



**REPORT**  
**SPRING SESSION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE INGOS**  
**STRASBOURG, 14-17 APRIL 2008**

This Spring Session of the Council of Europe (CoE) INGOs (International Non Governmental Organisations enjoying participatory status with the Council of Europe) took place in Strasbourg (France) on 14-17 April 2008.

The session started on Monday 14 April with a meeting of the Bureau of the Liaison Committee, a meeting of the Liaison Committee<sup>1</sup> and an extraordinary meeting of the INGO Service Administrative Council.

On Tuesday 15 April the Conference of INGOs was held. It was followed by a presentation of the activities of the Conference of INGOs in various countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Belarus) in follow-up to the NGO Regional Congress organised in Kyiv on 25-27 November 2007 and by a meeting of the Gender Equality Grouping.

On Wednesday 16 April meetings of the various Groupings (Education and Culture; European Social Charter and Social Policies; Human Rights; Health) and of the Working Group on the revision of the internal rules took place.

On Thursday 17 April a seminar on "A Child's View of Human Rights" was organised. It was followed by a meeting of the Bureau and Grouping Presidents and by a preparatory meeting for the Ministerial Conference on Media and New Communication Technologies, to be held in Reykjavik (Iceland) in May 2009.

Mental Health Europe (MHE) was represented by Fanny Muller, Information and Human Rights Officer.

## **1. Background information**

An in-depth analysis on the reorganisation of the Conference of INGOs with the view to reinforcing its visibility and effectiveness is currently taking place.

An extensive discussion already occurred during the Winter Session of the Conference of INGOs, last January.

*For more information, read:*

[http://www.mhe-sme.org/assets/files/Report\\_INGO%20Conference\\_January%202008.pdf](http://www.mhe-sme.org/assets/files/Report_INGO%20Conference_January%202008.pdf)

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<sup>1</sup> The INGO Liaison Committee, set up in 1976, liaises with the Secretariat General, and encourages INGOs to cooperate with the Council of Europe.

For more information, visit: [http://www.coe.int/t/e/ngo/public/liaison\\_committee/Summary.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.coe.int/t/e/ngo/public/liaison_committee/Summary.asp#TopOfPage)

Following up on this, the Spring Session represented an opportunity for resolving fundamental questions, in particular as regards thematic work.

During the forthcoming summer session (23-26 June 2008) the new internal rules will be presented, debated, and hopefully adopted.

This crucial debate on the future of the Conference comes at the right time, as reflected by the Ministers' Deputies reactions to the speech of Annelise Oeschger (President INGO Conference) on the activities carried out by the INGOs in 2007 and their projects for 2008. During this exchange of views organised on 12 March 2008, many of the delegations reaffirmed that the Conference of INGOs is an essential element in the institutional architecture of the Council. Pluralist democracy and good governance are, indeed, inconceivable without civil society.

*To read the speech of the President:*

[http://www.coe.int/t/e/ngo/public/AOeDelMin\\_en\\_120308.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.coe.int/t/e/ngo/public/AOeDelMin_en_120308.asp#TopOfPage)

*To read the decision of the Ministers' Deputies:*

<https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1261795&Site=CM&BackColorInternet=9999CC&BackColorIntranet=FFBB55&BackColorLogged=FFAC75>

## **2. Meeting of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe, Tuesday 15 April**

The meeting was chaired by Annelise Oeschger, President of the Conference.

### ***Opening of the meeting***

Oeschger welcomed the participants and informed them that written presentations of all candidates for the position of President and Vice-President would be posted soon on the CoE website, in the INGO section.

Public hearings of all candidates will be held in October 2008 and January 2009.

### ***Draft memorandum of partnership on relations between NGOs and local and regional authorities in CoE member states***

Jean-Marie Heydt, Vice-President of the Bureau of the Liaison Committee, presented the draft memorandum of partnership on relations between NGOs and local and regional authorities in CoE member states.

*To read the draft memorandum, visit:*

[https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=CG\(15\)10RES&Language=lanEnglish&Site=Congress&BackColorInternet=e0cee1&BackColorIntranet=e0cee1&BackColorLogged=FFC679](https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=CG(15)10RES&Language=lanEnglish&Site=Congress&BackColorInternet=e0cee1&BackColorIntranet=e0cee1&BackColorLogged=FFC679)

The project stems from the Budapest Conference on NGOs and local and regional democracy (28 February – 1 March 2003) which was co-organised by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe.

The memorandum consists of 2 paired documents:

- the proposal of memorandum,
- a proposal for a resolution of the Council of Ministers.

The project will be presented for adoption at the next plenary session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, which will take place on 27-29 May in Strasbourg.

This landmark document is the first text to be jointly adopted by the Congress and by NGOs. It will foster and encourage collaboration between representatives of the local and regional authorities and representatives of the NGOs in the various CoE member states.

In addition, the INGO Conference President will be invited for the first time to address the Congress, during the May session. Cooperation between these two pillars of the Council of Europe will be consequently enhanced and deepened.

Participants welcomed the memorandum but insisted on the need for a concrete evaluation of the work to be jointly accomplished by the Congress and the Conference of INGOs.

The project was unanimously adopted by the Conference.

### ***Cooperation between the INGO Conference and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency Platform***

Marie-Josée Schmitt, Vice-President of the European Social Charter and Social Policies Grouping, briefly summarised the salient points in the cooperation between the INGO Conference and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) Platform.

