

PEACE Programme Steering Committee Meeting

Pavia, 15 June 2002

I. Background

The newly elected Steering Committee of the PEACE Programme had decided, at its first meeting upon election at the last Session of the 5th General, Paris 24 November 2001, to meet as soon as possible, preferably in the Palestinian Territories, at Bethlehem University, in order to take concrete action for the implementation of the decisions adopted by the General Assembly. Unfortunately, the unfolding of events in the region did not allow holding the meeting in Palestine. Under the circumstances, Professor Gianni Vaggi, Vice-Chairperson of the PEACE Programme, proposed to the Chairman to convene the meeting, in conjunction with the International Workshop "Social and Economic Sustainable Integration in the Middle East and the role of the European Union, Collegio Saint Caterina da Siena, organised by the University of Pavia, 14-15 June 2002. His proposal was accepted and the meeting was held at the University of Pavia, on 15 June 2002.

Present were:

Professor Manuel Hassassian, Chairperson
Professor Gianni Vaggi, Vice-Chairperson
Professor Luc François, Secretary General

Professor Radwan Barakat, Member
Professor Annick Suzor-Weiner, Member
Ms. Monica Margarit, Member
Professor Gabi Baramki, Honorary Member

Also present were Professor Dumitru Chitoran and Ms. Karimeh Shomali, PEACE Programme Office, UNESCO. Professor Antonio Savini, Director of International Relations, University degli Studi di Pavia, was invited to attend as an observer.

The following members presented excuses for not having been able to attend because of important commitments: Professor Edward Jennings, Professor Jan Peters and Professor Muhammad Shubair.

Professor Rami Hamdallah, President of An-Najah University and Treasurer of the PEACE Programme, who had originally announced his participation, sent an e-mail message informing that the situation at the University rendered it impossible for him to be away even for a short period. The members of the Steering Committee expressed concern about his absence, particularly in view of the fact that Professor Hamdallah had not been present at the last General Assembly of PEACE either. It was decided that, when the next meeting is convened, special attention should be paid to consult him in advance so as to make sure that he could attend.

II. Opening Session

Professor Hassassian, Chairperson of the PEACE Programme Steering Committee, opened the meeting by expressing special thanks to Pavia University and to Professor Gianni Vaggi personally for having taken the initiative to organise the meeting and for hosting it most generously.

He further thanked the Members of the Steering Committee for having made the effort to attend the meeting, and underlined its importance, in view of the continued serious situation in the Middle East, which affects strongly the normal functioning of the Palestinian universities. He considered their presence as an expression of their own concern, as well as of their institutions about the need to take practical action in order to assist the Palestinian universities to overcome the particular difficulties they are faced with. He also expressed the gratitude and thanks to the preceding members of the Steering Committee for their exemplary achievements.

The floor was given then to Professor Antonio Savini, who emphasised the support of Pavia University to the PEACE Programme, particularly through Professor Gianni Vaggi, who is the Vice-Chairperson in its Steering Committee and assured the Steering Committee members of continued support in the future. Referring to the fact that at present Pavia University holds also the presidency of the Coimbra Group, which played a decisive role in establishing PEACE, he wished to see links between PEACE and the Coimbra Group reinforced and particularly by having university members of the Coimbra Group join the PEACE Programme. He promised to approach the Coimbra Group universities for that purpose and asked for an updated presentation of PEACE to help him in this endeavour.

III. Agenda

It was stressed that all steps be taken in the future in order to make sure that the agenda is communicated to all members in advance so as to allow them to propose issues to be discussed at the meeting. The Agenda of the meeting was then approved as proposed by the PEACE Programme Office at UNESCO (Annex 1).

Item 1. Reinforcement of the PEACE Programme Funding Campaign

In keeping with the decision adopted at the last Session of the 5th General Assembly, the PEACE Programme has taken the initiative to launch a funding campaign for PEACE. The PEACE Programme Office, working in co-operation and with the support of Mr. Mustafa El-Tayeb, Director of Science Analysis and Policies Division, UNESCO, addressed requests for financial support for a number of priority projects to over 250 foundations, IGOs, NGOs, universities and other potential donors. Professor Dumitru Chitoran briefed the Steering Committee members about the preliminary results of the campaign. Several replies contained references to possible financial support to programme activities, especially by the World Bank. Other replies, especially from foundations, referred to their on-going programmes and suggested that requests be made in keeping with their rules and practices. Professor Chitoran also brought to the attention of the Steering Committee members the UNESCO Executive Board Resolution EXB/164/3.1.1 "3" concerning "The Reconstruction and rehabilitation of Palestinian educational and cultural systems".

