

THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS (INGOs)

“Giving Europe a human touch”



CONFERENCE OF INGOs
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONFÉRENCE DES OING
DU CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

THE CONFERENCE OF INGOs AND THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE A pioneering civil society assembly

Organised and independent civil society makes itself heard throughout greater Europe through the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), which is made up of almost 400 INGOs holding participatory status with the Council of Europe. Operating continent-wide, bringing together federations of national and local associations in each of the 47 Council of Europe member states and in other parts of the world, and covering a very wide range of sectors (humanitarian, social, educational, legal and trade union, etc), the member INGOs combine all players and all levels of governance, both public and private.

Civil society is embodied in INGOs, intermediary bodies that are key forums for participatory democracy. Their role is vital, as they guarantee freedom of expression and association and hence also the transparency and accountability of democratic governments. They form the real link between European political institutions and 800 million citizens. Through their solidarity and voluntary efforts, the INGOs in the conference work to defend, promote and enrich the values and fundamental rights of the European democratic identity so that all individuals can enjoy them all over Europe.

The Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe is the only civil society assembly that plays an institutional role within an inter-governmental international organisation. It provides a forum for

free and innovative participation and discussion which enables committed citizens and their representative associations to make a direct contribution to building Europe. The Council of Europe deserves credit for having been the first to introduce a consultative status for INGOs, from its very inception, followed by participatory status, thereby recognising their institutional place in the new form of governance, alongside the representatives of the executive and legislative branches and local and regional authorities (“quadrilogue”).

Today, 60 years after the introduction of consultative status, the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe can draw on its achievements and modernised architecture in pursuing its goal of driving forward a major new phase in dialogue between European civil society and the public authorities and institutions. Against the background of serious global challenges to democracy, human rights and social cohesion, civil society has a major responsibility to act with courage and determination on all levels to ensure that people live together in greater harmony and that the vital social fabric is maintained, while safeguarding a united, more inclusive and more human Europe whose democratic and humanist values spread out across the world.

Jean-Marie HEYDT,
President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe



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A PARTNERSHIP BASED ON HISTORY

60 years of participatory democracy

Organised civil society working to build a united Europe lay behind the establishment of the Council of Europe, which it called for as a means of overcoming the trauma of the Second World War. In 1952, a consultative status for INGOs representing civil society was introduced at the Council of Europe “to intensify the active participation of all citizens in conducting public affairs”. Relations between the INGOs and the Council of Europe have grown ever closer since then.

From the mid-1970s, the INGOs holding consultative status with the Council of Europe began organising and structuring their representation. They came together in a plenary conference and set up a Liaison Committee and thematic groupings. The establishment of a genuine partnership with the Council of Europe marked their shared political will to involve civil society in the process.

This partnership was reflected in the strengthening of the INGOs’ consultative status, which became a participatory status in 2003. The INGOs therefore contribute actively to the decision-making process, the preparation of European legal instruments and their implementation. They help to expand the co-operation between the Council of Europe and the voluntary sector in its member states, making sure that its various organs respond to the aspirations of all Europeans.

“The important role to be played by the Liaison Committee as the democratically elected representative body of all of the INGOs enjoying participatory status with the Council of Europe, and by the INGO thematic groupings as their collective voice and, thus, of millions of European citizens, working in each of the fields represented by them” has been underlined by the Committee of Ministers [Res (2003)8]. It is also recognised by all the organs of the Council of Europe.

The term “Conference of INGOs” has been used since 2005 for all the INGOs holding participatory status gathered together in plenary session. The Conference is recognised as one of the four pillars of the Council of Europe, in which it represents civil society alongside the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, forming the “quadrilogue” of the Organisation. Following a major internal reform completed in 2012, the architecture of the Conference was modernised, in line with the other pillars of the Organisation.

PARTICIPATORY STATUS FOR INGOS

Participatory status is granted by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe after consultation of the political organs, including, in particular, the Conference of INGOs, and with the agreement of the Committee of Ministers.

The INGOs concerned must be:

> representative in a field of competence or action of the Council of Europe

- > present in a significant number of European countries
- > able to develop co-operation between players
- > capable of contributing actively to Council of Europe deliberations and activities
- > able to make known the work of the Council of Europe among European citizens

A KEY PARTNER IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

An innovative force in the “quadrilogue”

The Conference of INGOs is the institution which represents the INGOs holding participatory status with the Council of Europe. As such, it determines the general measures to be taken to organise its participation in the “quadrilogue”, ensures that the participatory arrangements function smoothly and seeks to assert the political role of civil society within the Council of Europe and its member states. It sets policy guidelines and adopts activity programmes.

