

**Stock-taking by the President of the Council of Europe Conference of INGOs,  
Annelise Oeschger, at the opening of the plenary session on 28 January 2009**

**1. Some developments**

My predecessor, Daniel Zielinski, left us a fine legacy: the transformation of consultative status for INGOs, which dated from 1952, into participatory status in 2003. All we had to do was to put that legacy to good use. The climate was excellent, the Council of Europe was preparing its third Summit of Heads of State and Government, to be held in Warsaw in May 2005, and our aim was to ensure that the Presidency of the Conference of INGOs could address the Summit, after merely being present at the second Summit, in 1997, and being completely absent from the first one, in 1993. This was achieved, and the Conference of INGOs thus gained political recognition as one of the pillars of the Council of Europe, alongside the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress. But this position serves no purpose if we do not have the means to live up to the ambitions vested in it. With the invaluable support of the Directorate General of Political Affairs, we therefore became involved in budgetary negotiations and obtained a substantial increase in resources for the Conference of INGOs, in several stages.

The extraordinary meeting of the Liaison Committee held in Warsaw on the occasion of the Summit paved the way for greater geographical diversity in the representation of INGOs. This diversity was one of the prerequisites for the relevance of the work of the Conference of INGOs. Building on this, we launched the series of regional NGO congresses. We also stepped up our activities in Russia, and this led to the establishment of the framework programme for the strengthening of the civil society and civic participation in Russia.

In December 2005 the Committee of Ministers adopted Resolution Res(2005)47 on committees and subordinate bodies, in which it decided that representatives of the Conference of INGOs should sit on subordinate bodies, like representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly and Congress. This formally consolidated our status. We then needed to reorganise ourselves and our working methods in order to live up to these new expectations. We completed this work in June. The financial resources of the Congress of INGOs must now again be adjusted accordingly.

In October 2007 the Committee of Ministers adopted recommendation CM/Rec(2007)14 on the legal status of non-governmental organisations in Europe, which we helped to draft. We were duty-bound to make a substantial contribution to its implementation and, in January 2008, we set up the Expert Council on NGO Law, our first monitoring body.

The Conference of INGOs sits on the bodies managing a growing number of Council of Europe programmes and activities, including the Advisory Board of the Forum for the Future of Democracy, where we are currently drawing up a code of good practice on civil participation. As on other occasions, I wanted at all costs to prevent this work from being done by our select Strasbourg circle or by far-flung experts. We found a means of taking advantage of scientific expertise and practical experience throughout Europe, and I

welcome the regional consultations that have taken place or are yet to take place in Stockholm, Kiev, Penza, Istanbul and Madrid.

This brief overview shows that the Conference of INGOs is a driving force for new developments.

## **2. Multi-annual framework programme 2006 - 2008**

Three years ago we adopted a multi-annual framework programme for 2006 to 2008. If we look at it today, we see that we have achieved the general objectives we set ourselves and have made progress in our five chosen areas. I should like to thank all those who were particularly involved: the members of the Bureau, including the members of the former Liaison Committee, the Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the groupings, the specially appointed officials and the outstanding Civil Society/NGO Division team. I should also like to thank the free spirits among you, those who took the initiative and undertook work, sometimes visibly and in other cases behind the scenes.

When it comes to assessing our activities, I see three major shortcomings:

- We had a plan for a "social Europe" that we wanted to carry through in conjunction with the European Union and representatives of INGOs in Brussels. We have not made much progress on this front. This is all the more serious as the need to ensure the participation of the most vulnerable members of our society and the indivisibility of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights is not always unconditionally recognised. I hope that the European Year for combating Poverty and Social Exclusion announced by the European Union for 2010, in which the Council of Europe should also become involved, will provide an opportunity to forge ahead.

- Closer co-operation with the North-South Centre and NGOs operating in African countries is the second area in which we achieved less than we had planned. I know, however, that this is one of the priorities of "Europe and global challenges" transversal group.

- Lastly, we imagine that we would progress much faster with communication between representatives of INGOs working on the same issues. Here again, however, those in charge of the new committees and transversal groups are set, along with the secretariat, to quicken the pace of work.

## **3. The potential of the Council of Europe Conference of INGOs**

The Council of Europe Conference of INGOs is a unique forum. It brings together, within an international organisation, INGOs operating in a vast variety of fields. Over the years, we have encountered civil servants, parliamentarians, local and regional councillors and ambassadors who have supported our desire to contribute, in our own way, to the achievement of the aim of the Council of Europe, which is to achieve "a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and

principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress" (Article 1 of the Council of Europe Statute).

What is striking in the formulation of this aim is the focus on unity - this is a vision of solidarity for Europe, based on human dignity, that was expressed 60 years ago. The Conference of INGOs has the privilege of being able to strive to achieve this without having to take account of the interests of politicians and geopolitical and economic power considerations. For a start, this allows us to draw attention objectively to shortcomings and excesses and put forward unbiased proposals. An example is our June 2007 study day on "Sects and cults - a challenge to democracy and human rights", the main conclusion of which was that it is unacceptable for organisations to infringe fundamental freedoms in order to protect their undemocratic practices.

Secondly, this independence gives us the freedom, within the organisation, to support individuals and groups that the other pillars are hard put to receive, such as representatives of Belarusian civil society, whom we have been receiving for two years now, during our sessions, people living in extreme poverty and inhabitants of regions at war who are seeking a platform from which to put forward joint proposals. Our duty is of course not only to receive them but to ensure that their appeals are heard and taken into account by decision-making bodies within and outside the organisation.

The bases are there, our plans are ambitious and we have our work cut out.

It may not be true of other organisations, but in the case of the Council of Europe I know from experience that what we obtain depends on our efforts. That is why I am pleased that the leadership of our committees and transversal groups is in such capable hands. I would call on all the INGOs to support these efforts by putting even more in to their involvement with the Council of Europe, for example by seeking out experts in their networks in all the member states or approaching governments to persuade them to increase their contributions to the Council of Europe or make voluntary contributions. I know that this may seem a pipe dream at this point in time, but who other than us can show that we are facing challenges that transcend national borders and that this organisation based on European solidarity, with its legal instruments and unique supervisory systems, is more important than ever?

#### **4. So where do I come into this?**

Over the five years of my two terms of office - the first was for two years and the second for three - I pursued an approach focused on integration, based on the little that definitely united us, but in the knowledge that this little was everything: the dignity of each human being. I tried, in my own way, to defend this dignity - sometimes, I admit, a little naïvely, using language that initially irritated some of our members for it was somewhat reminiscent of the comments of the cleaning ladies we bump into here or the unemployed men I see in the block of flats where I live. And, unlike the little girl in the fairy tale, I preferred to tell the emperor he was wearing no clothes before he faced the crowd. You supported me there, and I thank you for that. I am deeply convinced - and I have often

found it to be the case - that every man and woman has within himself or herself the answers to the questions that trouble us. Dividing the world and societies in our minds and our acts into rigid categories is one more obstacle that we have a habit of putting in our way, whereas what we need to do is to draw people together. Let us have the courage to meet our fellow human beings, whoever they may be, as living beings endowed with the capacity to understand, communicate and change direction, and we shall build a future of peace and freedom.

The future does not depend on the past: it depends on human beings.