Professor Gabi Baramki, Honorary Member of the Steering Committee, referred to the shift in the position of the World Bank, which is now taking a strong interest in Palestinian Higher Education. The Bank is elaborating at present a Study for Palestinian Higher Education, which would be the basis for decisions with regard to major international support.

Professor Hassassian added that he is acquainted with the strategy of the World Bank as well as of the European Union with regard to higher education in Palestine. He pointed out that neither is ready to cover operational costs for their individual institutions. As a result, the Palestinian universities are faced with enormous difficulties in meeting their running costs, at a time when they are either closed, threatened with closure, or cannot function normally. Moreover, they are in great need for professional development to assure the quality of their programmes.

Ms. Monica Margarit referred to the possibility for support from the European Union. She insisted that if a proposal for funding is to be sent to the European Union, it should be drawn out in accordance with the EU criteria for financial support. In this regard, it was suggested that the PEACE Programme proposal, sent two years ago to the European Union, which had already been approved by the Ministry of Higher Education and Ministry of Planning of the Palestinian National Authority, be sent to her and to Professor Luc François in order to determine whether it complies with the European Union criteria.

It was agreed to revise and update urgently that proposal and to present it to Brussels by a delegation made up by Professor Hassassian, the Chairperson, Professor Vaggi, the Vice-Chairperson, and any other members of the Steering Committee who would be available. The delegation should have discussions at the highest level on future support to the PEACE Programme by the European Union. It should submit the proposal as a PEACE Programme request, insisting that the Network has acquired extensive experience in extending international academic support to Palestinian universities through consortia of European and American universities, which assure quality, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of programme implementation.

The visit should be prepared carefully. It should be preceded by contacts with the European representative in Ramallah (by Professor Hassassian) with H. E. Mr. Miguel Angel Moratinos, European Special Envoy to the Middle East Peace Process (by Monica Margarit) and with other high level officials (by Professor Vaggi) with the possible support of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Professor Baramki mentioned also the name of Mr. Chris Patton the EU Commissioner for External Relations, for follow-up.

Item 2. Resuming and reinforcing major programmes of the PEACE Programme

It was agreed that the top priorities of the PEACE Programme for the forthcoming period will continue to be the scholarship scheme, exchange of staff with European universities and the launching of academic programmes at Palestinian universities.

The members of the Steering Committee took note of the existing offers for the PEACE Programme Scholarship Scheme, listed in the working document for this item on the Agenda of the meeting. It was, however, decided that all members of the Committee should make efforts to increase the number of grants. The objective to be pursued should be to have at least one grant offered by each of the number universities of PEACE.

Discussion referred then to the need to follow clear rules and regulations, established by the Steering Committee for the selection of applicants to the PEACE Programme grants. Professor Radwan Barakat pointed out that the Steering Committee should consider modifications and improvements of regulations. Guidelines for the award of PEACE scholarships, as a continuous process, so as to secure efficiency and the smooth running of the Programme. For the immediate future it was decided that the Chairman of the Steering Committee should receive the applications from the Palestinian universities, should screen them with the support of the Palestinian selection committee, which should decide on final nomination, and submission to the universities, which offer the grants. The final decision on acceptance rests, of course, with these institutions. That is why, given the great variety of situations and regulations at higher education institutions in Europe, it recommended to display flexibility in the choice of candidates.

In this respect, Ms. Shomali stressed that, when selecting a candidate, attention should be paid to the study project he/she submits, together with the study record of the applicant as well as his experience in the respective field of study. PEACE has lost many grants because of this issue.

With regard to Academic mobility through bilateral and multilateral agreements or co-operation, discussion focused on the need to resume such activities as soon as conditions at Palestinian universities will permit it. At the same time, several members of the Steering Committee insisted on providing information on proposals for such activities and on their transparency, so as to open possibilities for all Palestinian higher education to benefit from the advantages of international co-operation. Professor Radwan Barakat stressed that the PEACE Programme can play an important role in securing contacts for Palestinian institutions and scholars when they are looking for European partners. PEACE could and should also play a role in supporting research at Palestinian universities and institutions, besides academic programmes.

