Implementing Language Legislation in Education

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Mr Van der Meer presented the Mercator network and its tasks. Mercator works with long-term strategies, and its mission is to provide objective information about the minority language population and the languages themselves. He highlighted that the centres of the network are linked electronically, and the main principle is to make current data available to the public at all times. The network publishes a joint newsletter, initiates conferences, coordinates projects, and maintains one common website. Mr van der Meer also highlighted some of the activities of Mercator Education by mentioning maintaining specialist libraries, networks, databases and publishing research on various subjects related to education, for example teacher training, language immersion and trilingual schools.

Mercator also maintains a growing network of bilingual and trilingual schools on the Internet which currently includes 60 schools in 19 regions. In addition to exchanging information between schools, teachers, students and parents, the website generates more publicity for smaller efforts of multilingual education. Another main component of Mercator Education's activities is publishing the regional dossier series, which is aimed at providing descriptive information and statistical information about responsibilities, legal arrangements, financial investments and other linguistic information about different minority language communities in the European Union.

The Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations have created several conventions, documents and recommendations for minority issues and education policies. The main considerations for the future will be determining the goals of education policy, the tools available to develop multilingual thinking regarding education, as well as determining the actors of such efforts. Furthermore, one challenge will be to enable several levels of political decision-making to have access to any relevant information concerning education and multilingualism. Implementing legislation on education in Europe will include facing a diversity of factors: demography, status, government, historical, geography, levels of organisation. According to Mr van der Meer, the increasing use of English as the European lingua franca has created the need to learn English, also for speakers of minority languages. Future tasks will not only involve revitalising minority languages, but also considering curriculum designs in relation to English. There is a need to go beyond bilingualism and move to trilingualism, Mr van der Meer pointed out.

Mr van der Meer went on to mention several cases of the conditions in which school inspections are carried out in Europe. In several countries, productive forms of collaboration
have been created between minority language NGO's and educators, as well as cross-border exchange of teachers. Mr van der Meer stressed that legal proficiency in autonomous communities must be maintained on a reasonable level. Another top priority is teacher training and developing teaching material.

Given the diversity of languages and educational schemes in Europe, we need to create a climate of tolerance and highlight similarities instead of differences. That way, we will all benefit from language legislation, Mr van der Meer concluded.