She first remembered the participants that the mandate of the newly elected FRA Director will start on 1 June 2008.

She also insisted on the fact that FRA's tasks will only consist in collecting and analysing data, giving opinions, raising the public awareness of human rights issues and cooperating with civil society.

The basis for cooperation between the INGO Conference and the Fundamental Rights Platform has been set up: the Conference of INGOs was represented at the FRA consultative meeting with civil society held in Brussels in December 2007; a FRA representative was invited at the last meeting of the Human Rights Grouping in January 2008.

The FRA and CoE mandates are geographically similar: FRA will, indeed, work with EU Member States, candidate countries, South-eastern Europe and Western Balkans, as well as other observers.

There are also institutional resemblances since FRA will both carry out joint activities with NGOs and establish a NGO Platform (Fundamental Rights Platform)<sup>2</sup>.

Marie-José Schmitt proposed that the Conference of INGOs ask the Bureau to ensure that the INGOs are represented at the FRA Platform, through:

1. a permanent representation;
2. an ad'hoc representation, depending on the issues at stakes.

This proposal was unanimously adopted by the Conference.

*To read the speech made by Marie-Josée Schmitt at the Conference:*

[http://www.coe.int/t/e/ngo/public/Fundamental\\_rights\\_agency\\_en.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.coe.int/t/e/ngo/public/Fundamental_rights_agency_en.asp#TopOfPage)

### ***Reorganisation of the structures and working methods of the Conference of INGOs***

Annelise Oeschger gave the participants an update on the reorganisation of the structures and working methods of the Conference of INGOs.

The proposed rules of procedure shall be presented 60 days before their adoption by the next Conference of INGOs (June 2008). As a consequence, the proposed rules of procedure will be posted on the CoE website on 25 April

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<sup>2</sup> The Council of Europe has established formal working relations with non governmental organisations since its foundation, as early as 1952.

(<http://www.coe.int/T/E/NGO/public/>). INGOs will be invited to submit amendments to the Secretariat.

The proposed rules of procedure will be adopted on 25 June.

The first part of the proposed rules of procedure deals with the governing bodies' reform, whereas their second part is about the reform of the thematic work.

Claude-Laurent Genty, member of the Liaison Committee, added that contrary to its current competencies, the Bureau will not be a deciding body; it will only be responsible for ensuring that the decisions are implemented.

The Standing Committee will have more political power because its President and Vice President will be elected.

The possible establishment of transversal and/or expert groups will be officially recognised.

The new rules of procedure for both the Conference and Bureau will be incorporated in one single document (two documents at present).

The new proposals will be published on line in June 2008.

### ***Update on INGO-Service***

Michel Muller, Vice Chair of INGO Service, gave an update on the INGO-Service. He informed the audience that the INGO-Service will financially support (partly) the INGO Conference.

He also unveiled the results of an INGO-Service survey on possible funding sources.

Surprisingly, 70% of the respondents are not opposed to external partnerships and/or funding (e.g. large companies).

6 respondents wished not to pay their annual fee. But on average the fee rate has risen from EUR 120 to EUR 125. Muller warmly thanked the NGOs which accepted to pay a higher fee.

In January 2008, it was decided that the INGO-Service President would be elected in June 2008.

### ***Information on the events organised around the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue***

During the 3<sup>rd</sup> CoE Summit held in Warsaw in 2005, the Head of States and Governments decided to explore more in depth the issue of intercultural dialogue. A White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue has been produced afterwards and it will be presented for adoption in May 2008.

On 8 April, an exchange of views was held in Strasbourg on the theme "*Teaching religious facts*". The INGO Conference was one of the main partners to the event. At this occasion Professor Jean-Paul Willaime, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Sorbonne, Paris (France), insisted on the need to respect the independence of religious and humanist communities. He also highlighted four possible fields of action for the Council of Europe:

1. Training teachers;
2. Developing adequate manuals and resources;
3. Re-Writing the history of religions in Europe;
4. Reflecting on the need for deontology and ethics.

A representative of the IFPCC (International Federation for Peace and Conciliation) gave a presentation on the various events held in 2007 and 2008 on the theme "*Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue*".

On 26 June, a study day on the theme "*Rule of Law and Intercultural Dialogue*" will be organised by the CoE.

***Exchange of views on the joint commemoration of the "Righteous" of Europe***

Francis Rosenstiel, member of the Liaison Committee, presented his project on creating a joint commemoration day of the "Righteous" of Europe, to highlight the enduring values of the resistant movement. He already received support from the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, and hopes to gain as well the support of the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel.

The project includes the organisation of a European meeting, where people who were involved in the resistance movement, their families and a number of eminent intellectuals would gather to debate and exchange on the spirit of resistance.

The Conference unanimously agreed on supporting the project.

***AOB – other business***

Maritchu Rall, President of the Extreme Poverty and Social Cohesion Grouping, presented a motion proposal on the current food crisis and hunger in the world. The motion proposal calls on the institutions of the Council of Europe to urge the member states to tackle the crisis and the EU to increase its funding support to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The motion was unanimously adopted.

The Conference of INGOs' next meeting will take place on **25 June 2008**.

The INGO Plenary Conference was followed by meetings of the following thematic Groupings:

- Gender Equality,
- Education and Culture,
- European Social Charter and Social Policies,
- Human Rights,
- Health.

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*Fanny Muller, June 2008*