The members of the Steering Committee insisted that at future meeting there should be fuller information on on-going or intended projects, provided well in advance so as to allow for a proper discussion and adequate decisions with regard to their usefulness and need for support.

Professor Luc François and Professor Annick Suzor-Weiner insisted that PEACE should be more visible to the university community as an efficient tool to help the Palestinian needs.

Item 3. Membership of the PEACE Programme

The Steering Committee members took note with satisfaction of the expression of interest in the PEACE Programme by several new universities, which might join the Network. They are well known universities, which would reinforce the PEACE Programme. Consequently, it was agreed that Professor Hassassian should send letters of reply to them, welcoming their initiatives and reminding them that, according to the PEACE Programme By Laws, an official letter, signed by the President of their University (or any other authorised official) be sent to PEACE confirming the wish to join the Network. Acceptance as members of PEACE comes into force upon receipt of such a letter, and will be confirmed by the next General Assembly of PEACE.

With regard to the payment of membership fees, the members of the Steering Committee took note of the situation of payments as of the date of the meeting. Members of the Committee decided to get more involved personally in convincing the universities in their own countries to pay the fees.

Moreover, it was decided that the letter concerning fees payment, drafted by Professor Rami Hamdallah, in his capacity as Treasurer of PEACE be revised slightly and co-signed together with the Chairman, to be then addressed to all member-universities, using PEACE Programme headed papers.

Item 4. Participation of the PEACE Programme at the EAIE 14th Annual Conference, 11-14 September 2002, Porto, Portugal

The members of the Committee appreciated the invitation addressed by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven to Professor Hassassian as a speaker to the Session 4.06 "Co-operation in relation to governance and conflict" under Track 4 "Educational Co-operation with Developing Countries". It was agreed that, given the financial situation of PEACE, the invitation could be accepted, if Universiteit Leuven covers all costs.

Item 5. The situation of the PEACE Programme Office at UNESCO

With regard to relations of the PEACE Programme with UNESCO, Professor Chitoran informed that all official documents of the Organisation which refer to Palestinian Higher Education, mention PEACE and indicate that UNESCO will continue to support it within the limits of its programme and budget. However, he pointed out that the decision has been taken to terminate the employment of Ms. Shomali as of 30 June 2002, when she reaches retirement age. This will create serious problems to the PEACE Programme Office at UNESCO.

The members of the Steering Committee discussed in detail the implications of this decision, including the feasibility of having the Office of PEACE Programme at one of its European member-universities. It became clear however, that, as things stand at present, no member university is ready to assume full obligations and financial responsibilities for the functioning of the Office. In addition, relations with UNESCO have always been one of the strong assets of PEACE. Consequently, it was agreed to take all necessary action in order to assure the future functioning of the Office at UNESCO.

For that purpose, it was agreed that Professor Hassassian, should send a letter to the Director-General, asking for a meeting with him to discuss the further support that UNESCO could extend to the PEACE Programme, especially to the PEACE Programme Office, to which UNESCO has seconded a staff member since 1996. Efforts should be made to secure the extension of the arrangement and to retain Mrs. Karimeh Shomali on that post, before her retirement, for a period of at least one and a half years.

Item 6. Miscellaneous

Several points were raised by the members of the Steering Committee under this item, especially with regard to the need to be kept more regularly informed on on-going activities. On the other hand, the PEACE Programme Office at UNESCO indicated that contacts with the Palestinian members of the Committee, including the Chairman, are at times, difficult to assure.

The Steering Committee decided that, in addition to Professor Manuel Hassassian, Chairperson, and Professor Rami Hamdallah, Treasurer, Professor Luc François and Professor Annick Suzor-Weiner will be empowered to sign orders of transfer from the funds of the PEACE Programme account at the Arab Bank, Paris, after the approval of the Chairperson and the Treasurer.

The Committee members insisted also on the need to have a full-fledged Office of the PEACE Programme in Palestine, preferable at the University of the PEACE Programme Chairman, which should have all files of the Programme including the financial situation, kept in good order.

Professor Hassassian closed the meeting by thanking once again the members of the Committee for their participation. He expressed the hope that the political situation in the region will allow for the next meeting of the Committee, foreseen for the second half of October to be held in Palestine.

Other suggestions referred to the necessity of the PEACE Programme Steering Committee European members to be more constantly in touch, by using all means of modern communication, especially phone and by Internet. Furthermore, it was stressed that the European members of the Committee should use possibilities to meet frequently and discuss the needs of the Palestinians universities.