

EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S CONFERENCE OF INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS



April 2021

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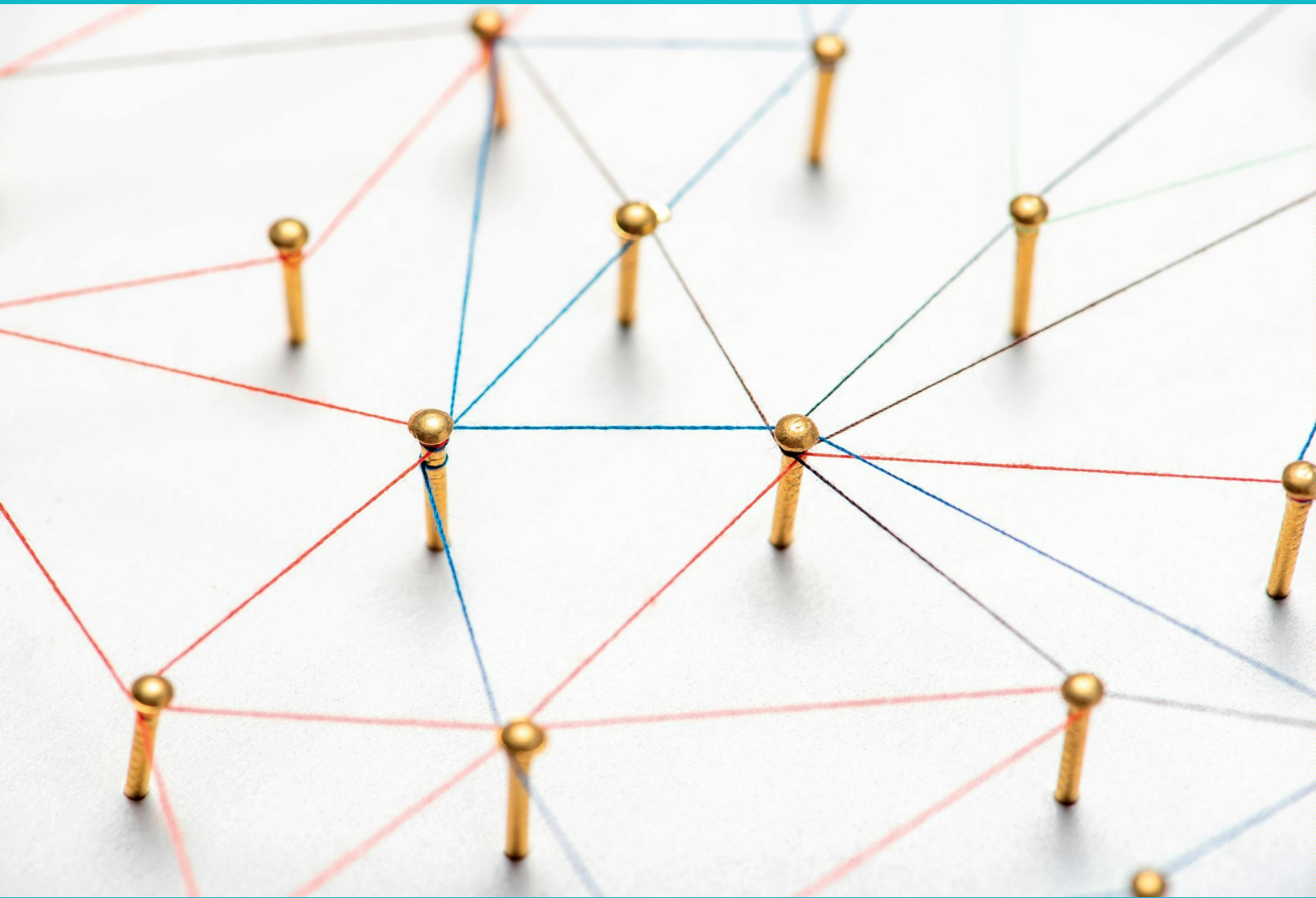
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List of acronyms and abbreviations

CAHENF	Ad hoc Committee for the Rights of the Child
CDDG	European Committee on Democracy and Governance
CM	Committee of Ministers
Congress	Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
DG	Directorate General
DG2	Directorate General of Democracy
DIO	Directorate of Internal Oversight
DPA	Directorate of Political Affairs
GRECO	Group of States against Corruption
HRD	Human Rights Defenders
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
ToC	Theory of Change
SG	Secretary General
UN	United Nations
The Conference	Conference of INGOs
WFD	World Forum for Democracy

Executive summary

The 2020 Work Programme of the Directorate of Internal Oversight of the Council of Europe included an evaluation of the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations. The evaluation aimed to assess the added value, relevance and effectiveness of the Conference's support to International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) in providing a voice for civil society within the Council of Europe between 2016, when the revision of the participatory status entered into force, and 2019. Its stated objectives in the Programme and Budget (2016-2017 and 2018-2019) and the Action Plan (2018-2021) along with the Committee of Ministers' resolution CM/Res(2016)3 were taken into account. The evaluation team was comprised of external consultants under the supervision of the Directorate of Internal Oversight.

The evaluation was based on a qualitative and quantitative methodology, mobilising different methods of collecting information: six case studies, a benchmarking study, an online questionnaire, remote observation of two sessions of the Conference, an in-depth documentary analysis and 57 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (member states, the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the Council of Europe Secretariat, INGOs, the Conference's statutory bodies, the Expert Council and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs)). COVID-19 travel restrictions did not allow any physical meeting nor direct observation in Strasbourg.

The evaluation finds that the Conference is a unique civil society consultation mechanism whose institutional role remains insufficiently defined. The lack of an official mission statement weakens its strategic orientation and generates different levels of expectations with regard to the Conference's relationship with the Council of Europe and even more so with national NGOs.

The Conference faces the challenge of remaining flexible to respond to its members' concerns as well as to urgent issues, while reinforcing its strategic orientation vis-à-vis the Council of Europe so as to better align its ambitions to available financial and human resources. In the short term, its strategic orientation could be improved by a less ambitious action plan, better taking into account the available human and financial resources, by a clearer alignment with the Council of Europe's biennial Programme and Budget and by defining performance indicators to better assess the contribution of the Conference to the Council of Europe.

In terms of relevance, the scope of the Conference is viewed positively by its members, as well as the opportunity it offers to connect with the different entities of the Council of Europe, but the challenge of involving more INGOs in its work is considerable.

As for the Conference's effectiveness, the Conference's biannual sessions and the Conference's representation in the Council of Europe bodies have not substantially contributed to the objective of "strengthening interactions between civil society and the Council of Europe" in quantitative terms, as the number of INGOs participating in the sessions and the number of delegates in the Council of Europe bodies has not significantly increased over the last four years. In qualitative terms, however, it is recognised that the level of engagement and expertise of Conference's delegates has improved in the same period. The Committee of Ministers and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities show an evolution of their co-operation with the Conference as a complement to their bilateral relations with INGOs.

The quality and diversity of its membership is influenced by both the Conference's level of activity and the Council of Europe's procedure for granting participatory status. The Conference is responsible for taking appropriate measures aimed at mobilising its members, including those who are inactive, strengthening its attractiveness to new INGOs and the diversity of representatives appointed by its member organisations. Other development opportunities lie in improving the Council of Europe's selection procedure, possibly prioritising the geographical and/or thematic mandate of the applicant organisations, while considering withdrawing the participatory status of the most inactive members.

The evaluation finds that each year the number of events and activities delivered by the Conference exceed the expected targets and that there has been an increase in the total number of the Conference's activities over the last four years. Therefore, it appears that the Conference's contribution to strengthening civil society and Council of Europe interactions resides in its capacity to carry out a variety of activities addressing concerns and topics that are relevant for both civil society and the Council of Europe. Case studies show in particular that these interactions are deepened by the Conference's ability to foster a dialogue between INGOs and different stakeholders within the Council of Europe that would not exist otherwise.

In terms of thematic contributions, the Conference has been able to provide timely and substantive inputs to the Council of Europe action plans on various topics, like gender, disabilities and education, among others.

In terms of added value, the Conference plays the role of a catalyst providing the Council of Europe with civil society's perspectives on emerging themes and feeding its decision-making process with field knowledge and thematic expertise of its members. Through the Expert Council on NGO Law, the Conference also contributes to the work of the Council of Europe with high-quality inputs on the evolution of the legal environment in which I/NGOs operate throughout the European continent. As such, the Conference supplements the bilateral co-operation between the Council of Europe and the INGOs and NGOs.

Through the Conference, the INGOs can structure a common and more legitimate contribution to the Council of Europe's work. The Conference's inputs offer supplementary contributions to the Council of Europe from a wide range of INGOs (thematic mandate, size, working methods, etc.). However, the Conference relies on a limited number of members. Its added value as a collective platform for its members remains difficult to demonstrate because the Conference relies on a limited number of members which constrains its capacities. A large proportion of its members are not aware of the possibilities the Conference can offer, ignore the Conference's added value while the most prominent members invest in the Conference only for certain topics and less so in the general activities of the Conference.

The main recommendations of the report highlight that it is crucial for the Council of Europe to maintain an adequate level of support to the Conference in order to maintain the quality of its activities, the level of engagement and diversity of its members, while deepening the Conference's synergies with other stakeholders, such as national NGOs. The recommendations of the report are addressed to the Conference, the Secretary General, the Committee of Ministers, the Directorate General of Democracy and other stakeholders within the Council of Europe.



1. The Conference of INGOs and the evaluation

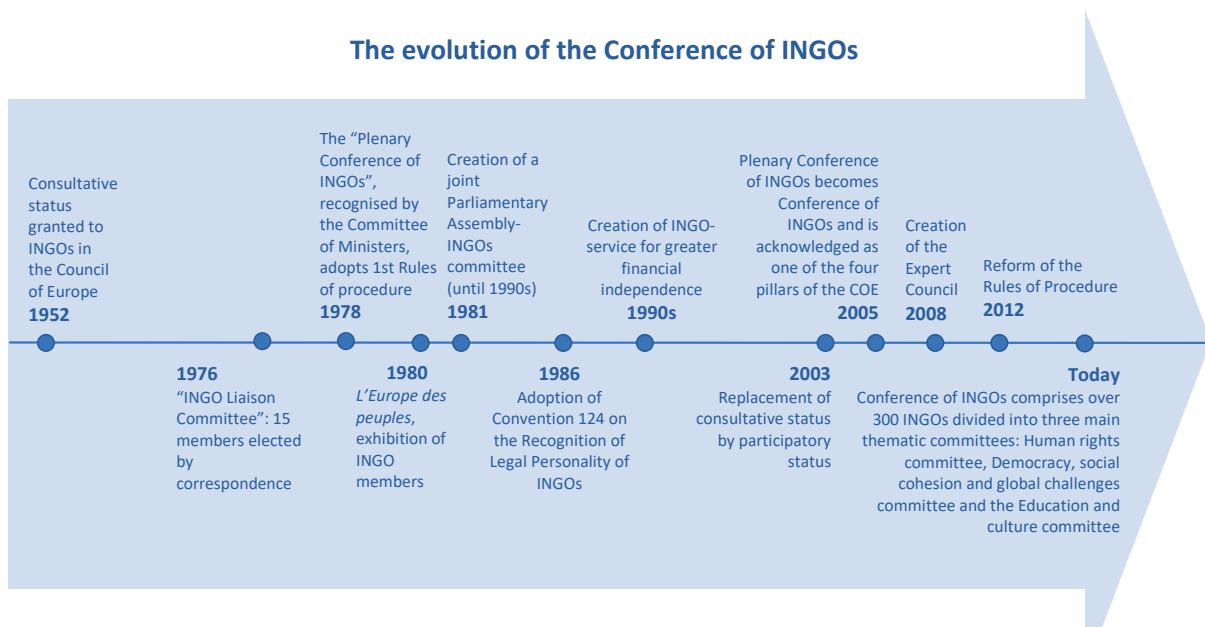
1.1. Presentation of the Conference of INGOs

1.1.1. History

The Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations is the representative body of all International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) with participatory status within the Council of Europe. The Conference's aim is to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, with a focus on participation by civil society in the decision-making process at local, national and European level. The Conference aims to facilitate INGOs' participation and access to the Committee of Ministers and its subsidiary bodies, as well as the Secretary General, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (Congress), the European Court of Human Rights (the Court) and the Commissioner for Human Rights.

In 1952, a few years after its creation, the Council of Europe granted consultative status to INGOs. In 1972 the INGOs started electing their representatives to what was called at that time the INGO Liaison Committee. A secretariat for the Liaison Committee was established in 1979 within the Directorate of Political Affairs (DPA). Established in 1995, the French INGO Service Association (known as "INGO Service") has been partly funded by voluntary financial contributions from INGOs, as well as from the Council of Europe budget in order to finance the Conference's collective activities. Co-operation with civil society gained momentum at the Council of Europe in 2003 when the status of INGOs was upgraded from consultative to participatory.¹ The conditions to apply for this status have been further clarified by a resolution adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2016.²

The graph below sketches out the main steps of the Conference's evolution:



1. At the time of the consultative status, INGOs were allowed to organise themselves so to have a common representation with the different bodies of the Council of Europe. Since 2003, the participatory status aims at fostering INGOs' collaboration with the steering committees, expert committees and the "subsidiary bodies" of the Council of Europe. The INGOs holding participatory status can contribute to the decision-making process, the preparation of European legal instruments and their implementation.
2. Resolution CM/Res(2016)3 on the Participatory status for international non-governmental organisations with the Council of Europe.

