

Council of Europe “White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue”

Briefing Paper

1. The Council of Europe in brief

Founded in 1949, the Council of Europe is an international organisation of 46 member states. *“The aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realizing the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress.”* (Statute, Art. 1) It seeks to develop throughout Europe common and democratic principles based on the European Convention on Human Rights and other reference texts on the protection of individuals. On its website, the Council of Europe summarizes its objectives as follows:¹

- to protect human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law;
- to promote awareness and encourage the development of Europe's cultural identity and diversity
- to find common solutions to the challenges facing European society: such as discrimination against minorities, xenophobia, intolerance, bioethics and cloning, terrorism, trafficking in human beings, organised crime and corruption, cybercrime, violence against children;
- to consolidate democratic stability in Europe by backing political, legislative and constitutional reform.

The Council of Europe predates the European Union (founded 1957) and the Organisation for Security & Co-operation in Europe (founded as the CSCE in 1975). The diversity of membership is reflected in the CoE chairmanship passing from Russia to San Marino in November 2006 and again from San Marino to Serbia in May 2007.

¹ http://www.coe.int/T/e/Com/about_coe/

2. The Council of Europe's involvement in intercultural dialogue

Within this framework, intercultural dialogue has been an issue for the Council of Europe during the last 30 years. Realising the necessity of intercultural dialogue as part of successful integration, it was first approached in the field of education. Starting in the 1980s, the focus shifted from integration to intercultural dialogue as part of democratic education. Intercultural dialogue was recognized as being essential for cultivating and promoting democratic values such as tolerance and peace. The 1990s ethnic conflicts and 9/11 prompted the Council of Europe to intensify its efforts in intercultural dialogue as an instrument of conflict prevention.

The 3rd Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in 2005 explicitly endorsed intercultural dialogue – together with political and inter-religious dialogue – as a means of ensuring that the diversity of European cultures becomes a source of mutual enrichment.

The Faro Conference in 2005 is considered to be a milestone in the Council of Europe's actions concerning intercultural dialogue. The "Faro Declaration" places intercultural dialogue in the context of the overall remit of the Council of Europe to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law, to strengthen social cohesion, peace and stability. The Declaration thus clears the ground for the "mainstreaming" of intercultural dialogue in all working areas of the Council of Europe. Therefore, the Council of Europe's involvement in intercultural dialogue is conceived as a cross-sectoral, "transversal" approach that influences the agenda of virtually all other policy domains and institutions of the Council of Europe.

However, in political language the term "intercultural dialogue" is only very loosely defined. In connection with the White Paper process the Council of Europe itself suggests the following **definition**,² but leaves it as a matter of discussion (cf. Questionnaire, question 4):

"Intercultural dialogue is an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other's global perception."

Furthermore, it is explained that in this definition, "*open and respectful*" means '*based on the equal value of the partners*'; '*exchange of views*' stands for every type of interaction that reveals cultural characteristics; '*groups*' stands for every type of collective that can act through its representatives (family, community, associations, peoples); '*culture*' includes everything relating to ways of life, customs, beliefs and other

² http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/concept_EN.asp

things that have been passed on to us for generations, as well as the various forms of artistic creation; 'world perception' stands for values and ways of thinking."

The general objectives of such a dialogue would then be 1) to learn to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and 2) to develop a sense of community and belonging.

The Council of Europe sees intercultural dialogue as a responsibility of all members of society – organizations, institutions and individuals on all possible levels. It states the interdependence of the actions of all these members. It, therefore, suggests a certain degree of coherence between the members as vital for promoting intercultural dialogue. The Council of Europe views its role in intercultural dialogue mainly in the area of achieving possible coherence. In this area of work the White Paper aims at identifying how the Council of Europe can help to create better conditions for the promotion of intercultural dialogue, how it can support and pursue dialogue within Europe and between Europe and its neighbouring regions.

In recent years, the Council of Europe has become more and more aware of the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue. Since 2000, for example, the Commissioner for Human Rights has developed a dialogue with religious communities on various issues related to human rights. The fact that the Council of Europe has prepared a questionnaire aiming especially at involving religious communities in the consultation process can also be attributed to the Council of Europe's rising awareness on the role of religion within this field.

3. The White Paper process

In the context of its activities for the promotion of intercultural dialogue the Council of Europe is currently preparing a "White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue" due to be published in November 2007.

The **objectives of the White Paper** are mainly twofold:

- 1) It shall formulate a coherent and long-term policy for the promotion of intercultural dialogue within Europe and between Europe and its neighbouring regions, namely the southern Mediterranean, the Middle East and Central Asia.
- 2) It shall serve as a reference document to policy makers and practitioners at national, regional and local levels, providing them with guidelines and analytical and methodological tools for the promotion of intercultural dialogue.

The **character of the White Paper** therefore is that of a document suggesting policies and initiatives and providing standards and tools in order to promote the dynamic process of intercultural dialogue in most different contexts.

As a first step in the White Paper process, Director General Gabriella Battaini-Dragnoni was appointed as the Council of Europe's Coordinator for Intercultural Dialogue by the 3rd Summit of Heads of State and Government in 2005.

In January 2007, the Council of Europe issued a Consultation Paper for preparing the "White Paper on intercultural dialogue" as well as several questionnaires aiming at different members of society, among these a questionnaire addressed to religious communities. In April 2007 the Council of Europe will hold a conference on "The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue".

CEC, as a regional ecumenical organization in consultative status with the Council of Europe and as a body of religious communities, has been invited to contribute to the White Paper process. It was also take part in the April conference.

4. Further information

- Current information on the **ongoing consultation process** can be found on the Council of Europe's website for Intercultural Dialogue: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/default_en.asp
- Consultation Paper and Questionnaires:
 - **Consultation Document** "Preparing the 'White Paper on intercultural dialogue' of the Council of Europe. Introduction to the consultation process" including the **general questionnaire** (p.16-17) : http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/Consultation_document_EN.pdf
 - **Questionnaire** addressed to **religious communities**: <http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/Questionnaire%20EN%20060307.doc>
 - **Questionnaire** on the role of intercultural dialogue regarding the situation of **immigrants and persons of immigrant background**: <http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/Questionnaire%20EN%20260307.doc>
- Council of Europe's already existing **database of examples of best practice**: <http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/intercultural-dialogue-database.php>
- The **Faro Declaration** (2005): http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/CulturalConvention/Source/FARO_DECLARATION_Definitive_Version_EN.pdf