



CONFERENCE OF INGOs
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONFERENCE DES OING DU
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE CONF/HR(2016)RAPACT

2016 ACTIVITY REPORT

Mindful of the need for balance between the specificity of the thematic committees and the kind of cross-cutting approach that is part and parcel of a robust civil society, we began our start-of-year meeting by giving the floor to the chairs of the “education and culture” and “democracy, social cohesion and global challenges” committees.

Achieving inclusiveness and the broad aims set out in the action plans of the Human Rights Committee (protection of rights and non-discrimination) and the Conference (participation in the decision-making process) were the focus of our committee’s work throughout 2016.

Rights protection:

- Human rights defenders in eastern Europe continue to face considerable challenges. The situation in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Azerbaijan, the Russian Federation, Poland and Hungary is troubling. Since the outlook remains bleak, the committee will submit a recommendation to member states during the 2017 summer session.
- The situation in Turkey is, to say the least, unfavourable to civil society and local NGO officials are in a vulnerable position. There is little room for manoeuvre at present owing to the pressure being exerted by the authorities. Extensive discussions with senior officials from Turkish NGOs provided an opportunity to find out about one another’s needs and methods of operation and, most importantly, to get to know one another so as to build trust and maintain relations over the long term.
- The Conference is endeavouring to do away with any hierarchy between civil and social rights. Human rights, however, also include the Oviedo Convention focusing on the challenges arising from emerging technologies and biotechnologies. Upholding rights requires us to be alert to possible new threats. Not wishing to ignore this area of human rights, Ms Lwoff from the Council of Europe’s Intergovernmental Bioethics Committee has sought to sensitise our committee to these issues and we have begun attending Bioethics Committee meetings on a regular basis (DH-BIO).
- Increasingly, technological developments are prompting citizens to assert individual rights as opposed to general ones. This clash is particularly evident in start- and end-of-life issues, hence the Conference’s decision to ask its members about surrogacy, the question being whether the right of individuals to make free choices about their own bodies is more

important than the prohibition against instrumentalising or commodifying the human body. The majority of civil society organisations are still undecided on this issue.

- The statement made by the Vice-Chair Iamvi Totsi at the European Youth Centre on World Human Rights Day testified to the ongoing concern regarding the protection and promotion of rights and the role of young people in our work.

Non-discrimination:

Discrimination can take many forms and is often insidious. In 2016, therefore, the committee tackled the issue from several angles:

- An exchange of views with Ms Bodil Høyer Damsgaard who spoke about how social workers are trained and what they do, with particular reference to Finland.
- The annual celebrations to mark World Day to Overcome Extreme Poverty (17 October), in which three delegations took part.
- Since discrimination predominantly affects women, we sought to take stock of the role, if any, assigned to them within religions.
- The visit by the Vice-Chair Iamvi Totsi to a Greek port where refugees were arriving provided an opportunity to physically take stock of the situation and to form at least some idea of the extent of the discrimination and inequality suffered by these people who were experiencing enough hardship as it was.

Decision-making:

- Regular participation in the work of the CDDH is seen as a significant contribution to the decision-making process. Civil society gets to have a say and the results produced permeate both the case law and the recommendations of other Council of Europe bodies.

Inclusive societies:

- The annual Exchanges on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue afford an opportunity to discuss the process of building a more inclusive society, in which the major philosophical and religious movements can play a part. In 2016, the event focused specifically on education as a means of preventing radicalisation.
- The Conference's participation in the World Forum for Democracy showed once again the importance of a cross-cutting approach if we are to move towards a more inclusive society. The presentation on the training course, which received INGO Conference accreditation in 2015, provided a practical example of civil society action in this area.
- The continuing efforts of the working group against hate speech, from a complementary perspective, are an indication of the committee's total commitment to this major cause, which is garnering considerable attention at the Council of Europe.

At the nexus between rights, discrimination and inclusion:

- Child protection: the decline of social services and pressure from migration are putting children in a particularly vulnerable position. In partnership with the relevant Council of Europe bodies, our committee has therefore set up a dedicated working group.
- Digital technology is a tool for emancipation as much as an instrument of exclusion and discrimination. Being skilled at using the internet is no guard against discrimination and inequality via digital technology. An ad hoc working group has been set up to explore this topic.

To conclude:

Civil society has a clear awareness of the changes under way in many areas. These changes take place over a long period and pose a threat to the protection of the rights that attach unconditionally to all human beings.

With the philosopher Jürgen Habermas fearful that democracy's days may be numbered, and a senior manager at Google hopeful that privacy will soon come to be seen as a mere parenthesis in history, civil society is waking up to the magnitude of the task that lies before it and what needs to be achieved. The Conference, which is in good working order, has a powerful stimulus effect to which the various Council of Europe bodies regularly pay tribute.

It is with clear-sightedness and determination, therefore, that the Human Rights Committee bids farewell to 2016 and looks forward to 2017.

Michel Aguilar
Chair of the Human Rights Committee