1.1.2. Status within the Council of Europe

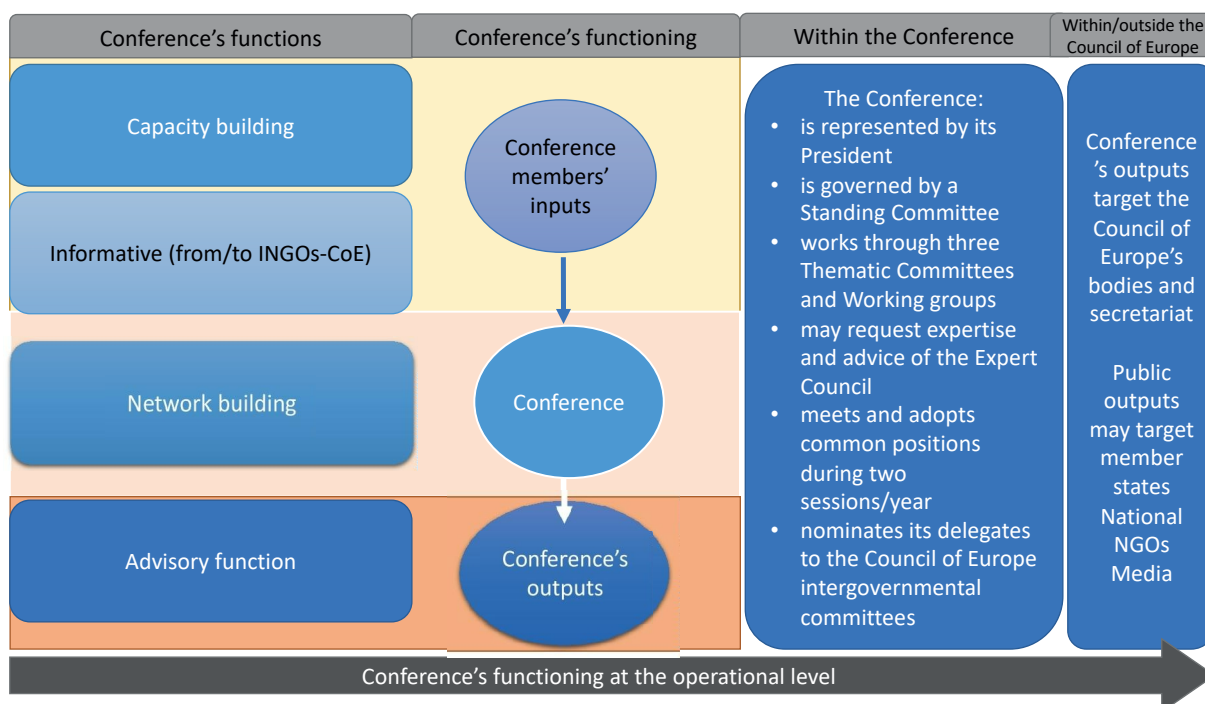
The Council of Europe recognises the importance of INGOs to European society and democracy. Thus, it provides them with the opportunity to acquire participatory status.

Resolution CM/Res(2016)3, adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2016, sets out the rules for granting participatory status to INGOs and the conditions to be met. The INGOs with participatory status constitute the Conference.³ At the time of writing this report, 314 INGOs enjoy participatory status.⁴ The same resolution mentions the co-operation with INGOs as part of the “Quadrilogue”⁵ “which is an expression of democratic pluralism and an essential element for the further development of an inclusive Europe”⁶

Held in 2019, the Warsaw Conference fed into the Council of Europe reflections on civil society. The statements urged member states to pay more attention to civil society, including via the Conference:

Member states are interested in more frequent, regular and open exchanges among the [Committee of Ministers] (and its rapporteur groups), civil society and NGOs. This could be done through [an] ... increased number of exchanges of views with the Conference’s President and requests that the Conference’s opinion be taken into account during the selection process of Commissioner for Human Rights and Secretary General candidates.⁷

The decision adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 2019 in Helsinki recognises the key role of civil society and expresses its “deep concern about the trend of a shrinking civic space, not only for civil society actors, but also for democracy and stability in Europe”⁸ Member states commit to a meaningful and transparent dialogue with independent civil society at all levels and “accept the principles of the rule of law and of the enjoyment by all persons within our jurisdiction of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as (they) collaborate sincerely and effectively in the realisation of the aim of the Council of Europe.”⁹



3. Resolution CM/Res(2016)3 on the Participatory status for international non-governmental organisations with the Council of Europe.

4. Internal database up to date as of October 2020, provided by the Council of Europe Secretariat.

5. Conference of INGOs constitutes civil society’s pillar in the Council of Europe “quadrilogue” with the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. Source available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/the-conference-of-ingos-in-a-nutshell>.

6. Resolution CM/Res(2016)3 on the Participatory status for international non-governmental organisations with the Council of Europe.

7. Warsaw Conference on “The Role and Position of NGOs in the Council of Europe” (22 March 2019) DD(2019)427.

8. Decisions on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe, adopted by the 129th session of the Committee of Ministers, 17th May 2019, CM/Del/Dec(2019)129/2.

9. Declaration by the Committee of Ministers on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Council of Europe, Decl(17/05/2019).

The Conference aims to represent INGOs with participatory status at the Council of Europe and to promote participatory democracy. The Conference gathers twice a year during the ordinary sessions, meets with members of the PACE and other relevant representatives of member states and Council of Europe bodies, and organises events related to Council of Europe priorities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, one webinar was organised in June 2020 while the October 2020 session was held in an online format. The Conference also produced a series of videos highlighting INGOs' responses and interventions delivered throughout Europe during the crisis. The Conference's functions are featured in the figure above.

1.1.3. Governance/functioning and financing

The Conference decides on policy lines and defines and adopts action programmes. The Conference is chaired by its President, whom it elects every three years.¹⁰ The Conference **sessions** are held twice a year in Strasbourg. During these sessions, the INGOs discuss important topics for the Council of Europe and reflect on the means to improve participative democracy. For example, during the session in June 2020, topics included were the role of civil society in strengthening participative democracy post-pandemic and the lessons that could be drawn from the current COVID-19 crisis in the field of education.

On the margins of the sessions, three **thematic committees** prepare contributions on democracy, social cohesion and global challenges, education and culture, and human rights. The thematic committees develop draft declarations and recommendations for other Council of Europe entities to be discussed and adopted by the Conference or its Standing Committee.

The **Standing Committee** is the decision-making body of the Conference. It adopts the draft recommendations and resolutions and is in charge of the co-ordination between the Conference and its committees. The Standing Committee facilitates the collaboration of INGOs with other Council of Europe partners.

The Bureau of the Conference prepares the agenda for the Conference and the Standing Committee meetings and implements their decisions. The Bureau is also in charge of ensuring that all the INGOs constituting the Conference are equally involved in the work of the Conference.

Created in 2008 by the Conference, the **Expert Council on NGO Law** is made up of 15 members with extensive NGO experience and knowledge of human rights standards. It operates under the Conference's authority to carry out thematic and country studies on specific aspects of NGO legislation and their implementation, in particular the European Convention on Human Rights and the Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)14 on the legal status of NGOs in the 47 Council of Europe member states and Belarus. The Conference, as well as groups of national NGOs, national authorities and Council of Europe bodies, can refer issues to the Expert Council, which can also take them up on their own initiative. The Expert Council can receive information from national and international NGOs, public authorities and international and intergovernmental institutions, like the Council of Europe.

The **Directorate General of Democracy (DG2)** develops activities under the Democratic Governance programme. It facilitates democratic dialogue, including through the World Forum for Democracy and the Conference, with the aim of guaranteeing public freedoms and to foster the enabling environment conducive to meaningful participation by civil society.¹¹

The budget of the Conference is financed mainly by member state voluntary contributions.¹² In addition to the financial contribution of the Council of Europe, the **INGO Service** receives voluntary financial contributions from the INGOs and distributes available resources to the Conference.

1.1.4. Key activities over the last mandate and the Theory of Change

The Conference has been working on several topics included in its Action Plan 2018-2021: civil society participation, protection of human rights defenders, freedom of expression, European cultural identity, freedom of association and the rule of law, among others.

In 2019, the Conference adopted the Recommendation on equality between women and men¹³ calling on member states to respect and defend this essential human rights achievement. The Conference has also

10. The current president is Anna Rurka, who is in her second mandate, due to end in April 2021.

11. Council of Europe Programme and Budget 2020-2021, p. 104.

12. In 2018-2019, the annual budget of the Conference of INGOs amounted to 166 600 EUR (including both voluntary contributions and contribution from the Ordinary Budget of the Council of Europe).

13. Recommendation on Equality between Women and Men, [CONF/PLE\(2019\)REC3 \(coe.int\)](#).

launched a “Youth Delegates Programme” with the support of the INGO Service: six youth delegates have been selected in 2019 and contribute to the work of the Conference.

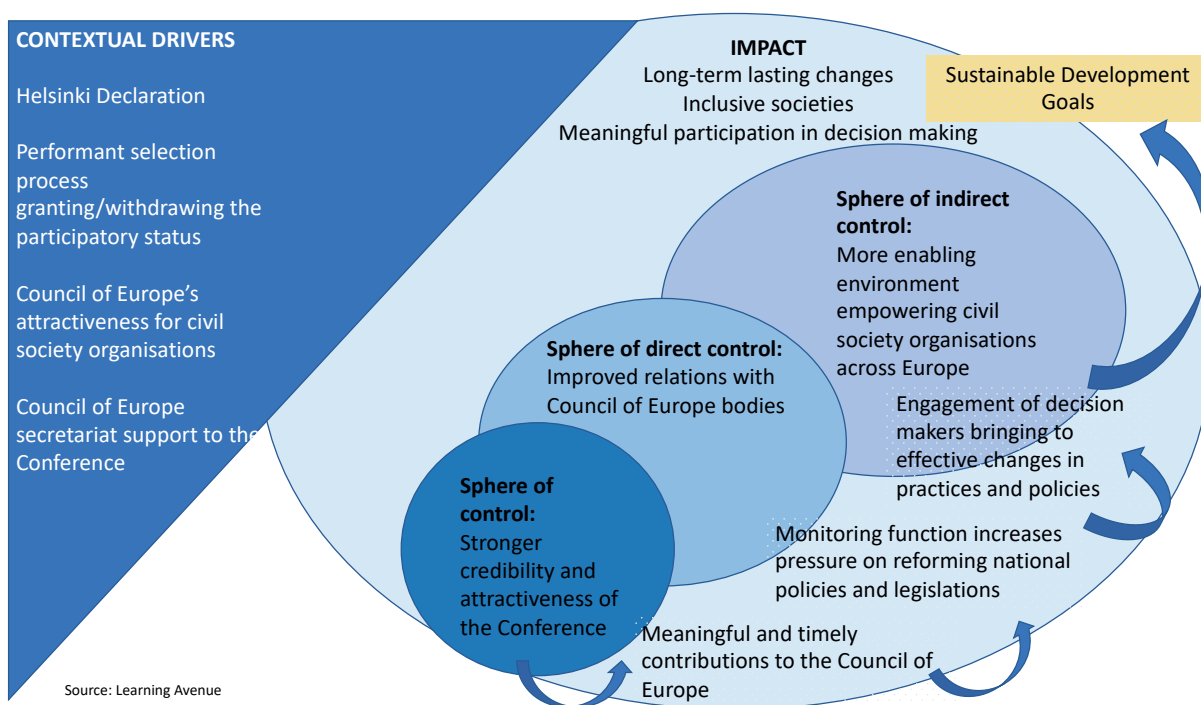
The Conference nominates delegates who regularly attend meetings of 33 of the Council of Europe steering committees and drafting groups, providing joint contributions agreed by the INGOs. The Conference has been active in particular within the European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG), the Educational Policy and Practice Steering Committee (EPSC) and the Steering Committee on Culture, Heritage and Landscape (CDCPP).

Since 2015, the Conference has regularly carried out country visits to member states in order to gain a better understanding of the co-operation between decision makers and NGOs as well as their participation in the public decision-making process at the national/local level.

The Theory of Change (ToC) for the evaluation of the Conference

The ToC outlined here has been prepared during the inception phase and refined for the final report. It was conceived as an evaluation tool enabling the evaluation team to confirm or disconfirm the assumptions throughout the evaluation process.

The ToC explores the underlying causal links of the Conference’s interventions at both the conceptual and operational level. The Conference is analysed as a mechanism of the Council of Europe, integrated into the complex institutional system. The Conference is also analysed with regard to the activities it delivers.



However, due to the fact that the Conference has no formalised mandate within the Council of Europe, the Conference’s intervention logic has been inferred from the Conference’s Action Plan 2018-2021 and the Organisation’s Programme and Budget documents between 2016 and 2020. The action plan is conceived by the Conference itself with no formal endorsement by the Secretariat nor member states and its visibility thus remains limited. This degree of autonomy also means that its scope and objectives can considerably change from one elective mandate to another.

2. Scope and methodology of the evaluation

2.1. The rationale of the evaluation

In accordance with its Work Programme 2020-2021,¹⁴ the Directorate of Internal Oversight (DIO) commissioned an evaluation of the Conference.

The evaluation explored three key questions:

- a. **The effectiveness of the Conference** – To what extent has the work of the Conference been effective?
- b. **The relevance of the Conference** – How relevant are the objectives of the Conference?
- c. **The added value of the Conference** – What is the added value of the interventions of the Conference in achieving the stated objectives?

