



REPORT
WINTER SESSION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE INGOS
STRASBOURG, 21-25 JANUARY 2008

1. Background information

This Winter Session of the Council of Europe (CoE) INGOs (International Non Governmental Organisations) started with a meeting of the Bureau of the Liaison Committee and a meeting of the Liaison Committee¹ (Monday 21 January).

A plenary meeting of the Conference of INGOs took place on Tuesday 22 January, followed by meetings of the thematic Groupings on Tuesday 22 and Wednesday 23 January.

On Thursday 24 January, an introductory meeting with new INGOs enjoying participatory status was organised.

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

This new session represented a milestone in the history of the Conference of INGOs. Ms Annelise Oeschger, President of the Conference, insisted on the opportunity that was given to the Conference to have a greater impact on the future of Europe.

On the one hand, the Council of Europe's expectations towards INGOs are increasing: INGOs are being called on to contribute to a growing number of intergovernmental committees, groups of experts, campaigns and ministerial conferences.

On the other hand, INGO representatives and national NGO (Non Governmental Organisation) leaders are urging the Conference to do more to promote and monitor the main Council of Europe conventions and recommendations.

To address these new challenges, the Liaison Committee decided to launch a discussion process on the reorganisation of the INGO Conference. The aim is to make its thematic work more result-oriented and hence more directly applicable in the areas where the Conference wishes to put across the views of civil society. The Conference will also have to establish structures that will enable it to develop shared views on issues concerning the fundamental principles of the Council of Europe and disseminate its work through the Council and the Member Countries.

¹ 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

2. Meeting of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe, Tuesday 22 January

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

Opening of the meeting

Oeschger welcomed the participants.

She expressed her pleasure for having the increased powers of the INGO Conference officially recognised by the new Recommendation (2007)¹⁴ on the legal status of NGOs, which was adopted unanimously by the Committee of Ministers on 10 October 2007².

She also congratulated the 15 NGOs which received participatory status in December 2007.

The agenda of the meeting and the report of the last session were adopted.

2007 activity report of the Liaison Committee

Next speaker, Jean-Marie Heydt, Vice-President of the Liaison Committee, presented the activity report of the Liaison Committee for 2007.

To read the activity report, visit:

http://www.coe.int/t/e/ngo/public/ingo_conference/documents/2008/01_OING_Conf_2008_OJ1_en.asp#TopOfPage

The report depicts the objectives tackled by the Liaison Committee in 2007:

- Increasing the efficiency and transparency of the work of the INGO Conference;
- Supporting civil society through 4 main priorities: relations with public authorities in the Russian Federation; the action plan on democracy in Belarus; the regional congress of NGOs in Kyiv (Ukraine) on 25-27 November 2007; and the Expert Council on NGO law;
- Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue: a White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue is being drafted; a Forum on Intercultural Dialogue was organised as well as a Symposium on Social Cohesion in a Multicultural Europe;
- Vulnerable Groups: a round table on the theme "*Children - Europe's creators*" was organised, as well a World Day to overcome Extreme Poverty;
- Human Rights: a Study Day on "*Sects as a threat to Democracy and Human Rights*" was held in June 2007; an INGO declaration was adopted to support Amnesty International against attacks based on religious doctrine; the Human Rights Grouping adopted a resolution on the statement by Patriarch Alexi II of Moscow and all of Russia on homosexuality;
- Democracy: the Conference was represented at the Forum for the Future of Democracy in Sigtuna/Stockholm (Sweden) on 13-15 June 2007;
- Collaboration with the other pillars of the Council of Europe and other European institutions:
 - Committee of Ministers and intergovernmental committees: the Conference was consulted on Recommendation (2007)¹⁴ on the legal status of NGOs;
 - Congress of Local and Regional Authorities: a joint memorandum was adopted;
 - Parliamentary Assembly: in November the Standing Committee of the Assembly adopted texts on co-operation between the Assembly

² For more information, visit:

[https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=CM/Rec\(2007\)14&Language=lanEnglish&Ver=original&Site=CM&BackColorIntranet=9999CC&BackColorIntranet=FFBB55&BackColorLogged=FFAC75](https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=CM/Rec(2007)14&Language=lanEnglish&Ver=original&Site=CM&BackColorIntranet=9999CC&BackColorIntranet=FFBB55&BackColorLogged=FFAC75)

and the Conference of INGOs; the Conference is also consulted on urgent matters;

- European Union: an exchange of views with Luisella Pavan-Woolfe, Permanent Representative of the European Commission to the Council of Europe, was organised; the Conference was also actively involved in the setting up of the Fundamental Rights Platform of the European Union Agency on Fundamental Rights.

