



**North-South Centre of the  
Council of Europe**



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**CONCEPT PAPER  
ON INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE**

The North-South Centre of the Council of Europe is, by definition, the Council's preferred instrument in its relations with countries in the south, especially its closest neighbours. This is why the NSC has often been described as the "CoE's window on the south". This position has been reinforced by the fact that sources of tension or even conflict that were thought to be a thing of the past have reappeared, basically due to misunderstandings, contradictions and rejections between north and south. The Mediterranean is often the centre of these ruptures.

The North-South Centre set up the Transmed Programme in 1994, with the main aim of reinforcing the dialogue with Maghreb and Mashrek countries. Some very important work has been done within the framework of this programme. It is necessary to capitalise on what has been achieved so successfully in terms of projects and networks created and strengthened and the expertise developed and recognised in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Where intercultural dialogue is concerned, the priorities set at the Warsaw Summit lent strong political legitimacy to the existing programme, which proved to be a precursor. The **Faro strategy for the development of intercultural dialogue**, which is also aimed at European societies in addition to relations between Europe and neighbouring regions, offers a front-line conceptual and operational framework for the NSC's activities.

An essential element of the Faro Strategy is the preparation, launched by the Committee of Ministers in April 2006, of a **Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue**. This process is in its final stages and the White Paper should be adopted by the Committee of Ministers at its annual ministerial meeting in May. The design and implementation of the NSC's activities in this field will be directly inspired by the White Paper's conclusions and recommendations and based on three strong convictions expressed therein.

- The first is the conviction that our common future depends on our ability to protect and develop human rights, democracy, the rule of law and intercultural action offering a model for managing cultural diversity that is open to the future. The action taken must be based on the principle of *ius humanitatis*, a concept founded on each person's human dignity and the idea of common humanity and a common destiny.
- The second is the conviction that intercultural dialogue has a central role to play here. On one hand, it helps overcome ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural cleavages. On the other hand, it enables us to progress together and recognise our different identities in a constructive, democratic fashion on the basis of shared universal values.
- The third is the conviction that intercultural dialogue can only develop if certain conditions are first met. The White Paper particularly stresses that, for intercultural dialogue to make progress, we must adapt democratic governance of cultural diversity, reinforce democratic citizenship and participation, teach and develop intercultural skills and set up spaces reserved for intercultural dialogue or expand existing ones. In short, intercultural dialogue must take on an international dimension

In addition to refocusing the CoE's goals and political priorities, as defined by the Committee of Ministers in the adoption of the White Paper, it was also necessary to take into account developments in a deeply changing international and regional scenario in order to adapt activities to the regional specificities of our southern neighbours and to major ongoing initiatives (particularly the implementation of the joint strategy adopted at the recent Euro-African Summit in Lisbon and the re-launch of the Barcelona Process through the plan for a Union for the Mediterranean).

Changes in the NSC's working methods should enable the intercultural dialogue programme with countries in the south to bring **real value added** to the Council of Europe and the countries in question.

Existing or future stands by the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE will also provide an important political basis for the NSC's activities in general and the following in particular:

- Resolution 598 (2008) and Recommendation 825 (2008) on cooperation between the CoE and the Maghreb countries adopted on 23 January 2008 by the PACE on the basis of a report by Ms Durrieu (France)
- Reports by Mr Mota Amaral (Portugal) on European Muslim communities and extremism and by Mr Branger (France) on immigration from Sub-Saharan Africa, which will be discussed at the April meeting of the PACE
- A report by Mr Bjornstadt (Norway) on the mobilisation of parliaments in favour of NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development), to which the NSC has contributed and which will be discussed at the PACE plenary session in June
- Upcoming reports on the role of women in modern societies, including in intercultural and inter-religious dialogue (rapporteur: Ms Circene (Latvia), and on the need for a Council of Europe neighbourhood policy (rapporteur: Mr Van den Brande, Belgium)

### *Goals of the programme*

The aim is to use dialogue to contribute to the development of familiarity, mutual understanding and ties between the different players in European and southern Mediterranean societies. As far as possible, this dialogue will be extended to the African continent for which there will be special activities.

The goals and priorities of the Intercultural Dialogue Programme are debates, exchanges and consolidation of the dialogue between the two sides of the Mediterranean and Africa. In order to mitigate ignorance, rejection, "shutting off" and extremisms the programme gives pride of place to dialogue based on intercultural understanding and a common commitment to the universal values that are intrinsic in human beings, whatever their ethnic origin, political convictions or religious beliefs.

**The fundamental goal is to identify that which unites us rather than focus on that which divides us.** It is only on the basis of a common, reasserted commitment to universal values, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that there can be productive dialogue on different approaches, the implementation and interpretation of these values and the management of cultural diversity as a resource and fundamental asset in modern societies.

The main goals of the NSC itself are:

- To promote intercultural dialogue between the CoE and neighbouring countries, particularly in the Maghreb and Mashrek on one hand and African countries engaged in democratic transition on the other
- To raise European, Arab and African public awareness of the need for better understanding and mutual knowledge
- To reposition the NSC as an indispensable player in Euro-Mediterranean relations by creating a true quadrilogue partnership between the two sides of the Mediterranean
- To develop pertinent, functional institutional partnerships (European Union, UNESCO, Alliance of Civilizations, ALECSO, Arab League and African Union)
- To involve the NSC member states and partner countries in the south in activities (first level) in order to create the right conditions for one or more southern countries to join the NSC (second level).