2.2. The methodology

The evaluation methodology relied on a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Below is a detailed description of the evaluation methodology.

- ▶ **An inception phase** consisting of a set of 10 remote interviews with representatives of the Conference governing bodies and Council of Europe staff, as well as a first analysis of the available documents. This phase resulted in an inception report, including the evaluation matrix (see [Annex 2](#)) composed of evaluation questions and assessment criteria.
- ▶ **An in-depth documentary analysis** based on an extensive list of reports from the Conference, the Council of Europe, statements, resolutions of the Committee of Ministers, PACE and Congress, and the results of the online survey conducted by the Conference on the participation of I/NGOs in the work of the Council of Europe. Internal notes/reports from Council of Europe staff were used, as well as draft documents, such as the Draft Rules of Procedure of the Conference. The complete list of documents is in [Annex 3](#).
- ▶ **A remote participation** in the webinars organised by the Conference in June 2020, as well as in the online session of the Conference in October 2020.
- ▶ **An online questionnaire** sent to all INGOs with participatory status (see [Annex 4](#)). The questionnaire was agreed and tested internally with the Conference President. It consisted of 15 key questions, some closed (using a drop-down list and scoring) and some allowing for open comments. The questionnaire was distributed in French and English, revolving around the three main evaluation criteria: the Conference's effectiveness, relevance and added value. The previous survey to international and national NGOs, carried out by the DG2 in 2019, was taken into consideration when preparing the survey's questions to avoid repetition. The questionnaire was administered in line with Council of Europe Data Protection Rules. The questionnaire was administered by the evaluation team who sent the online questionnaire to 314 recipients, using the database shared by DG2. The questionnaire was open from 3 July to 9 September 2020. It was answered by 70 members out of 314 INGOs (22%, which is a reasonable response rate for this type of survey).

¹⁴ [Work Programme 2020-2021](#) of the Directorate of Internal Oversight.

- ▶ **A benchmarking of civil society mechanisms**, established by intergovernmental organisations such as the OSCE, the OECD and the UN (see [Annex 5](#)).
 - The benchmarking study was based on a sample of nine international organisations of different sizes. In order to seek new insights, the organisations studied intervene in several fields (cultural, educational, associative, trade union, etc.), without necessarily having a mandate similar to that of the Council of Europe. The study proceeded through three main stages: 1) selection of elements of analysis subject to benchmarking; 2) identification of mechanisms or organisational bodies that are part of the sample, in consultation with the Council of Europe; and 3) analysis of the processes and tools of the networks/organisational bodies studied.
 - The data collection took place from August to September 2020 based on 10 structured interviews supplemented by a documentary analysis (mainly annual reports, activity reports, newsletters and websites of organisations). The study analysed the operating modalities, tools and practices of the different mechanisms and organisational bodies on the basis of 12 pre-identified benchmarking criteria (see Chapter 2).
 - The sample of mechanisms is not intended to be representative of all organisations in each sector. The evaluation team selected the tools they considered to be the most relevant to the needs of the Council of Europe and the scenario developed. The tools presented in the study should not be seen as the only ones relevant at the level of each mechanism but rather as the tool on which sufficient information was available. The nature of the information collected may also depend on the function and responsibilities of the interviewee, given that only one person was interviewed per mechanism.
- ▶ **57 semi-structured interviews** with The Private Office of the Secretary General, the Council of Europe Secretariat, the PACE Secretariat, Permanent Representations, the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Conference governing bodies, including some INGOs and members of the Expert Council. Due to the ongoing pandemic, all the interviews were held via video conference or by telephone from July to September 2020. Three national NGOs were interviewed in relation to their participation in one of the activities covered by the case studies (see list of interviewees in [Annex 6](#)).
- ▶ **Eight national and international NGOs** (with no participatory status) covering a vast range of domains and various geographical areas were contacted by e-mail to explore their understanding of the Conference and possible relevance for the Conference membership.¹⁵ Six of them answered (see list of interviewees in [Annex 6](#)). Three national NGOs were interviewed for the case studies.
- ▶ **Six case studies** explored the different ways of internal functioning of the Conference, as well as its complex interactions within the Council of Europe.¹⁶ The objects of the case studies were: the Conference's Code of Conduct, Council of Europe Guidelines on civil participation in decision making, the Conference's country visit to Italy, the Conference's country visit to Romania, the two Conference side events¹⁷ (April 2019, on the action of NGOs in the system of assistance and support to migrants and refugees, and June 2017, on women's mobilisation in Europe) and the Human Rights Committee of the Conference. The case studies have been included in the evaluation analysis with a few examples included in boxes in Chapter 4 (Findings), while others are included in [Annex 7](#).

All evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations were compared with the outcomes of the benchmarking ([Annex 5](#)).

2.3. Limitations of the evaluation and mitigating actions

The evaluation matrix – as validated by the DIO – included the three key evaluation questions as stipulated in the Terms of Reference ([Annex 1](#)), complemented with 12 sub-questions and criteria to ensure that they were more explicit. The evaluation team tried to comply as much as possible with the evaluation matrix, but a number of methodological obstacles occurred:

- ▶ The three evaluation questions overlapped, and a significant number of assessment criteria had to be refined. This might be due to the difficulty for the interviewees solicited during the scoping interviews to be explicit about their expectations for the Conference towards its members and the Council of Europe.

15. The selected sample of national and international NGOs was made on the basis of their recent engagement in the Organisation's activities (e.g. serving on steering committees, participating in conferences).

16. The selection of the six case studies is based on information collected through the scoping interviews and the documentary analysis. The selection criteria are the following: cases that are perceived as one of the tangible outcomes of the Conference and likely to foster the visibility of the Conference; involvement of different stakeholders including national NGOs and member states; reflecting the diversity of the Conference's Action plan 2018-2021; geographic zones and themes.

17. [Side-events – Information note for the attention of the Conference of INGOs](#).

- ▶ The evaluation of the relevance of the Conference depended on the familiarity of the Council of Europe bodies and their staff with its action plan. Few interviewees had a clear-cut understanding and knowledge of this plan, and most acknowledged they had a partial view of the Conference's activities and therefore of its capacity to respond to the priorities of the Council of Europe.
- ▶ The relevance was furthermore difficult to evaluate in the absence of a mission statement of the Conference. The action plan is designed by the Conference, which operates with autonomy within the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe's Programme and Budget mentions the Conference but does not stipulate the objectives assigned specifically to the Conference, as opposed to INGOs in general, neither does it indicate the expected activities to be delivered by the Conference.
- ▶ The evaluation of effectiveness was particularly challenging to conduct. The Conference's action plans lack baselines and targets associated with the indicators that are listed in the plans. The evaluators cross-analysed the Council of Europe and the Conference activities' reports in order to extract reliable data and formulate evidence-based analysis of the effectiveness.
- ▶ The online questionnaire provided numerical data, complementary to the 2019 survey on civil participation. However, the overall response rate to the online questionnaire was quite low (22%), despite sending several reminders. The survey period might have been an obstacle due to the summer holidays of many INGO staff members.

In addition, the evaluation was conducted during the adoption of the reform on rules and procedures of the Conference which were adopted in December 2020. The evaluation team strived to take into account the rationale of the draft reform and was continuously informed about the progress of the reflection and debates around the reform of rules and procedures. Many discussions with the Council of Europe and the Conference revolved around the likely adoption of these rules and procedures, with the risk of overshadowing other issues on the management of the Conference.

Finally, because of the ongoing pandemic it was not possible to conduct a direct observation of the Conference session in Strasbourg that may have offered a broader perspective. Remote observation was ensured at the June and October meetings of the Conference, providing a useful, although limited, amount of information compared to what might have been gained by attending physical meetings. This was counterbalanced by extensive interviews with the Conference members and stakeholders.

The evaluation report explains the reasons why some evaluation questions could not be fully addressed and, in such cases, evaluators refrained from providing findings. This approach was taken to prevent over-interpretation of anecdotal data or misinterpretation.



3. Evaluation findings

3.1. To what extent has the work of the Conference of INGOs been effective?

1. The Conference operates under the Democratic and Governance programme of the Council of Europe. Through this administrative arrangement, the Conference is included in the Council of Europe Programme and Budget. The evaluation focused on the two Programmes and Budgets covering the years 2016-2017 and 2018-2019 to assess the Conference's effectiveness. The overall objective of the Democratic and Governance Programme is that "different actors play a positive role at all levels of governance and in conflict resolution". Under this general objective, the expected result implicitly referring to the Conference is that "civil society interaction with the Council of Europe has been strengthened". The expected result in the Programme and Budget 2018-2019 is broader as it also includes the fact that INGOs and civil society in member states are expected to "have benefited from an improved and more enabling environment". As explained in the methodology and the Theory of Change in particular, this is more about long-term changes outside the direct control/influence of the Conference and that could be captured only through a social impact assessment that is beyond the scope of this evaluation.

2. The table below presents the indicators detailed by the Programme and Budget and evidence that could be found through the analysis of several sources: four Conference activity reports (2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019), INGOs' four-yearly reports to the Council of Europe, the Conference's action plans (2015-2018 and 2018-2021) and interviews.

3. The number of INGOs attending the Conference's biannual sessions and the number/level of participation of the Conference members in the Council of Europe bodies are the main two indicators that did not change substantially from one Programme and Budget to the other. Between the periods 2016-2017 and 2018-2019, the content and nature of the three other indicators changed substantially.¹⁸ This complicates the evaluation but reflects a welcome effort made by the DG2 Secretariat to better quantify the Conference's performance, taking into account the nature of its activities.

¹⁸ From the Programme and Budget 2016-2017 to the Programme and Budget 2018-2019, one indicator remained quantitative, another changed from quantitative to qualitative, and the three others changed from qualitative to quantitative.

Table 1 – Follow-up of the main indicators of the Programmes and Budgets and the Action Plan

Expected result			
2016-2017: "Civil society interaction with the Council of Europe has been strengthened" 2018-2019: "INGOs and civil society in member states have benefited from an improved and more enabling environment and have strengthened their interaction with the Council of Europe"			
Period	Indicators	Level of achievement	Comments
2016-2017	Number of INGOs attending biannual Conference sessions (target: from 90 to 120).	115 INGOs registered on average in the biannual sessions, according to the participants' lists.	It is higher than the baseline mentioning 90 INGOs while it is slightly under the expected target of 120. However, this can be lower as data available are based on registered organisations, not attendance lists.
2018-2019	Number of INGOs attending Conference biannual sessions on average (from 90 to 120).	118 INGOs registered on average in the biannual sessions, according to the participants' lists. However, this can be lower as we based our data on registered organisations, not attendance lists.	The small increase in the average number of INGOs attending the sessions is reflected in the baseline for the current Programme and Budget 2020-2021, that is, 120 INGOs (instead of 90 between 2016 and 2019).
2016-2017	Number of INGOs' representatives having participated in intergovernmental committees (target: 100).	32 delegates representing the Conference in the Council of Europe bodies.	This is far from the initial target, but the relevance of this quantitative indicator is questionable (see below). The indicator was replaced by a qualitative indicator in the following Programme and Budget (see below).
2018-2019	Evidence of increased participation in relevant Council of Europe bodies.	From 32 to 33 delegates representing the Conference in the Council of Europe bodies.	There is no quantitative evidence of increased participation. However, indications were found that the quality of the participation improved.
2016-2017	Number of civil society representatives and Conference having participated in the WFD (400).	Data not available. The indicator is not specifically targeting the Conference as it applies to INGOs in general, including those who do not enjoy participatory status.	Qualitative evidence included in the Conference's activity reports show its involvement ahead of (in the steering committee for the WFD) and during the WFD as well as in its Youth programme.
2016-2017	INGOs have contributed actively to the implementation of Council of Europe action plans.	Indications found in the Conference's activity reports. Confirmed by the Secretary General (speech at the Conference session in October 2020).	This indicator was dropped in the following Programme and Budget.
2016-2017	Availability of timely and substantive inputs from CS to the Council of Europe.	Indications found in the Conference's activity reports: delegates' contributions, statements, recommendations, reports/publications.	This indicator was dropped in the following Programme and Budget.
2018-2019	Number of assistance activities (5)	Five country visits between 2018 and 2019; seven in the previous period (2016-2017). Seven events in 2016; five in 2017; nine in 2018; 10 in 2019.	The two indicators were considered together as it is difficult to distinguish activities and events in the Conference's activity reports. Increase in the number of events over the four years.
2018-2019	Number of events (4)		
2018-2019	Number of opinions (3)	Between 2018 and 2019, five opinions ¹⁹ issued from the Expert Council instead of six over the two year period. The average of three opinions per year is achieved when taking into account the whole period covered by the evaluation (2016-2019).	The expected target is fully achieved. Besides the Expert Council opinions, the total number of the Conference's written opinions is four to five times higher.

19. These include: one country report, one study, two compendiums and one review of international standards.

The analysis of the achievements presented in the table is featured in the findings below.

Finding 1: The number of INGOs attending the biannual sessions increased in 2016-2017 and remained the same in 2018-2019, slightly below the target of 120.

4. The number of INGOs attending the biannual sessions increased in 2016-2017, but then remained stable in 2018-2019, slightly below the target of 120. Some 115 were registered on average in the first period (2016-2017) and 118 in the second period (2018-2019).²⁰ These numbers could be even lower as these data come from the list of registered INGOs, not attendance lists. In addition, the participants are counted without differentiating between INGOs who are members of the Conference and those who are not but who take part in the session on an ad hoc basis. For this evaluation, all INGOs registered were counted, including those who are not members of the Conference, as their participation may be considered to be the Conference's contribution to the expected result of "strengthening interactions between civil society and the Council of Europe".