The activity report was adopted unanimously.

The participants observed one-minute silence to honour and pay tribute to the late Micheline Galabert, who was an active and dedicated member of the Gender Equality Grouping.

White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue

An update on the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue was given by Christoph Spreng, Project Manager. The adoption of the White Paper by the Committee of Ministers has been postponed to May 2008 (initially the adoption of the White Paper was scheduled for December 2007).

However, a useful Handbook on Living Values for Democracy is already available.

A study Day on the Rules of Law and Intercultural Dialogue will also be organised in June 2008.

2007 activity report of the Groupings

Jean-Claude Gonon, General Rapporteur of the Liaison Committee, presented the 2007 activity report of the thematic Groupings. He pointed out the most salient evolutions:

- INGOs are more and more represented in Steering Committees and Experts Committees. Their collaboration with the other pillars of the Council of Europe has been largely increased. Their participation in various CoE campaigns is now more visible and recurrent.
- The groupings are changing and improving their working methods: Groupings sharing common concerns and interests organised joint meetings; rationalisation is the objective, as well as flexibility and adjusting to the institutional realities of the Council of Europe; "ad hoc" working group are being set up.
- New concerns have opened new areas of work: for example the feminisation of poverty and the persistence and increase in poverty in society.

The activity report was adopted unanimously.

To read the activity report, visit:

http://www.coe.int/t/e/ngo/public/ingo_conference/documents/2008/02_OING_Conf_2007_RAPACTREG_en.asp#TopOfPage

Study on Young People in Europe

An update on the CoE study on young people in Europe was given by its coordinator. This study, launched in April 2007, aims at finding instruments for the protection of children in all European countries. It has been translated in 10 languages. 1200 answers have been collected so far.

The outcomes of the study will be presented at the next meeting of the INGO Conference in June 2008.

Statement by the President of the European Court of Human Rights

Jean-Paul Costa, President of the European Court of Human Rights, joined the meeting for an exchange of views on the collaboration between the Court and INGO Conference.

Costa reaffirmed its commitment to ensure better and closer relations between the Court and INGOs enjoying participatory status with the Council of Europe. He insisted on their privileged role both as advisor and representative of the plaintiffs. He acknowledged their awareness raising mission and active involvement in the prevention of human rights violations.

A formal exchange of views between the Court and INGOs happened two years ago and led to an evolution of the Court's communication policy: documents and proceedings related to cases are now published at an earliest stage on the Court's website, allowing INGOs to undertake more efficient and timely actions.

The European Court of Human Rights is today at a critical step of her history.

Its independence has been recently challenged by some of the Council of Europe member states and, on top of that, the Court is facing an exponential growth in the number of individual applications. This poses a serious risk for the effectiveness of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) control system.

Political recognition of this problem was expressed at the European Ministerial Conference on Human Rights (Rome, 3-4 November 2000), after which a reflection process on means of guaranteeing the continued effectiveness of the Court was launched within the Council of Europe. This process led to the adoption of Protocol N° 14 to the ECHR on 12 May 2004. However, the reform process is still pending because of the Russian Federation's refusal to sign the Protocol.

2008 will also mark the 10th Anniversary of the single, full-time Court (prior to 1 November 1998, a part-time Court and Commission were dealing with complaints). Events will be organised on this occasion.

Statement by the Director of Democratic Institutions, Directorate General of Democracy and Political Affairs

New speaker was Philip Blair, Director of Democratic Institutions - Directorate General of Democracy and Political Affairs.

Replying to a question from Cyril Ritchie, President of the Civil Society Grouping, who regretted the absence of a section specifically dedicated to the work of the INGO Conference in the 2007 Annual Report of the Council of Europe, Mr. Blair officially stated that the Conference would have its own section in the next edition.

Blair gave an overview of the major developments related to democracy which should take place in 2008:

- organisation of a NGO Forum on Education on Human Rights, to be held in October 2008;
- organisation of a Forum for the Future of Democracy;
- proposal for a new protocol on the Convention on the Participation of Citizens;
- proposal for a CoE Strategy on the Promotion of Good Governance at Local Level.

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

Patrice Collignon, member of the Liaison Committee, summarised the discussions that were held during the Liaison Committee's meeting on Monday 21 January around the reorganisation of the structures and working methods of the Conference of INGOs.

