consequences of the economic crisis: in the last 12 months, the life of the people with low level of education deteriorated most (50% vs 17.8% at the respondents with higher education). The same observation was evident also in the collective aspect. Within the Albanian community deterioration was present mostly in the first category (60% of them declared that their status as ethnic Albanians was decreasing, despite 35% of university-educated respondents). This category expressed the biggest complaints about the municipality where they lived (70%) compared with the group of intellectual elites (35%), about changes in life in general in Macedonia in the past 12 months (100% - 62%). While the group with higher education saw the political
situation as the main cause of deterioration (30.8%), the group without primary education (40%), primary school (20.5%) and high school (19.1%) saw unemployment.

36.6% of respondents with low education and 61% of those with university education lived in flat/house of 81 or more m². 25% of low educated respondents coped with lack of space as a serious problem (undergraduate/MA/PhD’s 9.8%). Only 6.6% of respondents with higher education expressed dissatisfaction about housing, despite 20% of primary school. The same trend was related to the environment or the neighborhood (18.2% -40%). The first category lived with problems as rot in windows, floors, damp walls or floors, inadequate heating etc. house.

Table 1. Do you have problems with rot in windows, doors or floors in your accommodation?

| Educational Level | Very serious problems | Some problems | No problems | Refuse to answer |
|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-------------|------------------|
| Uncomleted primary| 30.0%                 | 20.0%         | 50.0%       | 0.0%             |
| Primary education | 22.7%                 | 28.4%         | 39.8%       | 9.1%             |
| Secondary education| 8.6%                  | 22.8%         | 58.0%       | 10.5%            |
| Univ. (MA,PHD)   | 4.2%                  | 15.9%         | 63.6%       | 17.1%            |

The traditional extended family is more present with people with less education (60% of them live with 5 or more family members), and the phenomena of a separate room for any children is specific for people advanced in the educational pyramid (48% of respondents in this category stated that in their families every child had their own room). Computer (87% -40%) and the Internet were more prevalent in educated families (83.9%). 16.6 of the three groups with the lowest educational level were not able to buy a phone and % and 44% LCD TV. 18% of poorly educated citizens within the last 12 months had managed to buy household appliances such as furniture, TV, washing machine (those with higher education, MA and doctorate, 34.6%).

While none of the group of respondents who had not completed primary education could allow himself a one-week vacation per year (not including family visits), about 40% of those with undergraduate/ MA/PhD degree had the possibility to realize such a thing. A trend with significant difference was observed also regarding the consumption of meat, poultry or fish every second day (35% of people with low education, and 52% with higher education) and regarding the chance to call friends for a lunch/dinner at least once a month (38% -53%). Problems were evident for the first category regarding the payment of electricity, water, phone bills, municipal taxes etc..

Conclusions

Balkan countries live in a stadium of long-lasting transition. Problems of life conditions are very present in the general societal chart of RM. Education is power (Scientia protests est-Bacon),is one of the tools for vertical mobility, is a social elevator, improver of the quality of life and a great provider of opportunity for self-realization.

From our research conducted in the middle of this year, we come to the following general conclusions:

- Educational achievements affect both objective and subjective satisfaction, they are a generator of pleasure of the citizens, *psychological eudemonia* and material conditions of life.
- People with low-level education feel more the consequences of the economic crisis.
- Education, quality of life affects the stability of individual and family life.
- Nine categories of material deprivation (EUROSTAT) are present at all citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, but especially more vulnerable groups, which include illiterate and those with low education.
- Macedonian ethnic Albanians, compared with the past, have greater opportunities for educational and economic advancement (and overall quality of life), at the time when they have established higher education institutions in their mother tongue and opportunities for access in global competition.

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