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Speech by Anna RURKA, President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe, at the Lisbon Forum on 25 November 2019

President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Ambassador of Spain, President of the Chamber of Regions of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Excellencies, Elected Representatives, civil society representatives, media representatives, ladies and gentlemen,

I should like to begin by thanking the North-South Centre for bringing us all here together as the Council of Europe quadrilogue.

Under the 2030 Agenda, sustainable development encompasses four interlinked dimensions – legal, economic, environmental and social – which are all equally important. These dimensions form an integral part of democracy, which is based on the rule of law and human rights and is brought to life by committed citizens who are able to form critical opinions, in complete independence.

The European Convention on Human Rights, as supplemented by the revised European Social Charter, shows that human rights can only be achieved in full against a background of social justice. Greater account should be taken of the case law of the Court and the decisions and conclusions of the European Committee of Social Rights when member states draw up measures for implementing the sustainable development goals (SDGs). The collective complaints system, with which rights may be asserted for marginalised groups, shows where systemic problems persist. Above all, however, it is an outstanding mechanism for dialogue between member states and NGOs.

The Council of Europe is addressing the rise in global challenges. At political and legal level, by opening up the Council of Europe's conventions and treaties to the countries of the northern and southern hemispheres and inviting the countries in the South to ratify them, the Committee of Ministers gives political impetus for expanding the common legal area in fields as varied as counterfeit medicines involving threats to public health, taxation, cybercrime and data protection. These countries' interest in and accession to the various treaties are an indicator of the relevance of the standards drawn up by the Council of Europe and a success factor for the entire system based on conventions and multilateralism. However, we are well aware that ratification is only a first step. Implementation of the treaties demands technical know-how and assistance that take account of the context and resources of the countries concerned. The North-South Centre plays a unique role here by assisting the countries in the Council of Europe's neighbourhood with the introduction of standards relating to human rights, the rule of law and democracy. It could expand its capacity and its geographical reach by establishing working relations with all states which have ratified Council of Europe treaties in the various areas.

In terms of the challenges involving global governance, we believe there is a need to improve the consistency of the legal framework, the decisions taken and the legal opinions issued by intergovernmental institutions. Given my position and the players I represent – civil society – I believe it is vital to give consideration to how these decisions and opinions are drawn up and received. Greater consistency in them would enhance both the credibility of intergovernmental organisations among citizens and also trust in public institutions. We know how closely

complex decision-making processes are tied up with communication. However, communication is not just a matter of publicity, presentation or the final stage in a decision. Engagement of civil society and citizens with political decision-making is vital for boosting the democratic legitimacy of public institutions and their decisions and establishing mutual trust. There again, the Council of Europe showed the way in this area by adopting guidelines for civil participation in political decision-making in 2017. Subsequently, in October 2019, the Conference of INGOs and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities both adopted the revised version of the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation. Civil participation contributes to the achievement of sustainable development goal 16 aimed at promoting peaceful and inclusive societies and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Multilateral institutions necessarily operate “far” from the public. They are therefore most exposed to criticisms regarding democratic deficits. As a forum involving the co-existence of two mechanisms for civil society participation – the participatory status granted to INGOs on which the Conference of INGOs is based and the co-management system involving government representatives and youth organisations – the Council of Europe sets an example that is unique worldwide.

In their diversity, INGOs are fully fledged democratic players. Committee of Ministers Recommendation 2007(14) and Resolution 2016(3) stress that “the development and reinforcement of this co-operation between INGOs and the Committee of Ministers and its subsidiary bodies, as well as with the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe has led to the ‘Quadrilogue’, which is, within the Council of Europe, an expression of democratic pluralism and an essential element for the further development of a citizens’ Europe”. We must keep on working as close as possible to the actual situation of those on the ground to support democratic deliberation and participation as foundations for democracy.

The Conference of INGOs works on issues that are directly related to the sustainable development goals, including 1) no poverty, 3) good health and well-being, 4) quality education, 5) gender equality, 10) reducing inequality, 11) sustainable cities and communities, 13) climate action, 16) peace, justice and strong institutions, and 17) partnerships for the goals. We will have the opportunity to go into this in greater depth in the workshop being held by the Conference of INGOs this afternoon.

Last year, on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and in co-operation with several members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, we began a project on women’s role in conflict resolution. Women are the main civilian victims of conflicts, they are often powerless to prevent them, they are very rarely involved in negotiations and they are confined to a marginal role in post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. Post-conflict situations and peace processes are therefore on our agenda for the near future.

If the ecosystem of governance and development is considered not only in terms of structures but also of political processes based on interaction and the interplay of influences between the parties involved, the Conference of INGOs is a forum where coalitions and alliances between INGOs can be established concerning transnational issues (such as migration). Like this entire ecosystem of global governance, the civil society sector is also undergoing a process of transformation, in some cases under the impact of restrictive measures and, in others, under the impetus of public mobilisation itself. We are striving to ensure and promote a constructive environment for the development of civil society in all its diversity and in compliance with Council of Europe standards. In this connection, in February 2020, we are going to hold an event on World NGO Day at which we will analyse the changes in the civil society sector while taking account of its transnational dimension.

In conclusion, we need stronger links and greater interplay between the activities conducted by the Council of Europe and the Sustainable Development Goals. Through the quadrilogue, the Council of Europe can make a contribution which takes on board the interests of various

types of players represented in the global system, including civil society, from the outset. This contribution enables the Council of Europe to give a voice to certain groups which are largely or totally excluded from political debate – something by which I set particularly great store.

Thank you for your attention