5. The INGOs' reports to the Council of Europe are another important, though partial, source of information.²¹ According to the 269 reports received for the period 2016-2019, between 107 and 160 INGOs declared that they had attended the sessions at least once in the period 2016-2019.²² Their declarations confirm, as found in the registration lists, that around one third of the Conference members attend sessions/events. However, the INGOs' reports do not provide data on the frequency of their participation in the sessions (just once, more than once, always), making it difficult for the DG2 to properly monitor INGOs' participation in the sessions, not in absolute terms but rather in terms of frequency.

6. In conclusion, the small difference between the average number of INGOs attending the sessions between the two periods, considering all the limitations of the sources available, does not allow us to conclude that the Conference has significantly strengthened civil society interactions with the Council of Europe, if relying on the quantitative Programme and Budget indicator for the Expected Result.

7. The most important data revealed by the INGOs' reports are that 28% of the INGOs declared not having attended any session nor events at the Council of Europe between 2016 and 2019. Around 33% of all the 269 INGOs reporting to the Council of Europe mention the lack of resources and the lack of capacity as issues and potential impediments to their participation in the Conference's events and/or sessions.²³ This said, the specific cases of INGOs never attending sessions and events have not been investigated so far by the Conference, nor by the Council of Europe. This sort of assessment may be considered in order to identify possible support that may be needed for increasing INGOs' participation. Some initiatives have already been undertaken, like those to reinforce youth participation, such as the "Young Delegates Programme";²⁴ and the "Speed Dating Forum" event held in 2016,²⁵ both supported by the INGO Service. In other cases, the assessment could reveal organisations that are not active or not willing to participate co-operate anymore, whose participatory status could be eventually withdrawn by the Secretary General.

8. The current pandemic highlights the Conference's flexibility and agility to accommodate social distancing and remediate the aftermath of the crisis affecting the INGOs (dwindling public funding, emergence of new barriers to people's freedom, etc.). The situation led the Conference to opt for alternative ways of working,

20. The sources used here are the INGOs' four-yearly reports to the Council of Europe and the participants' lists provided by the Council of Europe. The Conference's activity reports were not useful at this stage as they did not report the number of participants in the sessions. Also note that the number of INGOs represented in the sessions does not correspond to the number of participants in the sessions that is higher (between 200 and 300) because there may be more than one representative per organisation.

21. Every four years, the INGOs enjoying participatory status at the Conference must submit a report on their activity with the Council of Europe. A total of 269 reports were submitted for the period of 2016-2019.

22. The difference depends on whether we include 53 non-responses that, according to the format of the report, could be interpreted in both opposite ways.

23. Other reasons mentioned by the INGOs are the lack of information (1%: a new governing team is put in place and is unaware of the procedure, or information is sent too late); the lack of an invitation (1%: a few INGOs reported never having received invitations or meetings' agenda); the lack of relevance of their participation (2%: a few INGOs reported that the Conference's activity agenda was not topical for their organisation).

24. Six young delegates from 2019 were selected and contributed to the work of the Conference. They proposed to introduce a "Youth check" tool, which, through a few questions, will make it possible to check whether the texts voted on and the publications of the Conference of INGOs take the youth dimension into account. The 2020 youth delegate programme is underway – the call was launched in early 2020. See the Conference's Activity Report 2019 for more information.

25. Organised with the support of the INGO Service and the European Commission, the event drew representatives from 24 associations, NGOs, INGOs and informal youth groups involved in specific initiatives at local, national or international level, in areas such as intercultural dialogue, action against racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism and the rights of minorities. This event helped to boost the number of young people attending sessions of the Conference of INGOs in June 2016. See the Conference's Activity Report 2016 for more information.

mainly through online tools. The Conference chose to replace their sessions entirely by online meetings in June and October 2020. The observation of the October session showed that if online meetings are an opportunity to involve a greater number of INGOs, this is not automatically true if specific measures are not taken to foster participation ahead of (agenda setting) and during the meeting (facilitating oral interventions from silent observers).²⁶

Finding 2: INGOs' participation in relevant Council of Europe bodies has not significantly increased in quantitative terms but has strengthened the quality of contributions to the Council of Europe's Programme and Budget.

9. INGOs' participation in Council of Europe bodies²⁷ has changed at the qualitative level but has not significantly increased in quantitative terms over the last four years. The evaluation looked at both, as the indicator changed from quantitative to qualitative between 2016-2017 and 2018-2019. The Conference delegates were represented in 33 Council of Europe bodies in 2020 while they numbered 32 in 2016.²⁸ This is far from the initial quantitative indicator set by the Programme and Budget 2016-2017 expecting 100 INGO representatives to attend intergovernmental committees. However, the relevance of this quantitative indicator seems questionable: first of all because it was set at a time when a new resolution on the participatory status was adopted²⁹ and because it applied to INGOs as well as to the Conference delegates with no distinction, making it impossible to identify the expected Conference contribution to the indicator.³⁰ These, among other reasons, may explain why the indicator was replaced by a qualitative one in the following Programme and Budget 2018-2019.

10. In this regard, while the number of the Conference delegates in the Council of Europe bodies remained quite stable over the four years, some quality improvements have been confirmed by a majority of interviewees. The Conference's delegates are appreciated for their oral contributions providing relevant information based on their field knowledge. The delegates recently appointed by the Conference are recognised for their thematic expertise, making them legitimate contributors from the perspective of the Council of Europe bodies' members. They are also perceived as highly committed to the work of the Council of Europe bodies, attending meetings more regularly than in the past. The written contributions provided have also been welcomed by the interviewees. At least three young delegates were appointed, and the number of delegates increased from 21 to 28. This could be interpreted as a positive sign reflecting the increased interest of INGOs but also the possibility for greater participation, as eight more substitutes have been appointed to ensure regular meeting attendance. The appointment of delegates does not exclude the fact that the Conference members may be involved in other ad hoc consultations even without a recognised role as "participants". This was the case for the consultations regularly launched by the monitoring mechanisms, such as the 2020 online consultation of the Pompidou Group on the current challenges in the field of addiction and drug policies.

11. The Conference has engaged in several joint initiatives with different Council of Europe bodies, like the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) in relation to the Code of Conduct review, PACE side events (see case studies in [Annex 7](#)) and the Congress (Code of Good Practice). The strategy, recently adopted by the Ad hoc Committee for the Rights of the Child (CAHENF),³¹ has cited the Conference as one of its main partners.

12. In conclusion, there is no quantitative evidence of an increased participation of the Conference delegates in Council of Europe bodies between 2016 and 2019. However, indications were found that the quality of the participation improved. The new qualitative indicator, although it could be more specific, is welcome as it prioritises the quality of the contributions rather than the quantitative presence of the Conference delegates.

26. More than 200 participants registered for the October session. Representatives taking the floor or exchanging through the chat were members already active in the thematic committees and working groups.

27. These include: Intergovernmental Committees and their subordinate bodies, Committees of independent experts of the Convention Committees, Ad hoc Committees, Committee of the Parties, Governmental Committees, Partial Agreements, and others such as monitoring mechanisms, PACE Committees and the WFD Steering Group.

28. Data presented here are based on a comparison between the two reference lists from 2016 and the most recent list available, updated in May 2020.

29. Resolution of the Committee of Ministers (2016(3)) revising the criteria for INGOs applying for participatory status.

30. INGOs with participatory status may participate in Council of Europe bodies without being mandated by the Conference. The Conference delegates are also from INGOs with participatory status but as they have been given a mandate by the Conference, they represent the whole Conference in the Council of Europe bodies and not only their own INGO. The lists provided by the Conference concern only their own delegates. In some steering committees, even INGOs without participatory status may be invited to contribute to their work. This means that the total number of INGOs participating in Council of Europe bodies is higher and does not necessarily correspond to the Conference lists.

31. CDENF strategy 2016-2021, page 23. CAHENF replaced the previous Steering Committee for the rights of the child (CDENF).

Finding 3: The number of activities carried out by the Conference is higher than the targets set by the Programme and Budget.

13. The three quantitative indicators included in the Programme and Budget 2018-2019 concern the number of assistance activities, events and opinions implemented by the Conference on a yearly basis. The Conference's activity reports do not make a clear distinction between what the Programme and Budget refers to as "*assistance activities provided to member states to improve protection of freedom of association and the enabling environment for civil society*" and "*events held for promotion, awareness raising, exchange of best practices of the Guidelines on civil participation in the political decision making*". Therefore, the evaluation merged the two expected results to include all the events and activities held by the Conference on a yearly basis – the majority of them addressing or even involving member states. The four activity reports provide evidence that each year the number of events and activities exceeded the Programme and Budget's targets for the two indicators together (see table above), meaning that more than nine activities and events are reported per year. These include joint side events with the PACE, high-level conferences, thematic debates, urgent side events, exhibitions, launch of reports, training sessions, official meetings with Council of Europe representatives and other cultural events.³²

14. As for the number of opinions delivered, the evaluation focused on the Expert Council on the NGO Law that is mandated by the Conference to produce and release legal opinions. Between 2016 and 2019, the Expert Council released seven reports on issues related to freedom of association across Europe and produced five opinions on ongoing reviews of national NGO laws in five different countries. On average, the Expert Council issued three opinions per year complying with the target for the indicator.³³

15. The increase in the density and variety of activities is reflected in the Conference's activity reports, which have also improved their quality between 2016 and 2019, becoming more detailed and more precise. In addition, the quantitative increase in terms of number of activities is confirmed by the interviews. A vast majority of the interviewees declared that they observed a positive trend for the Conference over the last four years. The case studies (see [Annex 7](#)) are useful to give more sense of this qualitative evidence as they show how these activities contribute to strengthening civil society interactions with the Council of Europe in various ways, in particular, by:

- ▶ including national NGOs' input in policy recommendations to the Council of Europe (see the country visit to Italy);
- ▶ translating Council of Europe instruments into member states' official languages (see the case study on the Guidelines);
- ▶ bringing national NGOs to the Council of Europe and initiating a dialogue between civil society representatives, the Council of Europe and member states (see two side events with the PACE);
- ▶ promoting and advancing Council of Europe instruments and values among national NGOs (see the case study on the Guidelines).

16. The Conference members have actively contributed to the implementation of Council of Europe thematic Action Plans and to the Council of Europe's work in general through timely and substantive inputs.³⁴ These outputs are for instance, and according to the Conference's Activity reports, that the Conference in particular contributed to the Council of Europe Action Plan against violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism (2015-2017), the Council of Europe Disability Strategy (2017-2023), and the Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023. Its contribution was also confirmed by the Secretary General (SG) in her speech at the October session when she declared that "*the Conference achieved better interaction with Council of Europe bodies through the Conference's contribution to Action plans.*"³⁵

17. There are limitations in the assessment of the Conference's effectiveness in that the Programme and Budget indicators apply to all INGOs and civil society organisations, including those who do not enjoy participatory status.³⁶ Such a structural difficulty in capturing the Conference's performance has not yet been addressed by the Council of Europe, nor by the Conference, as its activity reports do not keep track of the indicators set by the Programme and Budget. This may be partly explained by the fact that, according to the interviewees,

32. Only events directly organised by the Conference within Council of Europe premises were taken into account. More events are attended by the Conference members over the year throughout Europe, including and especially by its president, but they were not included in the account.

33. Here again, reference is made to the indicators included in the Programme and Budget 2018-2019.

34. These are two of the qualitative indicators included in the Programme and Budget 2016-2017 that were dropped in the following period.

35. Secretary General, Speech at the October session of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe (2020).

36. It must be remembered that only INGOs enjoying participatory status are members of the Conference.

the Conference is not involved in the preparation of these indicators. In addition, the current format of the Conference's activity reports (around 25 pages long with no quantitative indicators) does not provide sufficient visibility of its interventions in the Council of Europe's work. Beyond their field of intervention, Members of the PACE, staff and Permanent Representations are rarely aware of the amount of work delivered by the Conference on other topics, as was confirmed by the interviews held.

Finding 4: The Conference's activities have complied with the thematic priorities set in the Programme and Budget while maintaining a certain degree of autonomy and flexibility in their programming.

18. The Programme and Budget specify the thematic priorities to which the Conference is expected to contribute. Between 2016 and 2017, the Conference was expected to "concentrate on enhancing the protection of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs); combating radicalisation and extremism leading to terrorism; promoting gender equality and protecting the freedoms of assembly, association and expression". Between 2018 and 2019, the Conference was invited to "concentrate on the freedoms of assembly, association and expression, promoting the use of the Council of Europe Guidelines on civil participation in political decision making". This change reflects the effort made by the DG2 to provide a strategic orientation to the Conference even though it is not unanimously shared by the Conference members.

19. The evaluation found that the Conference implemented activities related to all these thematic priorities during the period covered by the Programme and Budget. This highlights three main points:

- ▶ A change in the Programme and Budget is not automatically reflected in the practice in the Conference's daily work. This is also due to the fact that the periods covered by the Council of Europe's Programme and Budget and the Conference's action plans do not match.
- ▶ Although the effort to establish priorities for the Conference's interventions is welcome, thematic priorities like "freedoms of assembly, association and expression" are broad by definition, encompassing a large spectrum of relevant interventions (for example, a side event to address cases of human rights defenders at risk).
- ▶ The Conference members deal with different thematic issues (cultural, economic and social rights) that are not necessarily or fully covered by the Programme and Budget priorities.

