



News of the Council of Europe

Civil Society Forum

13-14 November 2011

Living Together combining diversity and freedom in 21st century Europe

According to the International Organization for Migration there are **over 64 million migrants in Europe and their number is constantly increasing**. They are not a homogenous group: they have different nationalities and ethnicities and they come to Europe for different reasons. A large number of them are irregular migrants and half of them are women. Their share level in the democratic process remains low for lack of integration, yet **integration is the key to democratic participation of migrants**. Indeed it leads to a better understanding of shared values and respect for cultural differences, both of which are essential for democratic development.

The **Civil society forum** held by the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organization (INGOs) with the support of the council of Europe, built on the outcome of the NGO Forum on **“New multicultural challenges: how can NGOs play their parts”** which the INGO Conference organized on 24-25 March in Istanbul.

Objectives

- ✦ to **give a “civil society” dimension** to the implementation of the *“White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue”* adopted by the Committee of Ministers in May 2008 and the recommendations of the *Group of Eminent Persons* on **“Living together: Combining diversity and freedom in 21st century Europe”** by **identifying new approaches to inclusive multicultural societies in Europe**;
- ✦ to **highlight the new multicultural challenges facing European societies** and **identify best practice** in NGO work aiming at **mastering diversity and making it a benefit for society**;
- ✦ to offer a framework for **sharing experience among NGOS and dialogue between representatives of civil society and representatives of governments, parliaments and local and regional authorities**;
- ✦ to launch the **“toolkit”** for the practice of intercultural dialogue;
- ✦ to pursue **co-operation with civil society from the Southern rim of the Mediterranean**.

PARTICIPANTS

The Forum brought together 140 European civil society representatives, from 40 countries, who promote the **“living together”** principle through their works.

In the light of the push toward democracy taking place in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region (North South Centre), civil society representatives from these countries were involved as well, both as participants and interveners to widen the debate by encompassing their aspirations and experiences in living together in multicultural societies. In addition, representatives of governments, parliaments and local and regional authorities of different European countries were invited for a political dialogue with participants.

Forum structure

The Forum themes were dealt with from the angle of the civil society’s contribution to the work of the Council of Europe.

The first day was open to some 50 participants selected through an open call for applications. It was organized in workshops that focused on the NGOs practical experience, using interactive participatory working methods.

The plenary sessions on the second day were open to representatives of civil society, universities and authorities. **The Forum** discussions dealt with the Council of Europe's achievements and activities, as well as topical developments in Europe as illustrated by the report of *the Group of Eminent Persons*. They also provided an opportunity for a political dialogue between representatives of civil society and governments, parliaments and local and regional authorities.

The thematic focus of **the civil society Forum** was on **diversity** and participants discussed

- ✚ **how intercultural and democratic education can empower people to master and to benefit from diversity;**
- ✚ **how social cohesion can be achieved in multicultural societies .**

In order to identify the best practice of NGO's action and the participation of NGOs in the political debate, decision making and implementation, these issues were dealt with at two levels of the political process:

- ✚ **making policy**, that is the role of civil society in raising awareness on the issues at stake and putting them on the political agenda;
- ✚ **making policy work**, that is the role of civil society in implementing concrete activities and holding governments responsible.

Forum Conclusion

The Forum debates showed that an **intercultural dialogue is a multivectoral and multidirectional continuous process that affects to some degree each and everyone either as individuals or as members of social groups, be it in their daily life or while performing public functions**. Such a dialogue is possible and effective when it includes the following values and principles: Human rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law; equal dignity and mutual respect; gender equality; dismantling the barriers that prevent intercultural dialogue; **The task today is not just to recognize, respect and cherish this diversity, but also to use it for the common good**. Furthermore it is the matter of **shifting the mindset of the public from polarization to solution-oriented dialogues**.

This is no easy task for sure and obstacles to intercultural dialogue are on all levels: national, regional and local. Some of the hidden obstacles to dialogue are also created because of **no sense of belonging and lack of security for all**. Among the issues which spur the most discussions are the ones related to **migration (legal/illegal), religion, ethnicity, cultural and religious racism and xenophobia, employment, social integration of minority groups, gender differences, the rights of immigrants, cultural heritage etc...** Addressing these problems



requires openness to recognize them and willingness to overcome them. It requires time, effort, a **long-term commitment and courage to push the "hot buttons"**. The Conference of INGOs of the CoE will endeavour to contribute in **making Europe a better place to live for EVERYONE**.

Picture: Zaheer Ahmad rep. of the National Association of Muslim Police (United Kingdom); Françoise Ferey; Katerina Vassileska rep. of the Local Development agency (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and currently involved in the creation of the first SI Club in Macedonia.
Report:F.Ferey, SI/E rep. to the Council of Europe