

Speech by Jos Lemmers
on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of
the North-South Centre at the Council of Europe
on 10 December 2019

The air is an ocean that unites all peoples

“The air is an ocean that unites all peoples.” I will never forget this phrase that was hanging above the KLM counter at the airport of Nice when I did my postgraduate studies at the European Institute for Advanced International Studies. Subsequently I had the pleasure to be actively involved in the World Federalist Movement, the Netherlands Association for a New International Development Policy and the International Coalition for Development Action. It was in the latter context that I participated as an NGO representative in the Council of Europe’s Lisbon Conference on North-South relations in 1984.

Indeed, the history of the North-South Centre cannot be separated from two important preceding moments in the history of the Council of Europe:

First of all, the Lisbon Conference of the Parliamentary Assembly in 1984 on the theme “North-South: Europe’s role” which, in an NGO sponsored amendment to its final Declaration, called for a European Campaign on Global Interdependence and solidarity as a practical way to arouse public attention around Europe to the need for more North-South co-operation on the very principles on which the Council of Europe was based. The call for this campaign was intended to promote global recognition of the need for all categories of human rights, civil and political, but also economic and social rights, to be put into practice in a world where good governance and the Rule of Law could gain more global importance.

Secondly then, the European Campaign for North-South Interdependence and Solidarity which was organised by the Council of Europe in 1988 with a dozen of international roundtables and events throughout the then largely West European territory of the Council of Europe. Major events took place in Paris, Berlin, London, Amsterdam, Vienna, Bergen (Norway), Antalya (Turkey) and Madrid. In the aftermath of the Campaign the Council of Europe also organised an important conference in Porto Novo, Benin, focusing on the need for democratic governance in that country, as well as in the surrounding area. Many dignitaries and activists from different African countries took part in this event which is said to have contributed to the discussion on the need for democratic institutions in surrounding African countries.

All this gave rise to the subsequent invitation by the Portuguese Government during its chairmanship of the Council of Europe in the late 1980ies to call for the setting up of a permanent European Centre to advocate and seek the implementation of the objectives of the North-South Campaign. In 1989, that is now 30 years ago, the Committee of Ministers honoured the Portuguese invitation and decided to set up the European Centre for Global Interdependence and Solidarity, in short the North-South Centre, in Lisbon, Portugal.

It was the Portuguese Secretary of State for Development Co-operation, the same Jose-Manuel Durão Barroso who later became the President of the European Commission in Brussels, who invited the Council of Europe to open its North-South Centre in Lisbon and nominated the co-ordinator of the previous North-South Campaign to become the new Centre's first Director. This nomination was honoured by the member States and so I found myself facing the big challenge of becoming the North-South Centre's first executive

director, a task which I honoured to the best of my abilities for 15 years, from 1990 to 2005.

I remember arriving in Lisbon with one secretary and an overloaded bag full of expectations, but little money. Following closely the set-up of the preceding North-South Campaign the new Centre's governing structure was based on the quadrilogue principle of a four-way partnership between Governments, Parliamentarians, Local and Regional Authorities and the NGO community. This four-way partnership is one of the strongholds of the North-South Centre, uniting elected officials at three levels of governance with the sparkles of the NGO community – a unique concept which has not been applied in many places. I would say: one of the keys to success still valid today!

The budgetary needs for the Centre's programme implementation were gradually covered by regular contributions of the member States, a generous contribution of the European Commission and additional voluntary contributions by member States for programme implementation.

The Centre's programme of activities was based on three main programme elements. Information and media; education and youth; and dialogue and partnerships with the global South.

The information and media programme was an important challenge. One highlight was that, over the years, the Centre became a founding partner of the One World Group of Broadcasters, composed of some 15 major broadcasters, including the BBC, German ARD and ZDF, and Italian television, the global South based Inter Press Service, as well as various NGO partners. One of the prominent productions of the One World Group in the early 1990ies was the television film "The March" which highlighted the prospect of mass immigration by poor Africans crossing the Mediterranean sea to look for new perspectives. An image which turned out to have prophetic as well as tragic importance in the following decades. The importance of co-operation with the media cannot be under-estimated to achieve public outreach and I consider this one key to success which is even more valid today than ever before. Under

this programme window the Centre also launched the annual North-South Prize with one recipient from the global South and the other one from the global North, both having contributed in a major way to overcoming North-South disparities.

The education focused second dimension of the programme gave rise to the concept of Education for Global Citizenship, or Global Education. Many projects and programmes were launched over the years in numerous countries, including through the Centre's East-West-South programme, largely financed by grants of the Dutch Government. The aim was to stimulate the Council of Europe's new member States in Eastern Europe to participate in three-pronged projects in co-operation with Western European partners and partners in the Global South. Similarly, the Centre's youth programme developed a regular cycle of youth conferences highlighting the importance for youth organisations to integrate a global citizenship dimension in their programmes.

The Centre's third programme dimension, its global dialogue programme, led to many events uniting European and Southern participants. One Regional conference was held between Europeans and Latin Americans in Santiago de Chile with firm support from the new democratic Government of Chile. This Government was presided over by Patricio Aylwin after the dark period of military dictatorship and it was great to welcome him later as a recipient of the North-South Prize. Similarly a number of regional meetings took place in Africa, including in South Africa, Tunisia, Morocco and Cabo Verde. And it is a true honour and pleasure to see Sra. Vera Duarte at this table who played a significant part in the Conference in Cabo Verde.

The Dialogue programme also provided the context for the important Conference held in The Hague at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the situation in Rwanda following the terrible massacre. The 70th anniversary book of the Council of Europe includes a fascinating report on the context of the

North-South Centre's involvement in Rwanda and the role played by my highly committed and brave former colleague and deputy director, Eliane Carvalho, now working here at Headquarters. May I also seize this opportunity to express a wholehearted thank you to my 16 other former colleagues at the North-South Centre who pursued a further career at Headquarters and some of whom are present here today. Thank you my dear friends!

A conference which drew major attention under the Dialogue programme window was the Global Forum on Poverty, here in Strasbourg at Headquarters, where we had the honour to welcome Abbé Pierre and Mary Robinson, at the time President of Ireland. CNN made this event also an interesting media initiative. Another significant annual activity under the Dialogue programme was the Lisbon Forum, where questions of human rights, democracy and the Rule of Law are discussed in a North-South perspective. I note with great satisfaction that this programme element has also continued to be an important element of the North-South Centre's activities and that another session of the Forum took place in Lisbon just a few weeks ago.

In the course of implementing activities and events under the third window of the Centre's activities, the Dialogue programme, the Centre was subjected by its southern partners to an increasing call for a South-North dialogue and possibly even the setting up of South-North Centres in Latin America, Africa and Asia to complement the role of the Europe-based North-South Centre of the Council of Europe. In that same context the Centre was actively approached, at the time, by the Governments of Malta and Cyprus about the possibility of setting up regional centres for dialogue with the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries. I should point out that this happened at a time when neither Cyprus nor Malta were as yet members of the European Union. However, it showed the importance attached by these countries to developing more dialogue on democracy and human rights with the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean. The significant events and popular uprisings over the years throughout the southern Mediterranean illustrate the

context of this common wish for human rights and democracy. I would call it a missed opportunity that Europe did not grasp this historic moment to undertake major programmes to share the importance of the Council of Europe's main mandate to advance democracy, human rights and the rule of law not only inside Europe, but with our neighbours in an increasingly interdependent world.

Dear friends, I have exceeded my time, but I hope that this summary of my 15 years at the North-South Centre will help enhance this 30th anniversary event. Thank you.

Jos Lemmers

10 December 2019, Strasbourg

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