20. These observations partly explain why the Conference's Action Plan 2018-2021 is broader compared to thematic priorities set in the Programme and Budget. The Conference's intervention is formalised according to five pillars,³⁷ corresponding to long-term objectives, including the thematic priorities set in the Programme and Budget 2018-2019, but also in others.

The Conference's action plans

The Conference adopts its action plans autonomously from the Council of Europe Secretariat. They include a large number of different actions ranging from awareness raising to training sessions and collective thematic expertise. The first Action Plan 2015-2018 was the first effort to formalise the diversity of initiatives undertaken by the Conference within the Council of Europe, including new initiatives, such as the country visits. The adoption of action plans can be considered as an example of the efforts undertaken by the Conference to provide a clearer overview of its orientations and priorities on a three-year basis. The Conference operates in close co-operation with the DG2, informs staff in charge and makes sure that the activities that were not initially planned comply with the spirit of the action plan and with the Programme and Budget. This ensures a balance between the need to be responsive to unexpected situations and prevents rigidity in the planning and programming of activities still within an institutional framework. The DG2-Conference co-operation also allows identification, through careful selection, of where the Conference could achieve best results. This type of support provided by the DG2 contributed to better prioritising the Conference's actions. Interviewees from the PACE, the Conference and the DG2 agree that the support received by the

37. 1. To protect and reinforce freedom of association and associated rights and to contribute to democratic security in Council of Europe member states.
2. To observe and reinforce civil participation in decision making in the Council of Europe and member states.
3. To contribute to building an inclusive society and protect access to social, cultural and economic rights by vulnerable groups.
4. To contribute to the blossoming of a modern European Cultural Identity.
5. To contribute developing the institutional strengthening process of the Conference of INGOs to respond in a relevant way to the institutional evolution of the Council of Europe and geopolitical challenges. Gender, youth and migration are mainstreamed as "integrated approaches".

DG2 is welcome, for instance in selecting the most attractive topics instead of increasing the number of side events with little participation from PACE members.

21. It is useful to look at the activity reports together with the action plans as they allow an assessment of whether the Conference has implemented activities in relation to these thematic priorities.

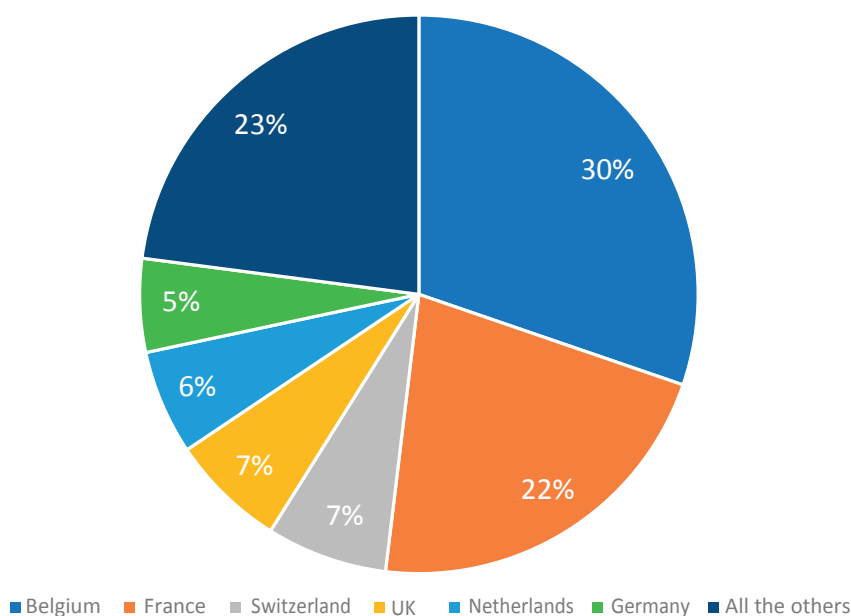
- ▶ Protecting *HRDs*: evidence of activities held in this field were found in the two periods.
- ▶ Combating *radicalisation and extremism leading to terrorism* – In 2016, the Conference contributed to the Council of Europe action plan against violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism (2015-2017). Other activities were held in 2016, but not since.
- ▶ Promoting *gender equality*: evidence of activities held in this field were found in the two periods.
- ▶ Protecting *the freedoms of assembly, association and expression*: evidence of activities held in this field were found in the two periods (public events, side events, written contributions).
- ▶ Promoting *the use of the Council of Europe Guidelines on civil participation in political decision making*: evidence of activities held in this field were found in the two periods, mainly through the country visits. The Conference was also involved in drafting of the Guidelines (see the case study in [Annex 7](#)).

22. For most of the interviewees, the profusion of activities reflects the ambition of the Conference to be as present and active as possible within the Council of Europe and beyond (for example, participating in national events on human rights). The risk is, however, that the high number of planned actions compared to a relatively limited resources and budget could be interpreted as a lack of strategic orientation. The difficult balance between keeping a strategic orientation in a complex and changing environment, especially in fields like human rights, is a challenge for the Conference.

Finding 5: The Conference’s effectiveness has been negatively influenced by the lack of diversity of INGOs’ membership as well as financial pressures (insufficient resources).

23. The quality and diversity of the Conference’s membership are quoted by almost all of the interviewees as the most important factor contributing to its effectiveness and legitimacy. The evaluation analysed the INGOs’ database in order to provide quantitative evidence of the current Conference membership. Unfortunately, the database provides only basic data (no age groups, no thematic composition) that are not sufficient to collect relevant for collecting evidence. Though incomplete, the following paragraphs put this analysis into perspective with more qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews.

Proportion of INGOs registered per State



Source: CoE Database comprising 314 INGOs enjoying participatory status

Chart prepared by Learning Avenue (October 2020)

Short description: 30% of INGOs enjoying participatory status are registered in Belgium

All the others: Albania, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Canada, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Norway, Portugal, Republic North Macedonia, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine, USA

24. The 314 INGOs are represented in all the 47 Council of Europe member states, including observer states. However, INGOs that are registered in western Europe account for 89% of all organisations having participatory status (see Diagram). According to the database, the highest number of INGOs with participatory status are registered in Belgium, representing 30% of the total number of INGOs. French INGOs account for 22%, followed by Swiss INGOs (7%), British INGOs (7%), Dutch INGOs (6%) and German INGOs (5%). Among the 314 INGOs, only 22 are registered in eastern European countries, 10 are registered in observer states and two are from non-member states. This may be explained partly by the eligibility criteria required for participatory status (international and umbrella organisations that are eligible for participatory status are more likely to be in countries where INGOs have been established longer and where funding for INGOs is more easily available).

25. According to one of these criteria in particular, only INGOs with a presence in at least five European countries are eligible for participatory status. This seems to be an obstacle for some organisations willing to join the Conference.³⁸ As a result, some of these or other criteria may exclude new and dynamic INGOs.

26. The evaluation concludes that eligibility criteria for participatory status, as set by the 2016 resolution, considerably affects the Conference's membership. It must be noted that the definition of these criteria falls under the responsibility of the Committee of Ministers while the Secretary General is responsible for the decision to grant participatory status.

27. It is, however, the direct responsibility of the Conference to ensure participation and involvement of its members by different means and initiatives. As previously shown by quantitative evidence, 28% of their members do not attend any sessions nor events. This implies that if there is already some diversity among the Conference's members this diversity remains undervalued as the Conference is not able to grasp contributions from a majority of its members while, at the opposite end, the group of most active members is over-represented in meetings and events at the Council of Europe.

28. Most of the interviewees regretted the absence or the lack of involvement of bigger and more established INGOs in the Conference. However, there is a wide consensus that large INGOs invest in the Conference only for certain topics of interest to them and not for its general activities.

29. Additionally, the Conference's effectiveness is affected by the low turnover of INGO representatives, which contributes to the Conference's "negative image" that some of the interviewees mentioned. The general perception is that most of the representatives mandated by INGOs are already retired, while younger professionally active people are under-represented. Unfortunately, data according to age groups are not available and this does not allow a confirmation of these general perceptions with quantitative evidence. However, a vast majority of interviewees who currently have direct interactions with the Conference delegates underlined an increase of younger delegates over the last few years, indicating that the concern of membership renewal is being addressed. There is still room for improvement but, if encouraged, this trend could bring about more visible results in the near future that could also be supported and monitored if data by age groups were made available in the Conference's database.

30. According to interviews, the Conference's effectiveness has been slowed down by other external factors. Some of the interviewees highlight the location in Strasbourg as another factor impacting the Council of Europe's attractiveness as a whole. It is difficult for INGOs and national NGOs to travel regularly to Strasbourg due to high costs and because almost none of the INGOs have a liaison office in Strasbourg, as may be the case for INGOs working with the UN in Geneva or with the European Union institutions in Brussels.

31. Financial pressure in 2019³⁹ negatively affected the Conference's work as its members were aware of the threats to the Conference's existence. Beyond this kind of conjunctural pressure, references to further potential budgetary cuts are recurrent among interviewees. This includes the support that the Conference receives from the DG2 Secretariat. Currently, the Civil Society Division of DG2 has two full-time staff members and one part-time person servicing the INGO Conference.⁴⁰ This level of support is currently being reviewed.⁴¹ Between 2016 and 2019, the budget allocated to the Conference was split into functioning fees and activity

38. Contribution received on 8 October 2020 by two national NGOs: "Our efforts to forge a structured relationship with the Council of Europe through formal and steady participation in the INGO Conference have so far been frustrating In spite of the considerable international exposure and active participation in multilateral or supranational organisations such as the UN, the OSCE ..., umbrella civil society organisations ..., [and] in spite of constant international co-operation with peer organisations from other countries, some of these co-operation schemes, even based on formal MOUs, the Conference has been kept inaccessible for our organisations under the current criteria ...".

39. The Conference's Activity Report 2019, p. 3.

40. Paper provided by DG2, "Streamlining the work of the Democratic Governance Department", version of January 2020 along with interviews held by evaluators.

41. Ibid.

costs with the former representing around 60% of the total budget. Additionally, the INGO Service is supposed to gather members' contributions, but only one third actually contribute. This amount is then allocated as a complementary funding to the Conference via travel reimbursements or direct funding for activities, such as a series of videos produced during the COVID lockdown.⁴²

Finding 6: The contribution of the Conference to the Council of Europe has increased but remains unevenly recognised among the Council of Europe bodies.

32. There is evidence that the Conference improved its contribution to the work of the Committee of Ministers. The 2019 questionnaire addressed to both NGOs and INGOs, regardless of participatory status,⁴³ already reflected the positive perception of strengthened co-operation of the Conference with the Committee of Ministers and its rapporteur groups, as well as with the grassroots level NGOs. The Council of Europe's biennial progress report confirms that the Committee of Ministers has an annual exchange of views with the President of the Conference and regular exchanges through its rapporteur groups. There are numerous examples of the Conference's advice, deliverables and contributions taken into account by the Committee of Ministers. For instance, in 2017, the Committee of Ministers adopted the Guidelines on civil participation in political decision making.⁴⁴ In 2018, the work carried out by the drafting group on civil society and independent human rights institutions, under the responsibility of the CDDH, led to the adoption by the Committee of Ministers of the Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe. The Conference members as well as the Expert Council made a major contribution.

33. Resolutions quote the Conference and the Expert Council as key partners for the design and implementation of standards. The continuous dialogue that the Conference President has with the Committee of Ministers, as well as with rapporteur groups and Permanent Representations, is seen by INGOs as effective and leading to impact.⁴⁵

34. Meaningful and timely contributions to the Committee of Ministers are provided by the Conference delegates. In order to feed into the standard-setting process, some committees indicated that they receive direct support from members of the Conference and national NGOs. This was the case, for instance, for the 2019 CAHENF report on "consultations with unaccompanied children on the topic of age assessment".⁴⁶

35. The Conference's contribution to the Congress has also improved and has led to joint initiatives in terms of civil participation. In 2019, the Congress endorsed the updated Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the decision-making process, calling for it to be implemented by local and regional authorities in the Council of Europe member states.⁴⁷ The code is based on practical experiences, good practices and valid methods from NGOs across Europe to engage with public authorities.

36. The evaluation found less evidence of the Conference's contribution to the work of the PACE seems to work more bilaterally with major INGOs for their expertise. NGOs provide input to PACE reports and are in direct contact with members of the Assembly during country visits and during the sessions in Strasbourg. Side events and hearings with the participation of international and national NGOs contribute to the preparation of PACE reports and facilitate awareness raising. PACE rapporteurs take into consideration information provided by NGOs in view of the preparation of their reports. The PACE has devoted a number of reports to civil society and human rights defenders and adopted subsequent resolutions and recommendations. Numerous exchanges of views have been recently observed between the Conference (via its delegate, the Migration Task force and the Expert Council) and the PACE Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons.

37. These examples cannot however be considered as a sustained trend of stronger co-operation between the Conference and the PACE. The intensity of their collaboration has varied over time, depending on committees' needs and priorities and other factors such as staff turnover, interest in specific subjects over others.

42. Available at www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/covid-videos.

43. Survey on NGOs' perception about how and to what extent the Council of Europe enables their participation in its Organisation and its work (April 2019).

44. The Conference's Activity Report, 2019.

45. Survey 2019, backed by flash interviews with INGOs, July 2020.

46. Ad hoc Committee for the Rights of the Child (CAHENF). The 2019 report is available at [https://rm.Council of Europe.int/we-are-children-hear-us-out-children-speak-out-about-age-assessment-re/16809486f3](https://rm.CouncilofEurope.int/we-are-children-hear-us-out-children-speak-out-about-age-assessment-re/16809486f3).