An agreement was reached on the necessary recognition of the INGO Conference as the fourth pillar of the Council of Europe, together with the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional

Authorities. The political role of the Conference should be recognised as well, and the enhancement of the Conference's working capacities will be a priority.

The following new structures have been proposed:

- The **INGO Conference**: it would retain the powers currently assigned to it and would decide as to the policy directions and stances on fundamental questions. It is foreseen that the Conference would meet during each parliamentary session.
- The **Bureau**: it would consist of 7 members elected by the INGO Conference (1 President, 3 Vice-Presidents, 2 Rapporteurs, plus the president of INGO Service). The Bureau would ensure the implementation of the decisions of the Conference of INGOs and be in charge of running the affairs of the Conference of INGOs.
- The **Standing Committee** (to replace the current Liaison Committee): it would consist of the Bureau members, the thematic Committees Chairs, and the Chairs of groups on transversal themes or groups of experts. It would also be open to the observers of the Conference of INGOs.
- **Thematic Committees**: they will continue the thematic work on issues such as Human Rights, Social Cohesion, Culture and Education, etc.

A vote on the composition of the various Thematic Committees will take place in April 2008.

For more information on the reorganisation of the Conference of INGOs, visit:

http://www.coe.int/t/e/ngo/public/memo_reorganisation_Conference_January_session_2008_REV20Dec.asp#TopOfPage

Statement by the European Commission Director of Social Protection and Integration

Jérôme Vignon, European Commission - Director of Social Protection and Integration, presented the work of the Commission in the area of social inclusion. He briefly summed up the main development and achievements of the European Strategy against Poverty and Social Exclusion, which is based on articles 136 and 137 of the Amsterdam Treaty.

At the Lisbon summit in March 2000, European Union leaders set out a new strategy, which became known as the "Lisbon Strategy", and agreed on the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which provides a framework of political coordination without legal constraints. The OMC is a flexible and decentralised method, which involves: agreeing to common objectives and a set of common indicators; preparing national strategic reports in which Member States set out how they will plan policies over an agreed period to meet the common objectives; and evaluating these strategies jointly with the European Commission and the Member States.

According to Mr. Vignon the European Strategy on Social Inclusion is solid because:

- it relies on figures and indicators;
- it benefits from the political impulse of the European Council, which is held each year;
- it has a high visibility on the European level, thanks to NGOs (two meetings between NGOs and the Commission are held each year in May and October), but its visibility on the national level should be reinforced;
- it is highly flexible: if an issue is neglected the Strategy can be reoriented;
- the issue of social inclusion is well mainstreamed in policies such as employment and social protection, and it should be further mainstreamed in housing or health policies for instance.

NGOs are involved in this process, both at an early stage (they can send comments and critics to the Commission) and at a later stage (they are sometimes associated with national governments for the drafting of the national reports on social inclusion).

In 2007 a Memorandum of Understanding on the cooperation between the EU and the Council of Europe was adopted. It embraces seven areas for action; social cohesion is one of them.

Presentation of Soli TV

Participants were told about a new media initiative: "*Soli TV*".

Soli TV aims at highlighting the work and activities of INGOs working in the field of social cohesion through the dissemination and production of films (documentaries, fictions, reportages, shows, etc.), as well as informing and raising awareness on these issues.

Soli TV should also act as a platform between INGOs, policy makers and sponsors.

It is based in Chalon-sur-Saône (France).

It will be first developed in French, and then in English.

The initiative is supported by the Council of Europe, The Regional Council of Bourgogne (France) and Nicephore cité.

For more information, visit:

<http://vidsearch.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=vids.channel&ChannelID=255090270>

Terms of reference of the Expert Council of the INGO Conference to monitor NGO legislation

The session ended with a presentation of the Expert Council on NGO law.

The Expert Council is an initiative by NGOs for NGOs in all Council of Europe member states and Belarus.

It aims to contribute to the creation of an enabling environment for NGOs throughout Europe by examining national NGO law and its implementation and promoting its compatibility with Council of Europe standards and European good practice.

The President of this Expert Council will be Cyril Ritchie, who is the current President of the Civil Society Grouping. The President will run a three-year mandate.

For more information, visit:

http://www.coe.int/t/e/ngo/public/ingo_conference/documents/2008/01_OING_Conf_2008_OJ1_en.asp#TopOfPage

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

- Extreme Poverty and Social Inclusion,
- Health,
- North-South Dialogue and Solidarity,
- Human Rights,
- Towns,
- Countryside and Environment.

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Fanny Muller, February 2008