



EUGEO Commitment to Geographical Education: from the “Rome Declaration” to the “New International Charter on Geography Education”

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Abstract

This paper aims to summarize the recent activities carried out by the Association of European Geographical Society (EUGEO) on a path related to the state of geography as a discipline and to geographical education. The attention is focused on two main steps of this path. The first is the *Rome declaration on Geographical Education in Europe*, signed in Rome, 2013, by the International Geographical Union (IGU), the Commission on Geographical Education (CGE), EUGEO, EUROGEO and the Association of Italian Teachers of Geography (AIIG). The second is the *New International Charter on Geography Education*, that is planned to be endorsed, in its final version, by the General Assembly of the IGU on the occasion of the International Geographical Union Congress in Beijing, August 2016. The aim is to trace and discuss the motivations and ways in which EUGEO has been involved in the drafting of these two documents.

Keywords: EUGEO, Geography Education, International Cooperation, Rome Declaration on Geographical Education in Europe, International Charter on Geography Education, IGU-CGE, School, Teachers

1. Introduction

The last Century was the one in which the world changed more than ever before, and, as we all know from experience even before studies, changes occurred at an unthinkable rate in comparison with previous eras. These changes continue and intensify more and more in the new millennium. Although most of these changes are due to a continuous hyper-specialization in science and technology disciplines, the results have not always been entirely satisfactory, at least not for the Planet as a whole, nor for many of its inhabitants. Along with major changes in production systems, in the extraordinary ability

to transport raw materials and goods and in the increased mobility of capital, the world has experienced considerable imbalances, not only in the environmental field but also in the social one. In this context, geographical knowledge would be crucial to shape conscious citizens and to enable them to understand the complexity of the contemporary world and to interact with it. Nevertheless, in a number of European countries (and not only there) geography is under the threat of being reduced or even abolished from the school curricula (Ottens, 2013), and very often geographic knowledge is confused with mnemonic study of geographic places and

names. Considering these and other problems, after a long and open debate on the occasion of its 2016 Congress in Beijing, the IGU is going to endorse a new International Charter on Geography Education developed by the CGE. The first edition of the Charter (Haubrick, 1992) is still meaningful, but “since 1992 the world has changed and with it the discipline of geography and geography education [...]; compared to the 1992 Charter the new Charter is updated, and is more compact and includes an action plan” (CGE, 2015b, p. 2)¹. The Charter could be a vital opportunity not only to improve aims and objectives for geographical education, but for Geography by and large to reflect on its role in (and for) society and to boost it. This paper aims to summarize the recent activities carried out by the Association of European Geographical Society (EUGEO) in relation to the state of geography as a discipline and geographical education. These activities, in particular for geographical education, have been closely interconnected with the process that led to the drafting of the Charter. Once the Charter is approved EUGEO will undertake to let it circulate and to support any action needed to implement its action plan. Paragraph 2 is dedicated to the activities between 2012 and the *Rome Declaration on Geographical Education in Europe* (2013). Paragraph 3 describes the involvement of EUGEO in the follow-up of that declaration up to the drafting of the *New International Charter on Geography Education*. Lastly, the conclusions only illustrate the thoughts of the author and does not commit EUGEO.

2. EUGEO and Geographical Education: the making of the *Rome Declaration on Geographical Education in Europe*

The Association of Geographical Societies in Europe (EUGEO) has focused on issues in the last years relating to the state of Geography in Europe, and then, more specifically, to the state of geographical education. The 2012 EUGEO

¹ A Charter draft, updated on November 15, 2015, is published on the CGE Commission website (<http://www.igu-cge.org>). The same website has also published the *International Declaration on Research in Geography Education*, signed in Moscow, 2015, of great importance to the issues discussed here.

Seminar, in example, was entitled “State of Geography in Europe”, with presentations from Belgium, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. All the presentations², given by EUGEO member societies, among other fields of action considered (employment, academia etc.), highlighted the situation of Geography in schools as being very important in each country as well. Although in different ways for different countries, an almost common trend of weakening emerged. In some countries, like Italy, a reduction of geography content from the school curricula started in 2010 (De Vecchis, 2011, 2014), giving rise to a reflection on the role of geographical knowledge in contemporary societies and its perception in the media and public opinion in general (Maggioli and Tabusi, 2011). In the Italian case, the Italian Association of Geography Teachers, AIIG, along with the other Italian Geographical Associations (Italian Geographical Society, SGI; Geographical Studies Society, SSG; Association of Italian Geographers AGEI) and with the support of a website managed by some “young” geographers (luogoespazio.info), decided to start a public appeal in favor of Geography in the school curricula. Thanks to the support of international nets of geographers, endorsements were not only from Italy, but also from almost seventy countries all over the world, demonstrating that the importance of geographical knowledge goes well beyond borders. This is because, as the appeal reported, “Doing geography at school means educating citizens of Italy and the world to be aware, independent, critical and responsible, to know how to live their lives within their environment, and how to change it in a creative and sustainable way, with an eye to the future”.