The Conference of INGOs holds plenary sessions at Council of Europe headquarters in Strasbourg twice a year, during the ordinary sessions of the Parliamentary Assembly. It engages in dialogue with the representatives of the institutions and organs of the Council of Europe and adopts opinions and recommendations on the substantive issues about which it is consulted by the Committee of Ministers, and of its own initiative. Its deliberative work is structured by its decision-making bodies, the Bureau and the Standing Committee, and is based on the regular activities of its thematic bodies, the committees and experts.

The Bureau, the executive body of the Conference of INGOs, implements its decisions and its internal and external communication policy. It comprises the president, three vice-presidents and four rapporteurs elected by the plenary conference for a three-year term, renewable once. The INGOs’ financial management body is also represented.

The Standing Committee (former Liaison Committee) co-ordinates and ensures consistency between the work of the conference and its thematic committees. It also ensures compliance with the major policy lines of the Conference and has a consultative and proposal-making role vis-à-vis the Conference and its Bureau. It comprises the members of the Bureau, the elected chairs and vice-chairs of the thematic committees and the experts of the Conference of INGOs.

The thematic committees are responsible for the Conference of INGOs’ work in the priority fields of “human rights”, “democracy, social cohesion and global challenges” and “education and culture”, while “gender equality” cuts across all the committees and the relevant activities are co-ordinated by an expert elected at the plenary session. The committees meet during the plenary sessions and work in synergy with the committees of the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. They engage in substantive discussions and draw up positions on major topical issues within their fields which are approved at the plenary sessions. They are supported by specialised working groups.

MAIN PRIORITIES OF THE CONFERENCE OF INGOs

- > promoting the fundamental rights and values championed by the Council of Europe
- > democracy, the rule of law, human rights, in particular gender equality, including combating violence against women
- > solidarity in the context of global interdependence, in particular, Europe’s solidarity with its neighbours in the South within the Euro-Mediterranean region
- > social cohesion, the fight against poverty and social exclusion
- > sustainable development, education and culture
- > NGO law
- > participatory democracy, in particular NGO participation in decision-making processes
- > living together and dialogue in diverse societies



Opinions sought by the Secretary General and Council of Europe bodies

- > Annual opinion on the granting and withdrawal of participatory status for INGOs
- > Opinion on Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1893(2009) on the future of the European Centre for Global Interdependence and Solidarity (North-South Centre) and the proposal for a new statutory resolution on the North-South Centre [CONF/SC(2010)1] of 28 April 2010
- > Opinion on Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1908 (2010) on lobbying in a democratic society (European Code of good conduct on lobbying) of 6 October 2010

Consult the official documents of the Conference of INGOs (Opinions, Recommendations, Resolutions):

> <http://www.coe.int/T/NGO/>

PIONEERING STANDARD-SETTING

Grassroots action for an active and socially committed European civil society

The Conference of INGOs is committed to supporting and strengthening civil society, which is the bedrock of participatory democracy throughout Europe, in particular in countries in the process of democratic transition and also in Belarus. To that end, it carries out standard-setting activities, monitoring of the implementation of Council of Europe standards and instruments in the member states and co-operation activities, for which it receives support from the Organisation and enjoys the partnership of many players in civil society and European, national and international institutions. It provides civil society and the political authorities with pioneering instruments for improving democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

It regularly holds regional congresses, thematic conferences, training seminars and study days for its members and national NGOs on various political or social issues relating to human rights, both at regional and European level and both at Council of Europe headquarters and in the member states, in particular in eastern Europe and in other neighbouring states, especially in the southern Mediterranean. It also provides support for many initiatives by its member INGOs and other civil society players at European and national level. Since 2011, it has held a major annual Civil Society Forum.

It has set up an Expert Council on NGO Law, which since 2008 has monitored the implementation of the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the legal status of non-governmental organisations in Europe (CM/Rec(2007)14). The Expert Council seeks to create 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.

It has adopted a Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process, which since 2009 has defined at European level a set of general principles for a constructive relationship between the authorities and NGOs and has been recognised by the Committee of Ministers as "a reference document for the Council of Europe, and as a basis for a possible further development of the framework for the empowerment of citizens to be involved in conducting public affairs in European countries" (Committee of Ministers Declaration of 21 October 2009).

