



The President

Strasbourg, 24 November 2017

Dear President,
Dear INGO representative

Following the elections of the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the 3 thematic committees, Human Rights, Education and Culture, Democracy, Social Cohesion and Global Challenges, in June 2017, the Standing Committee of the Conference of INGOs met in October to evoke the objectives of each committee for the three years to come.

The mandates of the existing working groups, whose mission is to contribute to the roadmaps (work plans) of the committees, came to an end in June 2017. The coordinators of the groups who wished to continue their work were invited to make proposals to the newly elected Chairs and Vice-Chairs and I would like to thank those that did this.

The reason I am writing to you today, is that we would like to intensify the exchanges with the INGOs regarding the new roadmaps for the 3 thematic committees, the final adoption of which is planned during the winter session in January 2018. These roadmaps will be the basis for an action plan 2018-2021 for the Conference of INGOs which will be drafted and presented for adoption at the plenary session in June 2018.

Our action plan has to integrate the Council of Europe's strategic and thematic priorities. The thematic committees and the working groups exist to help to achieve these goals and it is expected that the working groups:

- contribute to the process of drafting new Council of Europe normative documents (conventions, charter, recommendations, guidelines, etc.) by providing an alternative perspective that takes into account the actions and expertise of INGOs;
- contribute to the monitoring processes carried out by the Council of Europe, attached to the different legal instruments of the Council of Europe;
- contribute to reinforcing the visibility and impact of the work of the INGOs and their members and in this way enrich the Council of Europe's programmes.

In order to ensure favorable conditions for the meetings of the working groups, taking into account the logistical conditions of each session and the work of the Secretariat, the Standing Committee has decided each committee can have 3 working groups working simultaneously. The duration of a working group is not necessarily 3 years. It can be shorter depending on specific goals and a renewal or creation can be done during the mandate of each committee (after validation by the leadership of the committee and by the Standing Committee, in accordance with the rules of the Conference of INGOs).

The work of the committees and their working groups must lead to concrete and visible results that will contribute to the impact of the Conference of INGOs at the level of the Council of Europe's work, with regard to national policies or to improving the functioning of civil society (and living conditions) in member States.

Several moments of exchange on this subject are already planned:

- On Monday, 22 January 2018, each committee is invited to hold a preparatory meeting allowing each INGO to express its interest and discuss the proposals in relation to one or more themes and working groups.
- This exchange of ideas can also be continued at the meeting of each thematic commission during the January session.

To ensure an efficient running of these meetings you are requested to send your contributions in advance.

The proposed orientations for each committee are the following:

Human Rights Committee would like to focus on different dimensions to counter the populist narrative, with regard to among other things, the narrowing of the civic space, protection of human rights defenders, the disregard for the rights of minorities. In this process, one of the aims will also be to identify best practices that stimulate the freedom of association and to promote their implementation in all the member States of the Council of Europe.

This work could be carried out on the basis of the following working groups:

- **Human Rights Defenders:** the aim of this group can be to analyse the functioning of existing protection mechanisms and to position the Conference of INGOs as a contributor to this work;
- **Poverty, discrimination and exclusion:** Poverty is more than the absence of money. It is also a lack of access to services, education, culture, housing, health, etc. This working group will be invited to focus on the consequences of systemic and even intergenerational poverty and be proactive regarding the measures to undertake;
- **Grass roots monitoring toolbox:** the Committee wishes to set up a think tank that develops insight in the process of NGO monitoring;
- **Children's rights:** this group is reaching the end of its mandate and is finalising its report in the framework of the monitoring under the European Social Charter;
- **The digital future:** This group will work under the **transversal group** entitled "digital society" (presented below). The human rights perspective will focus on data ownership, monopolising and manipulating digital means of expression.