47. Resolution 452 (2019). See also previous Resolution 385 (2015) "Fostering active citizenship by building partnerships with civil society".

3.2. To what extent are the objectives of the Conference of INGOs relevant?

Finding 7: The relevance of the Conference to the Council of Europe is difficult to establish with certainty based on the available sources.

38. The relevance of the Conference has been analysed through various sources, namely the online survey of 2019 on the participation of INGOs in the Council of Europe's work,⁴⁸ the online questionnaire administered for this evaluation and one-on-one interviews with several INGOs with participatory status and several national NGOs that are not the Conference members.

39. The lack of a mission statement and absence of Theory of Change of the Conference pose a challenge for the evaluation of its relevance. There is no consensus within the Council of Europe on the results expected from the Conference vis-à-vis the Council of Europe priorities. The action plan and the Council of Europe's Programme and Budget are not sufficient evidence to demonstrate the extent to which the Conference addresses the Council of Europe's needs in terms of consultation of and interaction with civil society. There are assumptions from the interviewees that the Conference responds to the needs of the Council of Europe in terms of consultation and inclusion of the civil society, but no evidence is provided. The relevance of the Conference remains subject to different interpretations according to those who are familiar with the Conference's activities and its action plan. The Conference is one among several channels used by the Council of Europe to take civil society's interests and concerns into account. Therefore, the relevance of the Conference as such is often confused with the relevance of civil society's contribution to the work of the Council of Europe.

Finding 8: There are efforts to align the Conference's activities with the Council of Europe's programme of work and therefore with the priorities of the Council of Europe.

40. Despite the absence of a mission statement, the Conference aims to contribute to the implementation of the priorities of the Council of Europe. There is a clear alignment between the action plan and the Council of Europe's overall Programme and Budget objectives. For instance, the Council of Europe's Programme and Budget 2018-2019 states that it "primarily aims at strengthening democratic institutions and governance, fostering political pluralism, empowering citizens and civil society, including through education, youth and cultural policies". The expected results of the action plan match these priorities. For instance, one expected result of the Conference action plan is the protection and reinforcement of freedom of association, to be achieved through activities such as publications on the opinions and studies by the Expert Council on NGO Law in topics related to freedom of association. The Conference's activities also respond to the priorities in the sector of human rights and to a lesser extent in respect of the rule of law (for the Expert Council essentially).

41. The newly drafted Strategic Framework of the Council of Europe for the next four years⁴⁹ aims to support the role and diversity of civil society in member states – among other goals. The Strategic Framework indicates that "additional focus will be applied to exploring the best possible ways to ensure better participation by civil society in the activities of the Organisation, including a stronger and more active role for its representatives in the activities of our statutory bodies". The Conference can be expected to contribute to this deliverable.

42. The Conference and DG2 programme staff have strived to align the Conference's agenda with that of the Committee of Ministers, PACE, Congress and the intergovernmental committees. The status of the Conference, being institutionally anchored within the Council of Europe, greatly contributes to the alignment of agendas and programmes. The Conference governing bodies (Bureau and Standing Committee), in co-operation with DG2 Secretariat, identify through careful selection where the Conference could be most instrumental to the Council of Europe in order to address its priorities. The support provided by the DG2 contributed to a better prioritisation of the Conference's actions, for instance in selecting attractive topics relevant to the Council of Europe instead of increasing the number of stand-alone events (for example, the Conference contributed to the Ad hoc Committee on Artificial Intelligence, set up by the Committee of Ministers.)

Finding 9: The activities and topics addressed at the Conference are judged as relevant to the INGOs.

43. The perception of relevance of the Conference is high among the INGO members that were surveyed in 2019 and in 2020. The online questionnaire indicates that activities included in the current action plan are

48. Survey on the participation of NGOs at the Council of Europe – Results and analysis, Council of Europe (2019).

49. Strategic Framework of the Council of Europe, SG/Inf (2020)34, 23 November 2020.

considered relevant for the majority of respondents: 54% think that they are relevant, 17% think that they are very relevant, while 29% think that they are somewhat relevant. The majority of respondents confirmed the relevance of the topics addressed at the Conference in the action plan and of the working methods (working groups, committees and events, and every opportunity offered to the INGOs to contribute to the Conference's work). INGOs unanimously declare that the topics discussed during the Conference are "somewhat relevant" (29%), "relevant" (44%), and "very relevant" (27%). None consider them irrelevant.

44. The topics meet the needs of the Conference's members and INGOs' beneficiaries. For 76% of respondents, the topics are relevant to their organisation's beneficiaries, 21% of respondents deem that this is the case in each session and 3% of respondents say it is never the case. The respondents particularly highlight the relevance of the Conference's activities for their own members and beneficiaries (i.e. the groups the INGOs target): 67% feel that they are sometimes relevant for their organisation's beneficiaries and 31.5% feel that they are always relevant for their organisation's beneficiaries. Only 1.5% feel that it is never relevant for their organisation's beneficiaries. This shows the relevance of joining the Conference for the INGOs to fulfil their priorities and to better serve the people targeted in their mandate.

45. The Conference furthermore helps the INGOs to address more needs than their mandate would allow. There is consensus that the relevance of the Conference lies in its capacity to spark ideas and enhance cross-fertilisation of thoughts on topics that are not necessarily the core mission of the INGOs. INGOs appreciate opening up the scope of activities, bringing fresh ideas and being acquainted with the most recent trends. There is thus a wide consensus on the relevance of the topics that are addressed at the Conference for those who are engaged. For 73% of respondents, the Conference's activities allow their organisation to take action on issues that it would not be able to cover otherwise. In addition, the INGOs appreciate that the Conference operates within the framework of the Council of Europe, which is an intergovernmental organisation gathering ministers, parliamentary and local authorities. This is a valuable opportunity for the INGOs to connect with a wider range of decision makers.

Finding 10: The quality of the Conference's work contributed to its reputation and subsequently to the recognition of its relevance within the Council of Europe.

46. There is consensus that the Conference has become more proficient in the conduct of its activities and subsequently in the reputation and recognition from within the Council of Europe. The main improvements observed are as follows:

- ▶ The consultation of INGOs' members is more systematic by the Conference for reflection and decision making.
- ▶ Decision, design, follow-up and reporting of the activities are discussed and formalised internally with DG2 programme and the Conference's appropriate governing bodies.
- ▶ The formulation of positions, such as resolution or position papers, are discussed across the Conference's governing bodies (Standing Committee, Bureau, chairs of the thematic committees).
- ▶ Remediation to challenges or problems to overcome is suggested, turning the Conference into a body that supports and facilitates the implementation of Council of Europe actions.
- ▶ The Conference facilitates joint contributions with greater legitimacy that INGOs individually would not be able to provide alone. The Conference provides more systematically a European dimension to debates that would not exist otherwise for INGOs or national NGOs limited to their country and/or thematic perspectives.

47. In parallel, the Conference updated its working methods through the participation in scientific projects, in order to share its experience and reap the benefits of a learning process under the supervision of academics.⁵⁰ By doing so, the Conference makes the case that its work results from rigorous approaches and is collaboratively conducted and validated.

⁵⁰ For instance, the Standing Committee agreed to become a partner in an academic research project called ACTIONS that studies the links between access to social rights and the decline of democracy, proposed by a consortium of six European universities within the framework of the Horizon 2020 European Commission programme. The INGO Service agreed to be the formal bearer of this partnership. The project was eventually not selected by the European Commission.

Finding 11: The consistency of the Conference's activities with its own action plan and other Council of Europe bodies' activities has improved.

48. It remains challenging to assess the relevance of the activities against the Conference's action plan. The Conference is not per se accountable for a strict implementation of the action plan. This plan is a framework for its activities that delineates the realms of intervention of the Conference. It helps to ensure the consistency of the action plan to the Council of Europe's work: The Council of Europe's Programme and Budget primarily, and then the activities and priorities of the other bodies (Committee of Ministers, PACE, Congress). The span of the action plan is wide enough to accommodate a vast range of activities. There is no example of activities that have been irrelevant to the action plan.

49. As mentioned above, the co-operation between the Conference and the DG2 enabled the streamlining of a range of activities and gave more consistency to the action plan. At the same time, and over the past five years, the governance body of the Conference triggered the involvement of the Conference in a wider range of Council of Europe's work (events, expertise, inputs to working groups, etc.), with a view to increasing the relevance of the Conference to the Council of Europe.

50. The consistency of the Conference's activities and their alignment with the Council of Europe Programme and Budget leads to a reasonable level of relevance. However, the Council of Europe has other channels through which to mobilise civil society other than the Conference that might be more relevant than the Conference itself. The following section on the added value of the Conference to the Council of Europe will help to better understand the contribution of the Conference to the Council of Europe.

3.3. What is the added value of the interventions of the Conference of INGOs in achieving the stated objectives?

Finding 12: The quality of the work of Expert Council has contributed to the reputation of the Conference and to the recognition of its expertise within the Council of Europe.

51. The Expert Council on NGO Law embodies, to a great extent, the expertise of the Conference and one of its main contributions to the Council of Europe. Interviews within the Secretariat, as well as with member states, welcomed their contribution, as it provided them with high-quality and timely information. The Expert Council's opinions have been taken into account in the Secretary General's annual State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law (4th and 5th reports). They have been quoted in the opinions of the Venice Commission, and the Committee of Ministers called on its member states to:

ensure that legislation, in particular on freedom of association is drafted and applied in conformity with international human rights law and standards and, where appropriate, seek advice from the Commissioner for Human Rights, the Venice Commission and the Expert Council on NGO Law of the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations and other bodies of the Council of Europe.⁵¹

52. As highlighted in the case studies, the Conference co-operates effectively with the Expert Council through country visits. These visits enhanced the internal dynamics of the Conference, creating synergies with the Expert Council (one of its members is always part of the delegation) and national NGOs.⁵² Some of its members also observed that "the Conference is progressively more and more able to reach out to the national level through consultations with local NGOs invited to Strasbourg".

53. The positive working dynamic is partly due to the Conference's proactiveness in promoting applications of potential experts to the Experts Council. INGOs, through their affiliate members, and some member states helped circulate the call for experts in 2016. This broad dissemination contributed to the increase in number and quality of the applications. In the longer term, the link between the Expert Council and the Conference could reinforce the quality of the work provided by the Conference itself, as well as its membership. Some of the members of the Expert Council indicated to the INGOs of which they are members that they are now considering applying for participatory status while the Conference was unknown to them before joining the Expert Council.

51. CM/Rec(2018)11.

52. The Conference's Activity Report 2019.

Finding 13: The Conference brings emerging concerns of civil society to the attention of the Council of Europe.

54. The Conference managed to increase its responsiveness to address emerging themes of interest for civil society. For instance, the CDDG in its report to the Committee of Ministers underlined the Conference's contribution to its work. In 2019, this contribution was mainly in the drafting groups on public ethics and digital democracy.

55. Another example is the Conference's participation in emerging themes for civil society in the work of the Committee on Bioethics: a Conference representative is invited to participate in all plenary meetings; relevant (umbrella) INGOs are invited to participate in all plenary sessions relating to specific standard-setting activities; and there are targeted consultation meetings with relevant INGOs during the standard-setting procedure.

56. At the same time, the Council of Europe foresees emerging needs to protect civil society organisations and hence is focusing on the effectiveness of Council of Europe bodies, activities and processes accordingly. The Georgian Committee of Ministers Presidency (November 2019-May 2020) recalled that much emphasis was put on civil participation in decision making during their mandate.⁵³ Responding to the unexpected challenges deriving from the COVID-19 crisis, the President urged the Council of Europe to assess the practice of its bodies with a view to fostering democratic participation and exploring alternatives to cope with limited interactions.

57. However, the lack of diversity of INGO membership hampers the capacity of the Conference to address a wider range of issues dealing with civil society's rights and protection. The Conference has paid attention to trends shaping the role of civil society (such as civic movements' protests) and to ongoing concerns such as the protection of journalists' sources. At the same time, the Conference governing bodies struggle to embed the foregoing issues or anticipate what will become important for civil society in member states and prepare actions accordingly. As pointed out earlier, the selection of the INGOs is not the ultimate responsibility of the Conference. The Conference can elicit membership but is not in charge of the process of granting participatory status.

Finding 14: The work delivered by the Conference is complementary to the Council of Europe's bilateral relations with INGOs.

58. The Conference is one channel, among others, between the Council of Europe and civil society. As reported by the Secretary General in her 2020 report⁵⁴ and earlier information documents,⁵⁵ the Council of Europe has a wide variety of tools and channels for co-operation with civil society that show a high density of the interactions in almost all of the thematic mandates.

59. These various co-operation channels are not limitations for the current Conference. The Conference fulfils different functions complementary to the bilateral relations between the Council of Europe and civil society. For instance, the Conference contributes to promoting and raising awareness of the Council of Europe standards and policies among its members at the local level and among other civil society partners across the European continent. The Conference furthermore allows the Council of Europe to obtain input through a bottom-up approach

60. The benchmarking exercise indicates that two key elements are essential for a well-functioning civil society mechanism within an organisation: first, an effective organisation, information sharing and communication with members of the mechanism; and second, an efficient co-ordination between the mechanism and other parallel channels of co-operation with civil society within an organisation. The first condition is met, with the sufficient co-operation between the Conference and the DG2 Secretariat. The second might be a likely goal for the future of the Conference. An example of effective organisation, as noted in the benchmarking report in Annex 1 (of the [Annex 5](#)), is the United Nations Economic and Social Council, which co-operates with the UN Committee on NGOs (composed of more than 4 000 NGOs). The NGO committee is elected by the Economic and Social Council as a subsidiary body. The committee has 19 members who are elected based on equitable geographical representation. The committee oversees the monitoring of the registration process, but also the engagement of civil society organisations. Another example of effective co-ordination between various civil society-specific initiatives is the OECD Annual Forum Network organised by the Directorate for communication and civil affairs of the OECD. The directorate centralises issues related to civil society interaction in the OECD

53. Priorities of the Georgian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, Information Documents, CM/INF(2019)22.

