

The voice of civil society at the Council of Europe

THE CONFERENCE OF INGOs



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

NGOs play an essential role in safeguarding and realising genuine democracy. For over 40 years, organised civil society has contributed at both national and international levels to achieve the statutory aims of the Council of Europe, notably “the achievement of greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and of facilitating their economic and social progress”.

ORIGINS

— The Council of Europe introduced a consultative status for NGOs in 1952. Co-operation intensified over the years and the INGOs began organising and structuring their representation with a view to developing a more coherent and consolidated action with the Council of Europe. In 2003 the Committee of Ministers adopted Resolution (2003)8 which introduced a new **participatory status for INGOs**. This status has enabled INGOs to increase active participation in the policies and work programme of the Council of Europe. For example, since 2005, the Conference has a place as participant on intergovernmental steering committees and expert groups. In his 2015 report, the Secretary General recommended revising the rules on participatory status, and in July 2016 the Committee of Ministers adopted Resolution (2016)3 on participatory status for INGOs with the Council of Europe. This Resolution recognises the Conference of INGOs as the representative body of the INGOs enjoying participatory status with the Council of Europe.

STRUCTURE

— The **plenary meetings of the Conference** are a platform for dialogue with the bodies of the Council of Europe and for exchange amongst its members. The plenary Conference decides on policy lines and actions and adopts positions on fundamental issues which are sent in the form of Recommendations or Resolutions to other Council of Europe bodies, international or national institutions. The Conference is led by a **President** elected every 3 years.



■ The **Bureau** of the Conference of INGOs, an executive body, is made up of nine members elected for a term of 3 years, who are delegates from INGOs with participatory status.

■ The **Standing Committee** ensures consistency of the Committees' work and compliance with the major policy lines defined by the Conference. **Three thematic committees** facilitate INGO engagement in the priority fields of: human rights; democracy, social cohesion and global challenges; education and culture. The Conference of INGOs has three integrated approaches: gender equality (coordinated by the Vice President in charge of equality), migration and youth policy (please see the Conference of INGOs Action Plan 2018-2021).

■ The Conference of INGOs established the **Expert Council on NGO Law** in January 2008 with the aim of supporting an enabling environment for NGOs through examining national NGO legislation and its implementation and providing advice on how to bring national law and practice into line with Council of Europe standards and European good practice. The Expert Council supports the Council of Europe's commitment to the role of civil society in the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law through follow up on Council of Europe standards in this area, in particular the Committee of Ministers Recommendation on the legal status of NGOs in Europe (CM/Rec(2007)14). It co-operates closely with other Council of Europe bodies, in particular the Venice Commission and the Commissioner for Human Rights. The members are appointed by the Bureau of the Conference of INGOs for period of 3 years. The Expert Council produces legal opinions on issues relevant for civil society work.

ACTIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

■ Civil society in Europe is increasingly subject to threats, restrictions and obstacles that are preventing it from effectively playing its proper role in a democratic society. The Conference of INGOs follows closely this worrying trend and **contributes to the development of Council of Europe policies and standards** which affect freedom of association and civic space, most recently the development of the Committee of Ministers' Guidelines for Civil Participation in Political Decision-Making and Recommendation on the Need to Strengthen the Protection and Promotion of Civil Society Space in Europe. In addition, the Conference of INGOs **participates in approximately 30 intergovernmental Steering committees**, drafting/working groups and the President of the Conference regularly informs the Committee of Ministers' Rapporteur Group on Democracy about its work as well as **engaging directly with the Ministers' Deputies** in an annual exchange of views.

■ Since 2015, the Conference of INGOs has been enhancing its relations with NGOs in the Member States through regular consultations and **country visits to Member States**. The country visits are followed by a report focussing on the space for civil participation in decision-making and discussion in the plenary meetings of the Conference of INGOs. The Conference has organised in recent years events on key dates such as the international Day Against the Death Penalty, Democracy Day, World NGO day and, for a long time now on the World Day for the Eradication of Poverty. The Conference is also a co-piloting partner and contributor to the World Forum for Democracy.

■ The Conference regularly co-organises topical side events with various **Committees of the Parliamentary Assembly**, participates in their meetings or hearings and contributes to the work of Rapporteurs. Closer co-operation with the **Congress of Local and Regional Authorities** is being built with a joint working group updating the 2009 Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation and the Conference of INGO's 2018 decision to hold one plenary session per year jointly with the Congress' session.



PARTNERSHIPS

■ The INGO Conference's work is assisted by the **Civil Society Division** Secretariat team within DG Democracy and supported by the Organisation's Ordinary Budget within the Good Governance Programme.

■ The INGO Conference's work benefits from additional reach and scope through its relationship with the local association "INGO Service". The purpose of **INGO-Service** is to provide additional financial means to the Conference of INGOs to carry out its activities and its mission, thus enhancing the work of all the INGOs holding participatory status. Through voluntary subscriptions by the INGOs, INGO Service provides funds inter alia for the actions of the thematic committees, for increased participation and representation of the Conference, and for special events.

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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.



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