In 2012, it launched a Toolkit for Conducting Intercultural Dialogue as a means of addressing the current build-up of unresolved issues in matters of diversity and migration, which have led to an intolerable level of human rights infringements in European countries. The toolkit serves as a practical guide for conducting dialogue where the need is greatest.

The Conference of INGOs also takes part in and contributes to the activities of the steering committees and committees of government experts. This means it is involved in the preparation of Council of Europe conventions such as the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, to give only the most recent example. It also takes part in and contributes actively to the committees of the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, on which it is represented, as well as various initiatives and events organised by the relevant institutions and those of the European Union to which it is invited. In particular, it is a member of the governing bodies of the Council of Europe's North-South Centre, where the "quadrilogue" is particularly effective.

MAJOR INITIATIVES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Standard-setting, monitoring and co-operation activities

- > The Expert Council on NGO Law, set up in January 2008
- > The Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process, adopted in October 2009
- > The Toolkit for Conducting Intercultural Dialogue launched in June 2012
- > Co-operation agreement between the Conference of INGOs and the North-South Centre, signed on 27 January 2010
- > Three-year framework programme on "Reinforcing civil society and civic participation in the Russian Federation" (2008-2011)

Recent events

- > European Biodiversity Day during the plenary session in Strasbourg from 26 to 28 April 2010
- > Round Table on "The burqa: symbol of oppression or affirmation of identity" during the plenary session in Strasbourg from 21 to 24 June 2010
- > Forum on Universality of Human Rights, in co-operation with the European Wergeland Centre in Oslo on 21 and 22 October 2010
- > Civil Society Forum on "New multicultural challenges: how can NGOs play their part?" in Istanbul on 24 and 25 March 2011
- > Civil Society Forum on "Living Together: Combining diversity and freedom in 21st-century Europe" in Strasbourg on 13 and 14 November 2011
- > Civil Society Debate: Inclusive Democracy, as part of the World Forum for Democracy in Strasbourg on 7 October 2012

BRIEF BACKGROUND

First stage: consultative status

1951: First meetings with INGOs

1972: Adoption of first rules for consultative status for NGOs by the Committee of Ministers

1976: Intensification of co-operation with INGOs. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Georg Kahn-Ackermann, calls on them to organise. Establishment of a Liaison Committee.

1979: Provision of a secretariat, meeting rooms and interpretation facilities

1991: INGOs internally reorganised in thematic groupings

Second stage: participatory status

2003: Establishment of participatory status for INGOs with a view to facilitating co-operation between them and the steering committees, committees of experts and subsidiary bodies of the Council of Europe

2003: Simultaneous establishment of a partnership status for national NGOs

Third stage: political recognition and modernisation

2005: The plenary conference becomes the Conference of INGOs

2005: At the 3rd Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Warsaw, the President of the Conference of INGOs is invited to speak in that capacity for the first time

2005: The Committee of Ministers rules that the Conference of INGOs may send representatives to the steering committees and committees of experts, like the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

2008-2012: First and second major internal reform of the Rules of Procedure and architecture of the Conference of INGOs



A RECOGNISED CONTRIBUTION TO THE FOUNDATIONS OF EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

“The Council of Europe is playing an irreplaceable role in the building of a single Europe. Its intergovernmental co-operation method is enriched by a prominent parliamentary dimension – so well represented by your Assembly – as well as by a regional and local dimension in the form of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, not forgetting civil society, represented through the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations. Thus, the huge diversity of our continent is represented within a single institution. No organisation can claim to be more representative of all Europeans.”

Micheline CALMY-REY, Chair of the Committee Ministers,
Address to the Parliamentary Assembly,
25 January 2010

The Parliamentary Assembly noted “with satisfaction that the work programme of the Conference of INGOs contains several major themes which are closely related to the priorities of the Assembly. On this basis, it is convinced that additional steps should be taken with a view to an enhanced co-operation aimed at further developing citizen participation and dialogue with civil society.”

Resolution on Co-operation between
the Parliamentary Assembly and the Conference of INGOs,
Resolution 1589 (2007)1

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Conference of INGOs concluded a memorandum on partnership between local and regional authorities and NGOs in Council of Europe member states to promote “progressive and appropriate procedures for citizen participation between elections”.

Memorandum on partnership between local and regional authorities and
NGOs in Council of Europe member states, May 2008

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe confirmed the role of the Conference of INGOs in the Organisation’s “quadrilogue” in declaring that “Developing – with the help of the Conference of the International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) – interaction with civil society, whose action on the ground we applaud, will also remain one of our priorities.”

Madrid Declaration, May 2009,
(CM(2009)50 final 12 May 2009)

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