During 2012-2013 EUGEO was involved, mainly with the research work of its President (Henk Ottens) and in cooperation with the Italian company Bshape, AIIG and SGI, in a project promoted by the Education Office of the European Space Agency (ESA). The project had as its aim the use of remote sensing data and methods for geography teaching in the school

² Presentations materials are available in EUGEO website (www.eugeo.eu), under “Events”, and then “Cologne Seminar”.

curriculum, with nine countries investigated (Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and United Kingdom). Unless the situation is quite different in these countries, geography is generally appreciated as being very important knowledge especially in our era, but teachers' major obstacles are mainly related to the "time available for geography teaching, the quantity and quality of initial training for teachers, and the lack of adequate refresher training" (Ottens, 2013).

Considering geographical education as a priority, in its IV Congress (Rome, 2013) EUGEO promoted, thanks to AIIG, a special session focused on this specific theme, together with the International Geographical Union (IGU), the IGU Commission on Geographical Education (CGE) and EUROGEO (Ottens, 2013; Van der Schee, 2014). The results of this important and very stimulating session are resumed in the *Rome declaration on Geographical Education in Europe* (De Vecchis, Donert, Kolossov, Ottens and Van der Schee, 2013). Ottens, who undersigned it on behalf of EUGEO, defines the Declaration as a "joint response of the European Geography Community to recent threats to reduce or even abolish geography content from school curricula. [...] The Rome Declaration is a first step, a wake-up call to warn about the negative consequences for young persons and for society at large of this" (Ottens, 2013, p. 98). The declaration starts with the following sentences: "Geographical education provides students with essential capabilities and competences needed to know and understand the world. Responsible and effective uses of geographical information are vital for the future of Europe. Therefore, all European citizens need to understand how to deal with it. Geographical education provides them with the knowledge and skills to do this". It is surely rhetorical, but it is also a matter of fact to argue that future generations will build and organize our world. A hyper-specialization in science and technology disciplines is not capable of ensuring by itself responsibility and effectiveness for the future of Europe; not without a broader and multiscalar (in a word, geographical) knowledge which, however, has to make use of modern methods and technologies. Nevertheless, geography is not perceived as such

a kind of knowledge by a wide range of public, but in most cases, it brings to mind the school mnemonic subject par excellence, which consists primarily in learning by heart State names, their capitals, rivers and the names of seas and so on, as "clearly" showed by TV quizzes (Van der Schee, 2012). But this, of course, is not true only for Europe: to know better the place in which one lives, its cultural sense and, at the same time, other places and cultures in the world with the connection between people and their territories, all this is fundamental to live and build the present world (Bednarz, Heffron and Huynh, 2013; Stoltman, 2013; Butt and Lambert, 2014). Geography matters in a wide range of topics, and all of them play a key role in the most relevant facts of our contemporaneity. Peace, war, identities, migrations, spaces, places, boundaries, cities, flows, segregation, wealth and poverty, resources, climate, urbanization and many others, they are all the subject of study for geographers around the world. As Vladimir Kolossov, President of the IGU, states, "It is necessary to improve the image of geography in society and among decision makers. Geography plays the unique role in culture and education, in shaping our identities and understanding of the world" (2014, p. 78).

For this reason, the *Rome Declaration on Geographical Education in Europe* has been not a final destination, but one step along an important path to reflect on the discipline itself. A path to reach a geographical education whose usefulness is perceived and put into practice by the communities in a cooperative way. Using Joop Van der Schee's words, "It seems wise to extend the Rome Declaration to a worldwide initiative to improve the position and quality of geography education and to use the ideas from earlier plans to improve geography education" (2014, p. 10).