In accordance with the guidelines in the strategic document on the future of the NSC, **the Intercultural Dialogue Programme will be built in an integrated fashion through different articulated dimensions**. These dimensions will be based on the Council of Europe's values, particularly:

- The principle of equality between men and women and their respective roles as agents of change in Arab and African societies
- The reinforcement of democracy and the rule of law
- Migration and its socio-cultural corollaries through the role of migrants as agents of intercultural dialogue between countries of origin and host countries
- The role of the media as excellent vectors of intercultural dialogue

Intercultural dialogue serves as the catalyst and common denominator in all these dimensions.

### **Activities**

Activities will be undertaken in collaboration with important, recognised partners in the different southern countries and with institutions involved in intercultural dialogue (Unesco, Aleco, Alliance of Civilizations, Anna Lindh Foundation, etc). As things are at the moment and while the NSC is waiting for the final version of the White Paper, it plans to base its programme of activities for 2008-2010 on the following main events.

### **2008**

- The Tangiers Meetings, which will be held on 25 and 26 April 2008 and attended by around sixty participants from Europe and around the Mediterranean who will discuss the role of parliamentarians and local authorities in the management of migrants and intercultural dialogue at regional level
- Seminar on the media and stereotypes in the Euro-Mediterranean region, which take place in Lisbon on 21 and 22 June in collaboration with the Alliance of Civilizations.
- CoE/NSC/Aleco Conference in Tunis in October, where the NSC will be in charge of organising a workshop on the role of the media and coordinating with other workshops
- The Lisbon Forum will be held in Lisbon in November 2008. It has been suggested that the theme should be linked to the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and that the Forum be organised in collaboration with the Alliance of Civilizations, Venice Commission, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights.

### **2009/2010**

- Conference on the role of women as agents of change in the southern Mediterranean countries (following the 2006 process financed at the time by Switzerland)
- Conference on intercultural dialogue and the implementation of the Council of Europe White Paper on the Balkans (the plan is for it to be held in Montenegro in cooperation with the Alliance of Civilizations, following on from the Belgrade conference of November 2007)
- Conference on human rights and citizenship in the Mediterranean countries (in an Arab country: Morocco, Algeria Tunisia or Jordan)

- Lisbon Forum on women and the construction of peace (theme to be discussed), which could be organised in collaboration with the Mário Soares Foundation
- Conference on intercultural dialogue, the foundation of peace and stability in the Euro-Mediterranean region (which could be the theme of a new Tangiers meeting in 2009 if the evaluation of the 2008 meeting leads to a decision to make it a new permanent NSC process along the lines of the Lisbon Forum)

One of the NSC's regular annual activities is still the North-South Prize. Its organisation needs to be rethought so that it takes place at the beginning of the year. The prize should give a real idea of the enshrined values of the Council of Europe and also serve to increase the visibility of the NSC and CoE.

From a more general point of view, the NSC will increase its involvement in important networks within the framework of its relations with the south. One of the main ones is COPEAM (Permanent Conference of Mediterranean Audiovisual Operators), of which the NSC is a founding member and has occupied the Vice-Presidency for eight years. There is also Euromesco (Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission), with which the NSC has worked actively since the beginning. Cooperation with Unesco will take the form of revitalising the Faro platform for intercultural dialogue set up in late 2005 and open to new partners.

In its relations with Africa, the NSC will focus on greater cooperation with Portuguese-speaking African countries, particularly Cape Verde and Mozambique, which are good examples of democracies. The fact that the NSC's seat is in Portugal and its cooperation with the CPLP (Community of Portuguese Language Countries) will make this easier. South Africa will continue to be an important partner and the agreement reached in December 2007 by the NSC and the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA) in an exchange of letters between the two directors sets up a useful framework for cooperation. Moreover, the memorandum of agreement recently signed by the Council of Europe and the OIF (Organisation internationale de la Francophonie) opens up prospects well worth exploring.

Finally, a reinforcement of the NSC's position in Balkans is on the agenda. In addition to specific activities like the implementation of the White Paper on intercultural dialogue (especially through the conference planned for Montenegro), this new priority will make it possible to extend the Trans-Mediterranean Programme to the region. The accession of Montenegro would be the first step in this direction.

## **Funding**

The financial implications of the programme will have to be rationalised due to the NSC's current budgetary constraints. Member countries interested in a particular theme of intercultural dialogue in the region will be invited to make a voluntary contribution. In addition, we will systematically seek partnerships for joint activities with the above organisations and institutions. The NSC will also count on relations with international foundations based in Lisbon (particularly the Gulbenkian Foundation, Mário Soares Foundation and Aga Khan Development Network).

The development of synergies within the NSC (activities related to education and youth must make a systematic contribution to the goal of reinforcing intercultural dialogue and vice-versa) and between the NSC and the Council of Europe (developing partnerships with the PACE, Congress, NGO Conference, Venice Commission and Commissioner for Human Rights) will guarantee credibility and coherence.

In conclusion, the NSC's activities within the framework of intercultural dialogue with countries in the south and the Balkans will complement the work of the Council of Europe in this field. It is important for the CoE to build solid relations with its southern neighbours considering their historical, geographical and cultural proximity, counting on the support of its member states (particularly those with a special interest), closer cooperation with the European Union (implementation of the Memorandum of Agreement signed in May 2007) and the two special instruments that it has for its activities outside Europe (the Venice Commission for legal cooperation and the NSC for political rapprochement through intercultural dialogue).

It is necessary to oppose the fragmentation that threatens to take over with a project that will help build a pluralistic Mediterranean and Euro-African space that will bring a future of dialogue, cooperation and peace.