During the next three years, the **Education and Culture Committee** wish to situate its work on a combination of current educational, cultural, artistic, religious, societal and civilizational issues. To face the rise of populism, fueled by the quest for identity, massive urbanisation, digitilisation in daily life and the fact that the economy shapes politics, the Education and Culture Committee would like to launch the following working groups in order to raise awareness of the issues and make proposals for action.

- **Intercultural cities:** This group will ask us to reflect on the civilizational, societal, environmental and cultural aspects inherent to the integration of groups from various

backgrounds, and also to reflect on town planning, as well as on public policies and private initiatives in terms of education. The Intercultural Cities network of the Council of Europe will be associated to these reflections in order to gather good practices and identify obstacles to proper cultural integration in all of our cities, particularly in terms of immigrants;

- ***The Europe of heritage and creation – cultural routes***: By relying on the research of Cultural Itineraries, this working group will look at the influence of land and virtual routes in Europe, in history and in our contemporary society;
- ***The right to lifelong learning***: Taking into account that inclusive society is built through a learning society, this group will reflect on the right to lifelong learning as an adult, on the involvement of economic and social organisations in adult training, as well as the close-knit links between dignity, citizenship and employment. Indeed, an inclusive society is built through a learning society;
- ***Digital citizenship***: This group will work under the **transversal working group** entitled “Digital society”. Its aim is to reflect on how and why digital tools contribute, or do not contribute, to disseminating human rights and to building European citizenship, with the aim of living together harmoniously; how to ensure that vulnerable and marginalised population groups have access to education and European citizenship.

The Education and Culture Committee proposes to hold a meeting in Paris on 2 December with representatives of INGOs interested in the work of the committee. A participation via skype or contributions by e-mail before this meeting are also possible.

The **Democracy, Social Cohesion and Global Challenges Committee** has identified several main challenges that are: the erosion of democracy and democratic institutions, a tendency to "populism" that leads to political cynicism and the polarization of societies, the transition to the digital world, opening new access ways for fake news, the negative impact of corruption on good governance and the loss of public confidence in the democratic process. In view of the above, it will be necessary to rely on 3 working groups within the Committee:

- ***Civil participation in political decision-making***: This group will focus on the implementation of the [guidelines for promoting citizens' participation in the political decision-making](#) recently adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. Under this theme the Committee expects to receive contributions related to gender perspectives in political and democratic processes;
- ***Fight against corruption and strengthening transparency and accountability***: The product could again be a toolbox for transparency in the working relationship of government agencies / administration with stakeholders. The collaboration with GRECO and Transparency International will be established;
- ***Protection of the human being and human dignity***: Access to services and health care is a major issue in Europe. This group will try to react to the demographic changes, inequalities in health care, health and environment hazards.

The transversal groups

In order to create additional space for debate and to strengthen transversality within the Conference of INGOs, the Standing Committee proposes to create 3 transversal working groups. It is agreed that each of the committees will be responsible for one of these 3 transversal groups, in collaboration with the other committees.

- **Freedom of Association, Expression and Assembly:** Led by the Human Rights Committee;
- **Social and Territorial Cohesion:** Led by the Democracy, Social Cohesion and Global Challenges Committee;
- **Digital Society:** Led by the Education and Culture Committee.

The axes until now considered as transversal: **migration, youth, equality between women and men** will be treated as an "integrated approach" and reflected in the overall work of the Conference. With regard to migration, the work of the thematic committees will be supported by a "watch unit", a non-formal group that will alert on major risks and major events.

In view of the various observations made by the INGOs regarding the density **of the calendar of the sessions**, the Bureau, the Standing Committee and the Secretariat are considering ways of working more interactively, with more space for debate and exchanges. Starting in January, we will experiment certain ideas and your comments and observations will be of great help!

I invite you to contact the Chairs and Vice-chairs of the [thematic committees](#) to discuss these orientations and contribute to the future work plans outlined in this letter.

I hope we can count on your contributions and I look forward to seeing you in January 2018.

Yours sincerely,



Anna RURKA