54. Secretary General, Follow-up to the Helsinki decisions on civil society, SG/Inf(2020)8.

55. Thematic debate entitled "The Role and Functioning of Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the Council of Europe", SG/Inf(2014)23.

– even if each directorate also has its own interaction with civil society stakeholders – and aims to establish connections with other directorates. It is in charge of sending a newsletter to civil society organisations, consulting civil society partners and managing the online network platform. There are approximately 300 members on the online network platform. The main aim of the network is to allow for civil society representatives and participants to discuss the main themes of the forum throughout the year, even the most problematic and controversial issues that are sometimes not tackled in meetings with member states.

Finding 15: The Conference has increased collaboration with national NGOs in different ways, improving civil society's contribution to the Council of Europe.

61. The Conference action plan states: that “The Conference must be simultaneously close to the grassroots organisations, work for a general interest of civil society and be involved in the high-level decision-making process in the Council of Europe and other international organisations.” Of the respondent NGOs, 61% say that in the last five years they were often or always given the opportunity to participate in a consultation procedure initiated by the Conference to share their views on a specific policy or topic.

62. In the last four years, the Conference has had ad hoc co-operation with national NGOs in preparation for the country visits (see case study on Italy), specific events (in Vienna, for instance, at the initiative of one of its members) and other initiatives (see case study on the Guidelines). These examples show that individual Conference members initiated, or the Conference as a collective proactively looked for, co-operation with national NGOs. On the other side, national NGOs rarely do so.

63. This kind of proactive attitude can bring positive and welcome synergies with national NGOs that in most cases do not know about the Conference or have not had an opportunity to co-operate with the Council of Europe.

64. As a result of the country visits, the Conference collects information on the participative practices established in the countries visited. The visits also aim to contribute to identifying innovative practices and obstacles that NGOs may encounter in the course of their work. This contributes to strengthening the dialogue between organised civil society at national level and local authorities. The results of this work will not provide the basis for any decisions but will provide contributions to the debates held by political decision makers and by the Council of Europe bodies.⁵⁶ These types of activities give the Conference an opportunity to inform national NGOs of the legal activities and instruments developed by the Conference and the Council of Europe (for example, the Guidelines and the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation as tools and reference points for NGOs), sometimes even carrying out translations on a pro bono basis.

65. At the same time as participatory status was granted to INGOs, the Council of Europe provided the opportunity to national NGOs to apply for partnership status.⁵⁷ Since then, only a very small number of national NGOs have obtained the status (15 in total). This statistic remains relatively unknown even among the respondents interviewed. The current Conference Rules of Procedure state that, “Delegates from national NGOs enjoying partnership status with the Council of Europe may be invited to sessions of the Conference in a consultative capacity.”⁵⁸

Finding 16: The Conference has made efforts to better engage the INGOs with the Council of Europe's work with some success.

66. The participatory status gives INGOs increased credibility with Council of Europe entities. Without it, it would also be more difficult for an INGO to be recognised by the different Council of Europe entities. Interviews echo the 2019 survey on the participation of NGOs at the Council of Europe where 54% of respondents acknowledged that the Council of Europe enables INGOs with participatory status to participate meaningfully in its work.⁵⁹

67. The Conference has attempted to better engage the INGOs with the Council of Europe's work. The value of the Conference to the Council of Europe should depend on the engagement of its members (for instance, through expertise, collaborative reflection, attendance at meetings, participation in the Conference's or Council of Europe's projects). Thanks to a more active communication within its membership, the Conference informs all INGOs of the opportunity to be active within the Council of Europe. This information is in alignment with the latest Strategic Framework document drafted by the Council of Europe Secretary General which mentions as a deliverable advising

56. Quoted from Action the action plan, and confirmed by the evaluation, see case study on Italy and Romania country visit.

57. Resolution on the Status of partnership between the Council of Europe and national non-governmental organisations (Res (2003)9).

58. Point 1.1.3. of the Rules of Procedure of the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) of the Council of Europe, adopted by the Conference of INGOs on 24 June 2016, available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/rules-of-procedure>.

59. Question from the 2019 survey on the participation of NGOs at the Council of Europe, “To what extent do you think that the Council of Europe enables meaningful participation of the following type of I/NGOs in its work?”, p. 4.

the Committee of Ministers and the PACE to adopt decisions aimed at ensuring better participation for civil society in the activities of our Organisation and based on the Secretary General's recent proposals, "including a stronger and more active role for representatives of civil society in the activities of our statutory bodies"⁶⁰ In the Conference Action Plan 2015-2017,⁶¹ a specific section has been drawn up to improve internal communication, the visibility of the activities and work carried out by the Conference. The first stage in this plan was to set up a homogeneous and coherent communication strategy for the Conference of INGOs. A Conference Facebook page and a Twitter account have been relaunched and are regularly updated with information. As announced by the action plan, the Conference has a new website on the Council of Europe portal that is regularly updated.⁶²

68. In addition, the Conference has made efforts to better induct new INGO members. In the last five years, two members of the Conference Standing Committee held two-hour training sessions for new members within the context of the session.⁶³

69. Despite such initiatives, there are recurrent criticisms from INGOs regarding the access to the Council of Europe. The consultation of civil society organisations in 2019 highlighted the lack of (or difficulty in finding) public information on agendas and timelines of policy processes and meetings. Testimonials from INGOs confirm that the efforts made by the Conference to prepare them to become active members are not enough to guide and assist them in order to increase their participation in the Council of Europe's work.⁶⁴

Finding 17: INGOs are not all aware of the contribution of the Conference in voicing civil society's concerns at the Council of Europe.

70. While some INGOs consider the Conference as a vehicle to promote their interests in the Council of Europe, few of their representatives are able to demonstrate the value of the Conference as such to the Council of Europe. In reality, the Conference relies on a limited number of INGOs and on the personal investment of INGO representatives serving on the Conference governing bodies (Bureau and Standing Committee) or the Expert Council.

71. Few of them are able to describe the contribution of the Conference to the work of the Council of Europe (neither are the other Council of Europe bodies), in detail and in concrete terms.⁶⁵ Only a small number of INGO representatives interviewed or surveyed quote examples of concrete inputs and tangible results of the Conference's interventions. The most frequently quoted contribution is the Code of good practice for civil participation. The activity report of the Conference, which reflects the richness of the activities, is not retained by the INGOs interviewed as evidence of the contribution of the Conference to the Council of Europe.

72. Furthermore, the INGOs could not provide examples on the Conference's specific contribution to the Council of Europe, as many engage in the Council of Europe through other channels than the Conference itself. The INGOs prefer to value the extent to which they directly contribute to the Council of Europe's activities – usually thanks to their own expertise in certain domains of interest for the Committee of Ministers, the PACE or the Congress. The online questionnaire points out that almost all those attending sessions of the Conference engage with the Council of Europe in other ways, more often via bilateral meetings or attending events other than those organised by or with the Conference. Many responded that they have direct interactions via e-mails or other communication tools with the Council of Europe.

73. Major INGOs who engage with the Conference only occasionally confirmed that the Conference contributes to voicing civil society's concerns within the Council of Europe. These organisations are well recognised for their expertise at the Council of Europe and have become regular partners of bodies such as the PACE, the rapporteur groups of the Committee of Ministers, the European Court of Human Rights or the European Social Charter Committee. For them, the Conference's contribution to the Council of Europe lies in its permanent presence, thanks to the Conference President's diplomatic relations with other Council of Europe bodies, which INGOs individually would not have otherwise.

74. As a tentative conclusion, the evaluation shows that the added value of the Conference lies in bringing the attention of the Council of Europe to emerging themes and concerns that are key for civil society in all its diversity. The Conference complements the co-operation between the Council of Europe and the INGOs or NGOs on a bilateral basis.

60. Strategic Framework of the Council of Europe, SG/Inf (2020)34, 23 November 2020.

61. The Conference's Action Plan 2015-2017, p. 4.

62. No further assessment of these new communication tools has been made for this evaluation.

63. Interview with another respondent.

64. Ibid.

65. As exemplified in the open comments to the online survey 2020, which were vague and inconsistent on the value of the Conference.

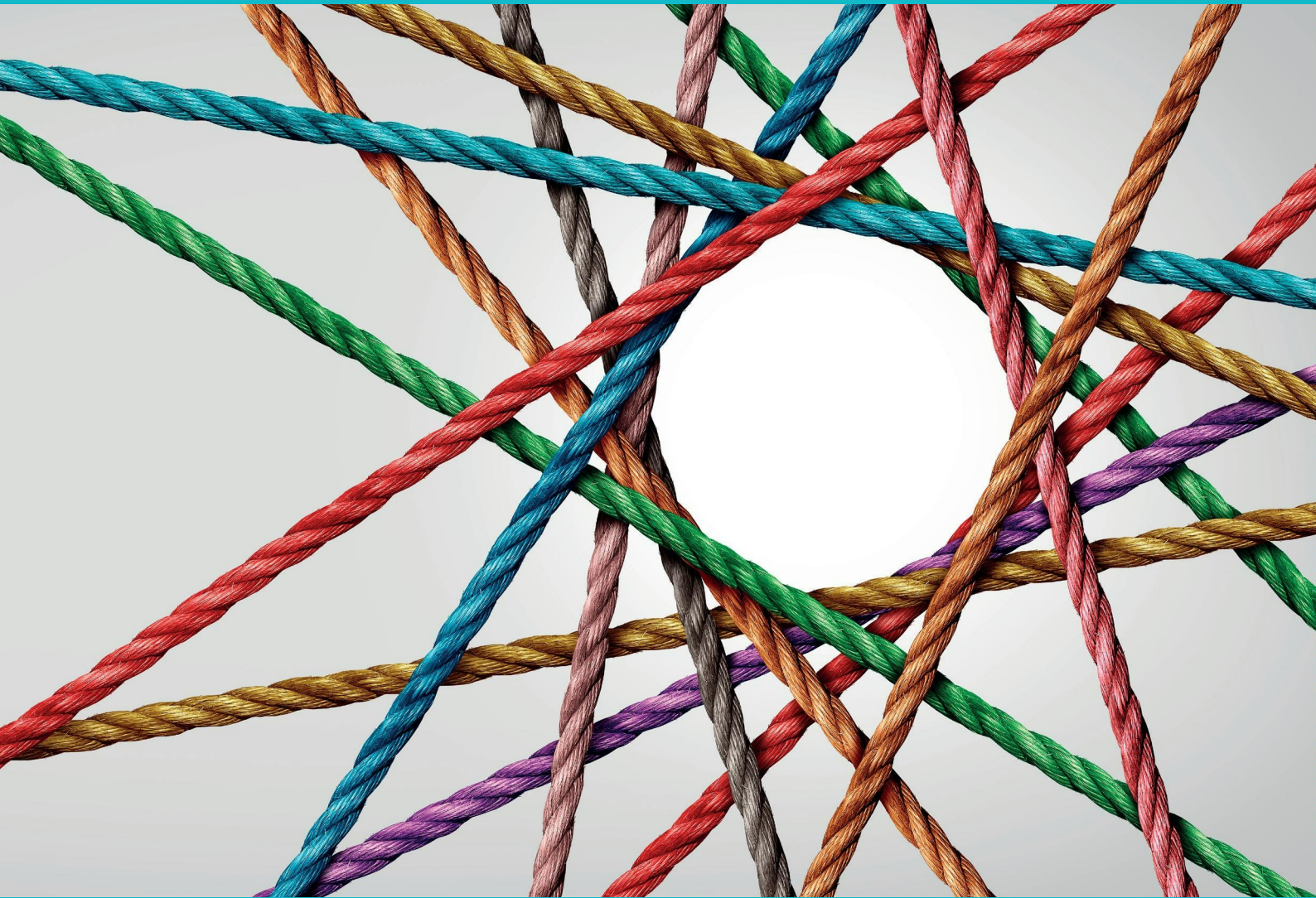


4. Lessons learned from the benchmarking

The list below presents the lessons learned from the benchmarking of organisations that have a civil society mechanism (Annex 5). They provide proposed actions on the possible evolution of the Conference for increased relevance, effectiveness and added value.