3. From the Rome follow-up to a New International Charter on Geography Education

After the EUGEO Congress in Rome, the IGU Commission on Geographical Education (of which Joop Van der Schee is co-chair) continued in its pivotal role to push forward for a wide reflection, stimulating a number of links

and meetings with regional and national organizations. During 2014 EUGEO was involved – with the participation of the President and the Secretary General – in two meetings with the same Institutions that signed the *Rome Declaration*. The first was an informal but extremely productive meeting in Utrecht (February), promoted by CGE and conceived as a follow-up of the Rome session. The intention was to plan a “roadmap” of actions (just imagined by Ottens, 2013) to strengthen geographical education and the position of geography in the public sphere. Van der Schee masterfully reported (and substantially expanded) the meeting’s results in this Journal (2014), introducing the idea of an International strategy for geography education. The second meeting was in the context of the EUROGEO Congress in Malta (May), where the findings of Rome and Utrecht were further developed. EUGEO members discussed these developments in Krakow during the 2014 Annual seminar, with an introduction by the CGE co-chair.

Between 2014 and 2015 the CGE decided to summarize the work developed in Europe with that carried out with geographers from all over the world, so as to propose a new Charter on Geography Education. On the occasion of the EUGEO General Assembly in Budapest (September 2015), the Annual EUGEO Seminar discussed the Charter draft with particular focus on actions arising from the paper. What can we do as geographers, and what can Geography do for society, in terms of methods, tools and skills? This was one of the main questions during the seminar. The possible answers were connected with the ability to relate the research results in simple and effective terms, taking into account that the communication of the research results is just as important as the results themselves. “Don’t be shy to say I’m a geographer!”, is a phrase coming out of the debate that sums up the sense of this part of the discussion very well. A more continuous and strict connection with the stakeholders is another part of a possible answer. Another part of the discussion focused on the so-called minimum requirement for geography teaching and geographical literacy of those who teach geography. While the principle itself is clear and supported by the participants, the reflection goes around the fact that the concept

of “minimum” should not serve as a pretext to lower the requirements in countries where they are higher. Another focal point of the discussion is related to who should formulate the standards: the prevailing view is that it is important that the decision makers are supported in these choices by the active involvement of those who do research and teaching. The key concept that emerged here is that it should be a specific professional duty to be able to interpret the curriculum in a way that makes geography a valuable learning experience for citizens of the 21st century. The problem of digital illiteracy (connected with the knowledge of languages) is evoked, and every possible effort by the community of geographers to share and improve information, methods and results is highly recommended.

4. Final remarks

These cannot really be conclusions, because the path has not been completed yet nor it will be concluded with the proclamation of the Charter. It was not the aim of this paper to analyze the Charter in its various points, nor to advance observations on its contents: the drafting process has been widely participated³ and, like the IGU-CGE website reports, the present version takes into account the comments made during the EUGEO Budapest Congress and before. In these final remarks, I would try, rather, to formulate just a few reflections on geography education and geography itself, as a discipline, as well as on the opportunities that the Charter opens up. Focusing on principles about geography education and its importance for students implies, inevitably, focusing on the importance of geography for communities and society. This is the reason why it seems reasonable to believe that the success of the Charter (and of its principles), far from being a geo-education specialist “affair”, will be as great as the determined support of the entire community of geographers will be. The point is not the defense of a discipline because of a kind of “corporative selfishness”. The point is to

³ A very important and useful instrument to follow the Commission’s work and the making of the Charter is the IGU-CGE Newsletter, edited by Brooks, Lidstone and Van der Schee (<http://www.igu-cge.org>).

preserve and put into action strikingly modern knowledge with a decisive avail in our time. Knowledge that is useful to understand and solve actual problems, and to prevent and avoid future problems. To let people see that geographical thinking is not (only) for military, tourists and academics, but is helpful for individuals and communities in their everyday life: this seems to be the key task for geographers. And this seems to be the commitment that the Charter is calling us to take. To succeed in this, geographers need collective awareness of their social role and increased cooperation and networking. The nodes of the networks are certainly scholars, geographical societies, universities and research centers, but schools can also be so; teachers may try to start from the local scale, applying geographical thought to investigating territorial problems and possible solutions, and “infecting” students, families and (maybe) local decision makers with it. This is, of course, just one of many hypotheses that can be imagined to make geographical knowledge available to society. To reach this goal, however, it seems very important to have a clear idea of the contribution of geography to education, sound research in the field of geography education, a strong international cooperation and a solid action plan. For all these reasons it seems very important, and stimulating, to have the new *International Charter on Geography Education*.

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