

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 385 (2015)¹ Fostering active citizenship by building partnerships with civil society

1. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are voluntary self-governing bodies established to pursue non-profit-making objectives through means that are consistent with the requirements of a democratic society.

2. The Council of Europe has a long history of interacting with civil society organisations and working together with international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), which contribute their specialised expertise to its work. Since 1952, INGOs have had a “consultative status” at the Council of Europe and, currently, over 300 INGOs have “participatory status”, that is they are particular representatives in the field(s) of their competences, they are active at the European level and share the Council of Europe’s aims and contribute actively to its work. They form the Conference of International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs) (hereafter “the Conference”), their main decision-making body.

3. The Conference sets policy lines, defines the programme of activities and also organises its participation in the so-called “quadrilogue”, which is the working frame for four bodies of the Council of Europe: the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (hereafter “the Congress”), and the Conference.

4. The Congress and the Conference have been in co-operation since 2003 to develop the relations between NGOs and local and regional authorities in Council of Europe member States. A significant step in this co-operation was the adoption, by the Congress, of Resolution 165 (2003) and Recommendation 139 (2003) on NGOs and local and regional democracy, which called on local and regional authorities to build and foster partnerships with NGOs.

5. Fostering citizen participation has also been on the agenda of the Congress frequently during the last two decades. Several reports, resolutions and recommendations were adopted on this topic with regard to different social groups and different aspects of the issue, including resolutions on women’s and youth participation, on responsible citizenship and on intergenerational co-operation.

6. It is against this background that the Conference of INGOs was invited to prepare a Code of Good Practice on Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process (hereafter “the Code”), which was adopted by the Conference on 1 October 2009. The Parliamentary Assembly and the

Congress supported it and the Committee of Ministers recognised its importance as a reference document for the Council of Europe.

7. The Code is a tool for dialogue and collaboration between public authorities and civil society. Its principal objective is the definition of a set of principles and guidelines for NGO participation in decision-making processes that are to be implemented at local, regional and national level in Council of Europe member States. It provides practitioners with a matrix of Civil Participation which sets out clearly the steps of the political decision-making process and their connection with levels of participation, illustrating the representative decision-making structure and facilitating its comprehension.

8. The rapporteur set up a reflection group in 2013 consisting of representatives of the Congress, the INGO Conference and experts, to review and assess the experiences from the countries where the Code and related operating systems, processes and tools have been used since 2009, and to discuss how the implementation of the Code could be improved, its visibility and accessibility increased and how it could be made more local government-friendly.

9. Taking note of the rapporteur’s explanatory memorandum, which reflects the discussions of the reflection group and the assessment of the experts, the Congress notes that the Code:

a. has the potential to serve as a tool for building a bridge between participatory practices in civil society and representative democracy at local and regional levels of government;

b. requires the support and encouragement of all local and regional authorities for partnerships to be built at the local and regional levels;

c. would benefit from some minor modifications even if it is too early for a revision of the text in light of the fact that only five years have gone by since its adoption.

10. In the light of the above the Congress:

a. calls on the local and regional authorities of the Council of Europe member States to communicate the Code by spreading information on its background, its content and how it can be used in interaction between civil society and local and regional authorities, and to establish trust and mutual relationships with NGOs, acknowledging the Code as an instrument of dialogue with civil society organisations for improved and sustainable political decisions;

b. encourages local and regional authorities to lobby their governments to sign and ratify in the near future the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207), if they have not yet done so;

c. invites the Conference of INGOs to review the Code with a view to making it more accessible for use by local and regional authorities.

11. The Congress particularly draws the attention of the Conference of INGOs to the need to:

a. to set up a follow-up committee with a mandate limited to the review of the Code, including members representing the Congress and the Conference of INGOs with two co-chairs; one representing civil society organisations and the other representing the Congress;

b. review the title, the language and presentation of the Code to make it not only more comprehensible from a local authority point of view and easier to read but also to provide balance between the contributions and responsibilities of the NGOs and local and regional authorities;

c. create incentives for the development of increased participation and co-creation, with a view to stimulating local and regional examples of positive collaboration with NGOs through events such as meetings using the participatory model, which can serve as an inspiration to implement the Code;

d. replace the term “partnership” used in the appended matrix with “co-creation” in order to make it clear and to emphasise that partnership underlies the entire process;

e. include newer forms of collaborative relations in the list of NGO definitions, complementing the Code with descriptions and facts about how active citizenship is strongly influenced by a vibrant civil society;

f. draft tutorials that explain and complement the current Code to make it accessible for users in decision making and public management;

g. review the current Promotion and Implementation Strategy for the Code in order to update it, to facilitate the assessment of future action needs and to consider collecting examples that can be used by others for a more effective implementation of the Code;

h. ensure that the work on the translation of the current Code into the languages of all member States and the development of a version for the visually impaired continues.

1. Debated and adopted by the Congress on 20 October 2015, 1st Sitting (see Document [CG/2015\(29\)6FINAL](#), explanatory memorandum), rapporteur: Raymond Svensson, Sweden (L, ILDG).