The benchmarking points out that organisations recognised as successful in mobilising civil society:

- ▶ continuously identify the needs of civil society and niches not addressed by other international organisations. This constitutes the most important guarantee for a true civil society consultation mechanism with impact. The added value of the mechanism depends on the ability to identify the needs and to include them in its interventions;
- ▶ allow for the civil society consultation mechanism to evolve according to the needs of the members, ensure its relevance and improve engagement of members. Institutional flexibility on the tools to achieve the objectives of the mechanism is valuable for sustainability and a positive evolution;
- ▶ set up a follow-up process, which is key to the success of a mechanism and to reaching its objectives. Transparency and continuity boost participation and engagement of civil society partners to build trust and create coherence in the different activities of the mechanism;
- ▶ set up feedback tools especially through online forms and direct contact with participants, which is key to understanding both the added value of the mechanism and the less attractive features of it, as seen by the civil society organisations;
- ▶ organise conference-style events that gather many stakeholders, which are extremely valued by NGOs and which allow for a bridging of the gap between civil society representatives and policy makers. A mechanism that creates opportunities for these meetings to occur is seen as efficient in strengthening civil society beyond its consultative role;
- ▶ organise side events or allow for civil society partners to organise their side events during formal events, which is valued by organisations. It is seen as the ideal setting to continuing discussions from formal sessions and for networking;
- ▶ put in place informal channels of interaction along with formal set-ups, which enables members to untap the spill-over from consultative mechanisms. It creates a space for civil society organisations to express their opinions and concerns freely. Online tools such as a forum or a platform are not costly and allow the creation of an active network of civil society organisations that are able to interact and exchange through informal channels;
- ▶ secure annual funding through partnerships with all types of stakeholders. Building these partnerships and allowing for these short-term agreements enables the funding of participants from civil society that would not have managed to attend otherwise and that can still provide added value to the debate;
- ▶ strike a balance between a strict selection of participants and an open participation in order for the consultation to remain representative of the different perspectives of a wide range of relevant actors without obstructing the course of the consultation or limiting the quality of input;
- ▶ ensure the engagement and active participation of members through monitoring. However, if the mechanism does not compensate its members, incentives need to be made clear, and responsibilities as well. Duties need to be expressed clearly and the most plausible sanction is to withdraw the consultative status from the members that have failed to deliver. This sanction needs also to be expressed clearly at registration level and it needs to be discussed with the organisation concerned in the case of a misunderstanding.



5. Conclusions

5.1. To what extent has the work of the Conference of INGOs been effective?

Conclusion 1: The Conference's biannual sessions and delegates in the Council of Europe's bodies have contributed to strengthening interactions between civil society and the Council of Europe, but there are factors which negatively influence the Conference.

Finding 1: The number of INGOs attending the biannual sessions increased in 2016-2017 and remained the same in 2018-2019, slightly below the target of 120.

Finding 2: INGOs' participation in relevant Council of Europe bodies has not significantly increased in quantitative terms but has strengthened the quality of contributions to the Council of Europe's Programme and Budget.

Finding 5: The Conference's effectiveness has been negatively influenced by the lack of diversity of INGOs membership as well as financial pressures (insufficient resources).

Overall, it was found that the Conference contributed to strengthening the interaction between civil society and the Council of Europe. However, the evaluation shows that INGOs' participation in the sessions and the number of delegates in the Council of Europe bodies have not significantly increased over the last four years. The Conference proved to be weak in mobilising INGOs to attend the sessions and/or other events at the Council of Europe. Insufficient attention has been given to those members who never attended any session or event in the last four years. The number of the Conference delegates in the Council of Europe bodies, even though recognised for their expertise and contributions, has not significantly increased between 2016 and 2019. The efforts to renew the composition of its delegates, investing in younger and more engaged individuals, are welcome but still insufficient.

The Conference's effectiveness is also negatively affected by external factors not under the direct responsibility of the Conference. In particular, it appears that while the quality and diversity of its membership is key to ensure the Conference's effectiveness, the Conference is not responsible for the selection process and criteria for applying participatory status. The current procedure does not include geographic or thematic criteria that might enable addressing the lack of diversity among the membership while the criterion of having a presence in five countries has been questioned by some INGOs interested in joining the Conference as rather limiting.

However, the Conference is the only body responsible when it comes to attracting new INGOs by showing a positive working dynamic. It also has leverage to encourage its members in proposing new representatives. Finally, it has the responsibility to ensure its interventions are inclusive and that its members take an active part in its work. The Conference should therefore be allocated adequate resources in order to make its activities as inclusive as possible, especially to boost INGOs' participation in sessions and events.

Conclusion 2: The Conference has been able to involve different stakeholders in its activities covering a wide variety of topics, thus contributing to deepening interactions between civil society and the Council of Europe. However, dispersion of the Conference's activities presents a risk considering the limited resources and shows a lack of strategic direction.

Finding 3: The number of activities carried out by the Conference is higher than the targets set by the Programme and Budget.

Finding 4: The Conference's activities have complied with the thematic priorities set in the Programme and Budget while maintaining a certain degree of autonomy and flexibility in their programming.

The Conference's contribution to the strengthening of civil society and Council of Europe interactions resides in its capacity to involve various stakeholders in a variety of activities. Evidence has also indicated that each year the number of events and activities exceed the expected target and that there has been an increase in the number of the Conference's activities over the last four years. We conclude that the Conference has been able to generate a better understanding of its actions at various levels of the Council of Europe and, to some extent in member states. In view of this, the Conference should continue to pursue thematic conferences, side events and country visits.

The Conference has also been able to provide timely and substantive inputs to the Council of Europe action plans on various topics, like gender equality, disabilities and education, but its general performance in its thematic priorities remains difficult to track due to the lack of proper monitoring tools: The Programme and Budget, the action plan and the INGOs' reports to the Council of Europe are useful for this purpose, but do not currently have an efficient monitoring framework. For the same reason, the evaluation cannot draw any conclusion as to the extent to which the activities carried out by the Conference have contributed to the promotion of the Council of Europe Guidelines on civil participation in political decision making and to the protection of freedom of assembly, association and expression.

The profusion of activities presents a risk of dispersion considering the limited budget and human resources available. The efforts made to improve the Conference's strategic orientation have not been sufficient as the evaluation shows that the change in the expected results set by the Programme and Budget 2018-2019 did not affect much the Conference's way in implementing activities or its effectiveness. The Conference clearly faces the challenge of remaining flexible to respond to its members' concerns as well as to urgent issues, while reinforcing its strategic orientation vis-à-vis the Council of Europe in order to better align its ambitions to the available financial and human resources.

5.2. To what extent are the objectives of the Conference of INGOs relevant?

Conclusion 3: The relevance of the Conference to the Council of Europe is difficult to establish, although the Conference's activities are consistent with the Council of Europe priorities.

Finding 6: The contribution of the Conference to the Council of Europe has increased but remains unevenly recognised among the Council of Europe bodies.

Finding 7: The relevance of the Conference to the Council of Europe is difficult to establish with certainty based on the available sources.

Finding 8: There are efforts to align the Conference's activities with the Council of Europe's programme of work and therefore with the priorities of the Council of Europe.

Finding 9: The activities and topics addressed at the Conference are judged as relevant to the INGOs.

Finding 10: The quality of the Conference's work contributed to its reputation and subsequently to the recognition of its relevance within the Council of Europe.

Finding 11: The consistency of the Conference's activities with its own action plan and other Council of Europe bodies' activities has improved.

The Conference does not have a mission statement. Its action plan is not bound to the Council of Europe Programme and Budget, which only briefly mentions the Conference, without specifying expected results. There is one indicator concerning the Conference in the Programmes and Budgets of the two periods under consideration, although it is questionable whether this indicator is for INGOs in general or for the Conference. However, the representatives of the Conference and the DG2 sought to harmonise the action plan and the Council of Europe's Programme and Budget, in order to better respond to the main priorities of the Council of Europe. In this sense, the relevance of the Conference is present since the Conference's activities respond to the priorities of the Council of Europe. However, these priorities remain extremely broad, as do the objectives associated with the Conference's action plans. Coming to a conclusion about the relevance thus remains challenging.

INGOs believe that the Conference responds to their mandate and to the interests of the populations they work with/for in their country or internationally. The scope of the Conference is viewed positively by its members, as well as the opportunity it offers to connect with the different entities of the Council of Europe.

By contrast, the Council of Europe's bodies struggle to identify the relevance of the Conference in a precise and documented manner. The Committee of Ministers and the Congress show an evolution of their co-operation

with the Conference, considering that the Conference is a complement to the bilateral relations that these entities maintain with the INGOs. This is less true for the PACE, where the Conference is involved in the work of its committees to varying degrees, mainly depending on the expertise required and items on the agenda.

5.3. What is the added value of the interventions of the Conference of INGOs in achieving the stated objectives?

Conclusion 4: The Conference is a unique consultation mechanism calling the attention of the Council of Europe to civil society's concerns and interests.

Finding 12: The quality of the work of the Expert Council has contributed to the reputation of the Conference and to the recognition of its expertise within the Council of Europe.

Finding 13: The Conference brings emerging concerns of civil society to the attention of the Council of Europe.

Finding 14: The work delivered by the Conference is complementary to the Council of Europe's bilateral relations with INGOs.

Finding 15: The Conference has increased collaboration with national NGOs in different ways, improving civil society's contribution to the Council of Europe.

Finding 16: The Conference has made efforts to better engage the INGOs with the Council of Europe's work with some success.

Finding 17: INGOs are not all aware of the contribution of the Conference in voicing civil society's concerns at the Council of Europe.

There is a consensus among INGOs that greater contribution by the INGOs can improve the Conference's recognition by and contribution to the Council of Europe. The greater the engagement of the INGOs, the better the quality of work and recognition of the Conference within the Council of Europe. By working under the auspices of the Conference, the INGOs can structure a common and more legitimate contribution to the Council of Europe's work. The Conference's inputs offer supplementary contributions from a wide range of INGOs, as well as the most well-known INGOs worldwide.

The Conference, through its Expert Council, contributes to the quality of the work of the Council of Europe in legal areas specific to the roles of NGOs and civil society in member countries. It benefits from the reputation of the Expert Council, which in turn contributes to the recognition of the Conference as a useful body for the Council of Europe (Committee of Ministers, PACE and the Congress). Therefore, sufficient resources should be allocated to ensure the regular functioning of the Expert Council.

The Conference was able to detect emerging themes useful for the interests of civil society and bring them to the consideration of the Council of Europe. At the same time, the Conference was able to take advantage of its relations with national NGOs (through member INGOs who have their own networks of national NGOs), to be in direct contact with civil society actors operating as close as possible to populations. The Conference therefore plays the role of a catalyst to provide the best possible information, or even influence, within the Council of Europe and within its areas of intervention.

On the other hand, it remains difficult for the Conference to demonstrate the added value of its actions as a collective platform conference of civil society to its members. Much remains to be done for them to truly realise the role the INGOs could play. Only the INGOs most involved in the Conference are aware of the role of the Conference for the Council of Europe. The Conference's added value depends on the ability of its members to invest, yet many of them lack the technical or financial capacity. The large INGOs, already well established within the Council of Europe, invest too little in the Conference, which does not appear to them as a facilitating organisation. The Conference therefore relies on a limited number of members, which constrains its capacity and, consequently, the added value it could have in the Council of Europe.

The Conference supports INGOs in their understanding of the Council of Europe and seeks to stimulate their participation, but still insufficiently. It is the responsibility of the Conference and the Council of Europe to encourage INGOs with participatory status to become more active and participate more actively in the domains addressed by the Council of Europe. Member-oriented actions, such as training sessions and direct support to its members, are not yet systematic and could be supported in parallel by developing communication tools targeting civil society organisations across Europe.



6. Recommendations

Based on the evaluation's conclusions, the following recommendations highlight that it is crucial for the Council of Europe to maintain its support to the Conference to help it improve the quality and strategic orientation of its activities. The recommendations are addressed to the Conference, the DG2 secretariat, the Secretary General, and other relevant stakeholders within the Council of Europe.

At strategic level:

1. The Organisation considers setting out a mission statement for the Conference in order to clarify its objectives vis-à-vis Council of Europe entities, INGOs and national NGOs across Europe. (High)
2. Taking into account the mission statement and objectives established, adequate resources are allocated by the Organisation in order to achieve them. (High)
3. Based on the agreed mission statement, the DG2 and the Conference, as well as other relevant stakeholders, engage in a collaborative process to improve the alignment between the Conference's action plan and the Council of Europe's Programme and Budget by agreeing on a results framework for its implementation, as well as a monitoring and evaluation framework. (High)

At operational level:

4. The DG2 Secretariat, together with the Conference, explores opportunities for strengthening online co-operation during and between sessions so as to involve less active INGOs or those who cannot easily travel to Strasbourg. (Medium)
5. Eligibility criteria for granting participatory status by including geographical and thematic priorities is revised so as to ensure greater diversity of the Conference's membership. (High)
6. The Conference pursues and strengthens collaboration with national NGOs through country visits and other ad hoc collaborations. (Medium)
7. The Conference develops its communication strategy to improve their visibility among the INGOs and NGOs, as well as to highlight its contribution to the work of the Council of Europe, in terms of results achieved and outcomes reached. This should be envisaged once the mission statement and the results-based framework of the Conference are revised and adopted by the Council of Europe. (Medium)
8. The Conference takes on a more active role in PACE and its Committees, as a complementary channel for civil society consultations. (Medium)



Annexes

Annex 1: Terms of Reference

Annex 2: Evaluation matrix

Annex 3: List of documentation consulted

Annex 4: Online survey results and questionnaire

Annex 5: Benchmarking report

Annex 6: List of interviewees

Annex 7: Case studies

The Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), in line with the Council of Europe's mission, aims to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, with a focus on the participation of civil society in decision-making at local, national and European levels. One of the main challenges the organisation faces is how to strengthen civil society and develop participatory democracy on a pan-European basis. The evaluation aims to assess the relevance, effectiveness and added value of the Conference's support to INGOs within the Council of Europe.

The evaluation finds that the Conference is a unique mechanism for giving a voice to civil society. However, the report also suggests the Council of Europe has yet to more clearly define the mission of the Conference, and should allocate adequate levels of support for the Conference to support by that mission ensuring the quality of its activities and the diversity of its membership, while deepening the Conference's synergies with other relevant actors.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.